the WAR HORSE
Nonprofit journalism about military service, war, and its impact.
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LETTER FROM OUR FOUNDER

Friends,

Thank you for helping to make 2019 a transformational year for The War Horse. Over the last year we’ve worked alongside veterans and military family members to publish dozens of first-person reflections, hosted our fourth Writing Seminar, and published reporting that explored toxic exposure, the unknown legacy of military mental health programs, and more. Along the way, we also established vital business infrastructures, made crucial technology upgrades, and continued to grow our audience.

This year, we asked our community to help us understand how we are meeting their needs and how we can improve in the future. More than 250 War Horse readers shared valuable insights that will be used to inform our strategy and the topics our newsroom will explore going forward. Overall, reader satisfaction exceeded 91%. Of those who participated, nearly 60% feel they’d lose an irreplaceable news source if The War Horse ceased to exist tomorrow.

We’re incredibly proud of the ongoing accomplishments of our team and community of writers. This October, we hosted our Writing Seminar for Medics and Corpsmen at Boulder Crest Retreat in Virginia and welcomed 12 War Horse Fellows for an expenses-paid writing retreat alongside award-winning journalists and bestselling authors. Our War Horse Fellows program was also highlighted by the Lenfest Institute, who noted that “while The War Horse focuses on the military community, there are a ton of great lessons here for any publication that’s looking to introduce new writers and tell underrepresented stories.”

Our community is growing and makes every aspect of our newsroom operations possible. We recognize that having your trust is a great responsibility. Not only do we expect to hold ourselves accountable to our values of integrity and respect, but we encourage our community to do the same. Thank you for your ongoing commitment to The War Horse.

Semper Fidelis,

[Signature]

Thomas Brennan
Founder, The War Horse
In 2019, we published reporting that explored ...
This year, in addition to publishing well-reported features and powerful reflections, The War Horse added multiple advisers to our team, established vital business infrastructures, and filed essential governance documents that will allow us to file our 501c3 application in 2020. This past spring, following the release of our upgraded website, our team launched our membership program alongside News Revenue Hub. Next, we worked with the Listening Post Collective to streamline the application process for our Writing Seminars, which allows us to better measure their impact. And this winter and upcoming spring, our supporters are hosting fundraising events to help launch our newsroom’s investigative unit. We look forward to sharing more soon.

**OUR READER SURVEY RESULTS**

At The War Horse, we value what you have to say. Since our founding on Kickstarter in 2016, we’ve built a community that’s been vital to our success, making every aspect of our newsroom operations possible—research and fundraising, fact-checking and copy editing, media insurance and web hosting, and so much more.

Earlier this year, we asked our readers to help us understand how we are meeting their needs and how we can improve in the future. Less than 7% of our participants reported a “great deal” of trust in mainstream media, and 38% said they have “not very much” or “none at all.” Readers felt drastically different about The War Horse. We wanted to share the results.

“Unbiased, personal and truthful.”

**All 250+ survey participants reported that they trust The War Horse.**

- 43% of respondents do not subscribe to any other military newsletter.
- 60% of readers feel they’d lose an irreplaceable news source if The War Horse ceased to exist.
- 91% reader satisfaction.
- 98% of readers find our newsletters informative.
This fall, The War Horse hosted our Writing Seminar for Medics and Corpsmen at Boulder Crest Retreat in Virginia thanks to generous support from Wounded Warrior Project and many other partners. The six-day expenses-paid writing retreat brought together a dozen veterans with Pulitzer Prize-winning journalists and bestselling authors, and included a tour of The Washington Post newsroom. Together, our volunteer guest speakers worked to help our 2019 War Horse Fellows find and shape their stories as immigrants, first responders, survivors of sexual violence, and much more.

Since 2017, The War Horse has hosted four Writing Seminars for Veterans and Military Families that have trained 50 War Horse Fellows and helped publish more than 75 stories about topics ranging from mental health and suicide, to school shootings and gender issues. Past fellows have also published with USA Today, CNN, and The New York Times. During our most recent community-building event for medics and corpsmen, all military branches were represented and had improved gender diversity. The breadth of experiences among our 2019 War Horse Fellows was remarkable—we look forward to continuing to work with them to publish their reflections.

“Hearing other people say the words that I have about my own experience was ground shaking... The lack of judgement and familiar one-upping that you can see in veterans did not live here,” said Gretel Weiskopf, a 2019 fellow and former combat medic. “I will always be grateful for the environment The War Horse created. ... There is real work that goes into this organization and this retreat, and one of the transformative notions is that someone would do this for me.”
I realized that along with the traumatic memories, I had also buried the side of me who can cope with them. It was liberating to be in a place where war and its repercussions aren’t kept shrouded in mystery. And humbling. I remembered why I got into journalism in the first place. War is a failure to communicate, and nothing good comes from veterans’ keeping quiet about it. I am proof of that.
A DIFFERENT KIND OF PLAGUE

After two men from the same unit killed themselves, maddening questions about life take their place for those who remain.

BY NATE ECKMAN
Last week, Kevin killed himself the same way that Billy did nearly two years ago: with a bullet in his head without a trace to why.

