“The War Horse’s work is outstanding and the commitment to the stories is commendable.”

- 2020 War Horse Donor
Friends,

During 2020, the generous support of The War Horse community helped our team overcome many unprecedented challenges, establish transformational partnerships, and reinforce our newsroom’s reputation as the most trusted source for military reporting. The support of our readers also helped The War Horse team improve essential tech infrastructures, establish relationships with best-in-class service providers, and transition to an independent nonprofit.

This year, our team also worked diligently to better engage with our community and grow our membership program. In 2020, overall website traffic doubled and our social media audience has grown 27-percent, aided by a deliberate effort to foster recurring syndication partners. Newsletter subscribers also increased by 53 percent and we’re incredibly proud to share that reader donations have more than doubled, further diversifying our revenue and protecting our independence.

Establishing best-in-class service providers was also central to our efforts during 2021 and that The War Horse onboarded with Baker Hostetler LLP as a full-service pro bono client. Their support has been vital to helping us navigate charity compliance, and provided pre-publication review for our most ambitious reporting projects. Also this fall, we became a pro bono client with Ridgely Walsh, a leading public affairs consultancy. We’ll be working with them next year to increase brand awareness and amplify the work of our growing reporting team.

As The War Horse enters 2021, we’ll prepare to celebrate our five-year anniversary and the many incredible milestones we’ve shared with our team and community of supporters by debuting our ambitious strategic plan to scale The War Horse from organization to institution. Along the way, we’ll continue increasing the number of reporting projects we publish and the dynamic partnerships we forge as we work to grow our newsroom team and impact.

On behalf of The War Horse team, thank you for your continued generosity and trust. It makes all of our work and impact possible.

Semper Fidelis,

[Signature]

Thomas Brennan
Founder and Executive Director
Why Isn’t Infertility in Military Women a Bigger Conversation?

KELLY KENNEDY  |  FEBRUARY 26, 2020

This award-winning reporting project explored how infertility among active duty and veteran women may exceed that of their male colleagues in uniform but is not being adequately researched by leaders in the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs. The early research shows that military women face three known causes for infertility: exposure to toxins, prescriptions for psychiatric medications—which are first-line treatment for veterans with PTSD—and a higher-than-average rate of reported sexual trauma.

According to some research, one in three veteran women experienced problems with infertility. They’re also having hysterectomies earlier in life. One study of female veterans interviewed by phone found that more female veterans have had hysterectomies at much younger ages—35 versus 43 years old—than civilians and that those who experienced rape in their lifetimes were more likely to have the procedure.

“I still talk to several female Marines I deployed with who struggle with infertility,” said one Marine veteran struggling with infertility. “And who have been pushed aside from the military health care system.”
How Marine Corps Culture Silenced a Victim of Sexual Assault

THOMAS BREN NAN  |  DECEMBER 1, 2020

A rape victim asked the military for help. Then her fellow Marines turned against her. Now she’s battling mental illness and an attempted murder charge. This War Horse’s investigation navigated an ongoing military court martial and safeguarding access to internal case documents, mental health evaluations, and privileged NCIS reports. The War Horse delicately traversed shield laws through exclusive sources and permission from the victim herself, a mentally ill refugee-turned-Marine currently incarcerated in a military brig.

The War Horse’s investigation was quickly syndicated by leading military newsrooms and thousands reacted online. Many detailed how the case exemplified the systemic issues in how the Defense Department fails to address mental health and sexual assault. “Great work on covering a serious issue that NO ONE seems inclined to cover,” one reader wrote in an email to The War Horse. Within three days of publication, multiple legislative offices confirmed a widespread effort to contact Ohu’s family.

Military reporters described the investigation as “brilliantly” written and a "troubling, deeply reported story" that "will make your blood boil.” Journalism educators heralded the project as “a story that needed to be told” and “a deep investigation, beautifully done.” The director at the National Alliance on Mental Illness, The War Horse’s story is a “must read,” a sentiment echoed by the former director of mental health for the Department of Veterans Affairs. According to the Marine’s active duty sister, “This story is like everyone else that goes through hardships with mental health, and sex crimes in the military. Her story speaks volumes into a systematic issue that's been prevalent for decades.”
“My name should be on that wall,” wrote Steve Alpert in this moving reflection exploring the choice not to join the military during the Vietnam War and then, later in life, discover a passion for creating art about war. “Truth was, I did not know anyone on that wall, and I had not served. A student deferment and a high enough lottery number kept me from the draft, and by the time I got out in 1973, the war was winding down,” Steve wrote. “I missed it.”

“At the wall, I collapsed in a ball of tears and sweat and snot. Feet walked around me. I don’t know how long I was hunched down there on the ground, but finally I dragged my butt out of there. But I came away with the notion that I was a coward, a fraud, I never served my country. That I missed something big in my life. That feeling lives in me to this very day, and remains my greatest regret in this life.”
During 2020, The War Horse focused on growing our membership program, ultimately raising nearly $31,000 — more than doubling our prior year total. Here’s what some of those supporters had to say about our work:

I support your work; it makes a huge difference.

I WANT OUR VETERANS TO KNOW THEY ARE NOT FORGOTTEN.

RELIABLE NEWS IS IMPORTANT.

We need great journalism.

There is so little good, in-depth reporting about the military and veterans.

The War Horse covers important stories that aren’t published anywhere else.

THE REFLECTIONS HELP ME REFLECT ON MY OWN SERVICE.

We love your work.

Your stories add a personal touch to the lives of our service members.

Your publication serves a very important and timely purpose.

THIS IS JOURNALISM AS IT SHOULD BE, AND VETERANS NEED A VOICE.
Everybody We Deal With Is Trained to Kill
One night, at an on-base bar at a U.S. Army air installation in South Korea, a soldier drank too much. Not exactly breaking news, but his first sergeant and company commander happened to be at the club, and after realizing the “super-drunk” soldier was no longer capable of behaving himself, they sent him home.

The soldier left, but then returned to the club—with a knife. Somebody called the military police. When Brenna Toel arrived, she could tell by the way the intoxicated soldier stood, and later by the way the shank looked after the police took it from him, that he had “been in some fights,” she said.

But rather than pull her gun—or a taser or a club—Toel cajoled, reasoned, and pleaded with the soldier to leave the club peacefully, using the de-escalation techniques ingrained in her during her training.

For three hours.

“I talked him down for three hours instead of having anybody else get hurt,” she said. “It never entered into my head to just pull my weapon and try to get him to go down like that. Never once.”

Like much of the United States in the past few months, Toel has watched the explosive news and accusations of improper police response and brutality, specifically against Black Americans—and the loud outcry that has followed.

May 25 video footage showed Minneapolis police officers kneeling upon the neck of 46-year-old George Floyd until he died. After the video went viral, protests erupted across the United States. Unrest followed—including peaceful demonstrations, as well as property destruction and looting—as did clashes between protesters and police.

But amid swirling and often divisive conversations about civilian police brutality and the role of police...
in American society, another police demographic largely has been left out of the national conversation: military police.

And while MPs have their own issues to deal with—from a lack of transparency, accusations of not caring enough about women and minorities while conducting investigations, a tendency toward inequity in punishments based on a commander’s discretion, and a trend toward violence among military veterans who become civilian police—former service members say civilians could learn from the military’s habit of responding to each call with the understanding that it could involve a co-worker, a friend, a person dealing with a mental health crisis connected to service, or a pushed-to-the-limits family member. In other words, the MPs act as members of a community.

This, they say, in addition to differences in military versus civilian police environments, mindset and training, and pride in combat experience is why there are very few stories of military police brutality.

**NO CIVILIAN EQUIVALENT**

In Toel’s case, law enforcement was the family business: Her father worked as a cop for 20 years for the city of Sacramento, her great-grandfather was a cop in Ireland before doing the same job in San Francisco, and numerous uncles and cousins served in law enforcement. Toel joined the Army after 9/11 and spent five years in her military job of choice, dealing with everything from on-base domestic-violence calls to writing on-base speeding tickets.

But as she wrote tickets and calmed families, she was aware at every moment that she could talk to the person’s commander. She knew that rank would play a role in how she handled a situation. She knew she could pull upon several base resources—from substance abuse counseling to mental health workers to family services—to help her in her job.

Even beyond that, comparing military policing to civilian policing is like comparing tanks to taxicabs.

“One of the biggest things there for me is that we do the same job as civilian police but everybody we deal with is trained to kill, and yet we don’t have all of the problems that civilian police have,” Toel said.

First, there are huge differences between how a military base looks and how the “real world” operates: Unit commanders have a say in everything from punishment for coming up hot for marijuana on a urinalysis to driving under the influence to missing child-support payments. In arguably no other place in the United States is one’s behavior so tied to one’s job: If a Marine gets caught misbehaving on base, his boss is the first one, after the military police, to know. If a soldier’s spouse files a domestic abuse complaint, the accused’s
commander knows. Service members aren’t allowed to take a vacation, go to college, or even get dental work done without permission from someone in their chain of command.