At the surface, both deaths are inexplicable. I imagine suicides always are, no matter the demographic. Though the fact both men were veterans seems to assuage most concerns. As if that’s just what veterans do, like the infamous 20-suicides-a-day—however accurate—isn’t a statistic of despair but a quota. And, according to the laws of nature, the veterans will meet this quota without enforcement. Because we’re disciplined and self-governing and we can meet and exceed any regimented expectation, except face the totality of life after service.

The “why” haunts me, because the inexplicability of their suicides makes me believe it wasn’t actually them in control. It wasn’t the thoughtful and introspective Billy, who though burdened by his ailing body had an unbreakable spirit; it wasn’t actually Kevin, who literally minutes before the act Facetimed a friend to share a laugh—like he did with anyone he knew. So, I believe that the “why” is a plague, as if not even they woke up those days knowing that it was their last days of life.

I wonder who the plague will strike next. The rest of my unit does too.

During our calls to check in and share details about wakes and funerals, we speculate. Jerry’s cocaine addiction makes him an obvious candidate. Mack is apparently homeless, living under whatever roof that he and his affiliates
find abandoned. We figure that Mack will soon die, not from a bullet he puts in his head but from whatever kind of senseless violence erupts in a crack house, or on a run to supply the home, or maybe even at the home, when the cocktail of narcotics finally overloads his heart and it fails. I worry about Jared. On occasion he’ll post an image of himself on Instagram, and I see that his smile is withering. Jared is where most of us exist: in a dull kind of pain indicative of seemingly less severe illnesses. We’re drinking too heavily and talking too little. We’re hermits. Disgruntled and melancholic. It’s just a phase, we say. We’ll get over it, we promise. But it has been years since we all left service.

What are the early signs of the plague, I wonder, and is there an antidote?

We believe that cure is time. Time to adjust to the new realities of life. Time to get our lives in order. It’s just a matter of time, we tell ourselves. But it also seems that awareness of time amplifies the plague’s side effects. Time is the great tormentor. The variable that makes us believe that our situation is inescapable. I don’t believe that time is the antidote. It is the great accelerator. To an ill mind, time is perpetual; a never-ending barrage of torments. I wish time was something we could travel through, that it wasn’t something to endure but a thing that we could traverse.

The first place I’d take us is back to that day late in 2011 when we all raised our right hands, at the Military Entrance Processing commands nearest our hometowns. That day we were most full of hope, when we stood in Cleveland, and Dallas, and Louisville, and cities all over this country, delivering a promise to defend our nation from all enemies foreign and domestic, and when we promised ourselves a life worth remembering. Our only concern with time then was how many days until boot camp. We thought that number was counting down to the beginning of our lives.

The plague makes me question reality.

We’re supposed to have a brotherhood; all those years rucking and camping and on-patrol in those 13 countries the Corps took us to, vowing to be by each other’s side no matter what. But twice in two years men have taken their lives without a trail as to why. In both times, both men spoke with others from the unit the days and hours before their final shots. In both cases, both men warned none of us about their pending suicides. The brotherhood
is supposed to isolate us from the taunts of depression, and self-mutilation, and harm. I thought that good families produce that kind of barrier to life’s hardships. Is ours perpetuating the hardships? Is our acclaimed “brotherhood” even real?

Is sanity just an illusion?

I think about that gun in my closet sometimes, and wonder if that’ll be the last thing I touch. I wonder because I believe in the plague, and that despite all the warmth and love surrounding veterans and awareness of suicide, no one seems to be able to answer “why?” Twice now, I’ve learned that there are no prerequisites for killing yourself besides 1) you have a pistol and 2) you’re an unexpected candidate.

Maybe we just never knew those men, and the guys we loved or liked or despised. The men we learned about under the stars, navigating terrain at night, and later in the hooch, under the red light of our glow sticks, were just illusions. Pop-up displays of the men the Corps told them to be and what insensitive men forced them to become. And, once they were out of the Corps, those pop-up men were too high-maintenance to maintain, too difficult to sustain, but they were so embarrassed with their true self that they’d rather suppress its existence than give it its day. But they tired. And the burden was too great. So when their true selves rose they did so in a fury, hating the body that suppressed them for so long that they destroyed it—in a last-ditch effort of liberation.

At this point, I’ll believe any story. Any explanation. Because the “why,” I’m convinced, is a plague, which convinces me that I won’t be one of them. As long as I avoid its grip.
FINANCIALS

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* Includes $50,000 earmarked for 2019 Writing Seminar

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As we continue to prepare for 2020 and the years to come, we are deeply grateful to our many supporters, advisers, and volunteers; our growing community of writers; and to the members of The War Horse team who have helped make our many accomplishments possible over the past four years.

Our newsroom and impact continue to grow. We’ve made incredible strides toward launching an investigative reporting team and are planning to host our 2020 Writing Seminar for Military Spouses at the Carey Institute for Global Good. Since our Kickstarter and throughout the launch of our small-donor program this year, people across America—both veterans AND civilians—have proven that there is widespread grassroots support and demand for The War Horse.

Next year, we’ll continue to grow our community, and together, we’ll publish reporting that can have a tremendous impact on local communities across the United States and inspire positive social change on a national level. By supporting The War Horse, you demonstrate your commitment to an informed and engaged democracy.

Thank you for joining us on our journey.
Donations drive our journalism. Support our storytelling today.

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