And while a commander might be willing to let a first offense slide—particularly if a unit is getting ready to deploy or has just returned from deployment—two or three drunk fights at a bar could mean the end of a career with a pattern of misconduct discharge.

The military world is “more engaged” than civilian law enforcement “by virtue of a commander’s authorities and responsibilities to sustain good order and discipline, and ensure the safety, security, and welfare of the personnel and property under their charge,” Capt. Casey Littesy, a spokeswoman for Headquarters Marine Corps, told The War Horse in an email, noting that jurisdiction for Marine MPs is “limited to Marine Corps property,” where the chain of command is in charge.

“This enables Marine leaders to identify indicators of potential misconduct early, intervening to prevent a situation before it occurs and before (law enforcement) response is required,” she said.

People in the military are also held accountable by anyone in the military who outranks them. Any higher-ranking Marine might remind a lower-ranking Marine she needs a hat if she walks out of a building without one on her head; just as any higher-ranking soldier can tell a drunk lower-ranking soldier he needs to go home and sober up.

Try telling the neighbor kid in Miami to take his hands out of his pockets and see what happens.

But rank can work against military police, too. One former Marine corporal said that during traffic stops, he would call another Marine to take charge when he pulled over colonels or gunnery sergeants because they outranked him. Because of the obedience and respect for higher ranks that is built into the military system, that interaction was best handled by a civilian counterpart or higher-ranking Marine.

There’s also a huge sense of community, and military police often work with—or socialize with—the same people they may later pull over for blowing through a stop sign. For example, a company of MPs may deploy with an infantry unit and patrol with them or act as back-up in an emergency. This creates a sense of camaraderie that’s not often seen in the civilian world.

And even the challenges of the military may add needed empathy during tense moments.

Navy veteran Julia Hutson worked as a master at arms—the Navy’s version of the MP—and now has a master’s degree in criminal justice. Veterans she knows in the civilian police world are better at handling mental...
health calls, she said, as many veterans have friends or know someone with post-traumatic stress or struggling with other mental health challenges. Many also have experience staying calm under pressure and not looking for trouble.

For police officers who are veterans, “Being a cop isn’t the coolest thing we’ve ever done,” said Hutson, who deployed as an inmate guard at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, a high-security military prison in Cuba, as well as to Afghanistan in 2013 on a female engagement team with special operations forces. “So I don’t go into work itching to dig into a bunch of nonsense.”

**DAYS LOOK DIFFERENT**

Military police deal with many of the same calls civilian cops do—domestic disturbances, DUIs, suicide attempts—but their days look different.

For Hutson, her job as a master-at-arms stands worlds apart from that of her job as a Texas police officer: It’s a “different spectrum of reality.”

Every person who enters a military base must present some form of identification—military ID, driver’s license, passport—to military police officers standing guard at the entrances. All visitors’ information is recorded, and there must be a good reason for them to be on base.

Generally speaking, everyone on base is supposed to be there, and if they’re service members, any criminal background is likely to be minor, both because people with criminal backgrounds aren’t allowed in the military and because service members who commit crimes are booted out.

“You’re already kind of sorting through and filtering the people that you would even have contact with,” Hutson said, “the vast majority of them having security clearances or background checks.”

Civilian communities and cops often deal with drugs or gangs and the people entrapped in their snares, said one recent veteran who spent five years as an active-duty MP with the Marine Corps and one year in the same role in the Army National Guard, and then served as a civilian cop with the Marine Corps. He asked to remain anonymous because he is trying to get picked up in the Navy reserves as a cop.

But even if a service member grew up influenced by drugs or gangs, “all of that was lost when they joined the military,” he said. “In the military, each individual is pretty much broken down and rebuilt in a way the military wants them to act.”

In his years of working with military police, arrests never amounted to anything more hands-on than locking a person into handcuffs. For Hutson, who now works in a large Dallas suburb as a civilian police officer, an average day sees about 15 calls.

In the military, “you wouldn’t see that many calls, first of all, and you wouldn’t see the type of calls, the diversity, and numbers of calls that you would see in a city, even a small city,” Hutson said.

The Marine Corps declined to comment on how many calls its military police see in an average day.

**THE GOAL WAS ALWAYS DE-ESCALATION**

For Toel, the training made the difference. In the civilian world—as well as in movies—police often respond with weapons drawn.

“People just assume that’s how cops are supposed to show up,” she said.
But that was not what she learned at her military police academy.
“The goal was always de-escalation,” she said. “We were taught in basic training, ‘shoot to kill.’ But as police, we were taught to de-escalate.”

And that makes sense: Toel wore the same uniform as did the soldier who showed up at the club with a knife—they were part of the same “team.”

Military police are trained in tactics “similar to that of civilian law enforcement” officers, Littesy said, including defensive tactics, basic investigations, searches and seizures, incident response, reporting, field interviews, weapons training, use of force, and traffic stops.

Most of the training military police get is similar to the civilian world, just condensed into a shorter amount of time, another Marine MP veteran said, noting his civilian training was more than double his military police training. He asked to remain anonymous because he was recently hired by a local sheriff’s department.

And, unlike in the civilian world, most MPs carry weapons.

In the Marine Corps, all military police carry a gun and carry nonlethal weapons, like a baton and pepper spray.

It was harder to get a weapon in civilian law enforcement, Hutson said, where there is a higher expectation of proficiency before a police officer can carry.

Hutson’s military police training was more textbook and PowerPoint-oriented, she said, while her civilian training was “more realistic” and put her in situations that were similar to what she now sees on the city streets.

But her military police training was more than sufficient, she says. “I don’t think they need it to be as intense as civilian law enforcement,” she said. “They don’t see the things that civilian law enforcement does on a day-to-day basis.”
Still, there were several high-profile military moments in 2019, most dealing with active shooters.

On Dec. 6, 2019, a Saudi Arabian military student training in the United States opened fire on a Naval Air Station Pensacola, Florida, classroom.

Four people were killed, including the shooter, with eight others injured. Base security officers and local Escambia County, Florida, law enforcement officers shot and killed the gunman. Two deputies who approached the shooter were injured.

In April 2019, a 25-year-old male sailor was shot and killed by base security at Naval Air Station Oceana in Virginia, after shooting a female sailor, who survived, in the parking lot. The incident was later deemed a “domestic” incident, Navy Times reported.

The Navy also has been investigating how base police and security troops responded to a “terrorism-related” gun battle at its Corpus Christi, Texas, base in May. A Navy Security Force officer was shot by the suspected gunman driving onto the base, but also was able to “roll over and hit the switch that raised a barrier, preventing the man from getting onto the base,” officials told The Associated Press at the time.

Unlike civilian crimes in a police blotter, reports, arrests, and investigations on base usually need to be obtained via a Freedom of Information Act request.

Records of many of the daily crimes that would require military police intervention are not easily accessible.

In April, military police faced criticism after Army Spc. Vanessa Guillen disappeared at Fort Hood, Texas. Her death inspired protests because, according to her lawyer, she planned to file a sexual harassment complaint, and because women—and especially women of color—say it is difficult for them to make their voices heard in the military when they’re being harassed or assaulted.
Investigators later said Guillen was bludgeoned to death on base by a fellow soldier. Seven other Fort Hood soldiers have been found dead so far in 2020 after being reported missing, leading to complaints that MPs there are not properly investigating missing people cases.

THEY DON’T SEE THE THINGS CIVILIAN LAW ENFORCEMENT DOES

Interactions with police officers are more often being captured on video, which means the world has been able to witness instances of police brutality and abuse. But video recording, unlike audio recording, is often prohibited on many areas of military bases, so troops interacting with military police might not even think to record.

Cell phone cameras, dashboard cams, and police body cameras are a big reason more police interactions have been coming into public light and scrutiny.

It was an onlooker’s cell phone footage (along with security and surveillance cam footage) that first gave audio and visuals to George Floyd’s death—and later-released police body camera footage that gave us more details.

And while recent studies show body cameras don’t influence police officers’ behavior unless they are used and reviewed properly, at least half of civilian departments have them—and military police trail far behind in acquiring them.

In 2017, Marine Corps Air Station Miramar, California, was the first military installation to implement a body camera program throughout its Provost Marshal, or military police, office, according to the Marine Corps.


“They were one of the first in the nation as a major city to take on the body-camera challenge. They talked to us a lot about their training, policies, and procedures, and some of the great results they were seeing.”

But the Marine Corps as a whole is still “doing an assessment on the use of body cameras,” Littesy said, viewing it as an “emerging capability.”

Though his unit did not have body cams when he was there (it does now), the Marine MP veteran said he often used an audio tape recorder at traffic stops for his own protection and to back up his reports.

PROBLEMS OF THEIR OWN

But as veterans leave the military and become civilian police, problems have arisen. In fact, the officer who knelt upon George Floyd’s neck first served as a military police officer in the Army Reserve. After eight years in the military, Derek Chauvin left with the rank of specialist—one step up from a private first class and one below a sergeant.

Many places, including Texas—where Hutson was hired while she was still into her eight years in the Navy Reserve—put a premium on hiring veterans in their police departments. That group consists of both veterans who served as MPs as well as in other job specialties, such as infantry or communications.

Law enforcement was one of the top-10 career fields for veterans in 2019, according to a survey by the Navy Federal Credit Union in conjunction with Hire Heroes USA. It was “most suited for, and comparable to military experience and skill,” the survey said. But does a military veteran necessarily bring a better background into a civilian police department?

Some critics argue that America’s police system has become paramilitary in rank and training, and has even added military equipment. A small West Virginia
town, for example, recently picked up a military mine-resistant ambush protected tactical vehicle—designed to fight improvised explosive device attacks. And with increased militarization comes increased violent behavior by police officers, research has shown.

Though largely unstudied, there is reason to believe veterans may also bring more force with them to civilian law enforcement.

Researchers at the University of Texas School of Public Health in Dallas published a study in the Journal of Public Health in 2018 finding that cops who were military veterans were more likely to discharge their weapons than their nonveteran cop counterparts.

Dallas Police Department officers who were military veterans who had deployed were “2.9 times more likely to be in a shooting” on duty as law enforcement officers compared to non-military-veteran police officers, the research found.

“Future studies should identify the effects of traumatic exposures—including combat exposure—on the behavior of veteran” cops, the researchers wrote.

“Military members are people, too,” a civilian Marine police field training officer told The War Horse on the condition of anonymity due to his current job. “They commit the same crimes people out in town commit. Some of them are pretty heinous.”

“Nobody knows what we military police actually do because our crime stats don’t get put out to the public,” he wrote. In the civilian cop world, the “blue wall of silence” is an unofficial oath of loyalty, one that says, “cops don’t snitch on cops.” They protect each other.

The military, however, is at least taught to “put the good of the institution before the individual,” Dwight Stirling, a reserve JAG officer and CEO of the Center for Law and Military Policy, wrote in The Conversation in December 2019. The military stresses the importance of organizational loyalty over personal allegiances.

Service members answer to the laws of the Uniform Code of Military Justice system, or UCMJ, which can sometimes bring harsher penalties to service members than civilian penalties might. Poor decisions can be detrimental to more than just a service member’s job—but their whole life, not to mention the possibility of marks on a federal record.

As the nation wrestles questions of racism and policing policies, military police schools are at least pondering the same tensions.

In an early June event in Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, junior Army police officers were invited to discuss “social issues currently facing this country,” like racism and civil unrest.

“Amidst the protests across the country, we determined that if the rest of the country was in turmoil, then our students would be feeling the same pain, anger, and concern for their families and communities,” said Col. Matthew Gragg, U.S. Army Military Police School training and education director, in an Army press release.

Soldiers discussed how policy change can be achieved in the Army. Some of the ways include new Army policies aimed at rooting out poor military leadership, Army Military Police School Commandant Brig. Gen. Brian Bisacre said at the event.

“Policy alone doesn’t change things—people do,” Bisacre said. “There are bad leaders, but the Army is trying to change that.” Just as civilian police could learn from MPs, MPs could also learn from civilian police experiences.

“There are problems,” Toel said. “There are, without a doubt, problems—and there are bad military police officers, obviously. But nowhere near what you see in the civilian world.”

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2020 FINANCIALS

Thanks in part to the receipt of our IRS 501(c)3 determination letter, The War Horse began the gentle transition away from fiscal sponsorship and is now able to process charitable giving directly. The generous contributions of our donors and supporters made 2020 a landmark fundraising year that will allow the organization to continue to grow and professionalize. Our complete initial 990 filing can be found on our website.

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A Message for 2021

America is disconnected from veterans and military families. Additionally, a cancer of failed accountability has metastasized throughout the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs. The War Horse team believes that facts can be part of the solution.

During 2021, The War Horse will increase our efforts to grow our audience, the number of reporting projects we publish, and the impact our work has on the communities we serve. As we prepare to celebrate the fifth anniversary of our Kickstarter campaign, The War Horse team would like to thank our many supporters, advisers, and volunteers; our growing community of writers and staff members who make all of our work possible.

The War Horse is not a breaking-news organization, but our team is dedicated to covering extremism in uniform and in the veteran community, and will be assigning journalists to explore solutions-driven reporting projects. As Louis Brandeis wrote for Harper’s Weekly in 1913, “Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants.”

You can count on The War Horse to continue shining light in dark places.
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