

the WAR HORSE



2023
ANNUAL REPORT

"I love The War Horse News because it's a lot of people that have served and trained—people who have actually experienced the military. The media are often excited to embed, but coverage focuses on sensationalized aspects, and not daily challenges and sacrifices faced."

- Jon Stewart



A NOTE FROM OUR FOUNDER

Dear friends,

Simply put, The War Horse had a tremendous year. We published our 100th reporting project and 350th reflection exploring the human impact of military service. As the founder, this is an incredible milestone for me. I can still remember hitting publish on our first story, nearly eight years ago, about the family of Staff Sgt. Javier Ortiz-Rivera, who died in Afghanistan in 2010.

Like our first story, this year's writing seminar also focused on families whose service member died in uniform. In April, The War Horse welcomed 10 Gold Star children and siblings to Lucky Spur Ranch in Texas for a weeklong, expenses-paid writing retreat. Mentors ranged from a Pulitzer Prize winner to First Lady Jill Biden, and following the seminar, two graduates spoke with WBUR's On Point during an hourlong live interview on Memorial Day.

This year, our team also collaborated with The University of Chicago to publish a white paper about the impacts of a declining military reporting ecosystem. To showcase the findings, we hosted the inaugural War Horse Symposium with Jon Stewart, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and the Deputy Secretary of Defense. The event was a tour de force that demonstrated our capacity for high-impact events, sourcing, and partnerships.

But that's not all. During 2024, we also welcomed our second full-time reporter, one of whom participated in a prestigious fellowship, and on the business side, we earned a Platinum transparency rating. Along the way, multiple War Horse writers earned awards, and I became the first enlisted recipient of the Lt. Gen. John Lejeune Award for Leadership, a recognition previously bestowed upon Sen. John Glenn, Secretary James Mattis, and President George H. W. Bush.

As I reflect on these many accomplishments, I am excited for the future of The War Horse. Readers and donors like you have helped our team build incredible momentum, and with your continued support, The War Horse will have an increasingly larger impact on the communities we serve.

Semper Fidelis,

Thomas Brennan
Founder and Executive Director

OUR FAVORITE REPORTING PROJECTS OF 2023

“Her Flight Instructor Sexually Harassed Her. The Marine Corps Tried to Kick Her Out.”

SONNER KEHRT | AUG. 18, 2023

More than a year ago, I started hearing stories from flight students in naval aviation training about bias, discrimination, racism, and sexism. Then I heard about two women in flight training who were on the verge of being kicked out—not just out of flight school, but out of the Marines altogether—after they reported sexual harassment and gender discrimination in training.

My investigation traced how the Navy and Marine Corps failed to take these women’s concerns seriously, and how their response was indicative of a larger problem. I talked to nearly two dozen flight students and instructors about their experiences, and tracked down data from multiple training squadrons that showed upward of 90% of respondents in command climate surveys said women who reported sexual harassment would be seen as troublemakers.

The military has promised to fix its culture, again and again. This story shows how in a specialty that is still primarily staffed by white men, it continues to fail at keeping that promise. “I know people keep saying, ‘Oh, it’s changing a little,’” said a former Marine Corps pilot who was sexually assaulted by a fellow pilot in 2003. “I don’t see it.”

“...Upward of 90% of respondents in command climate surveys said women who reported sexual harassment would be seen as troublemakers.”

‘People Feel Expendable’ — Military Could Lower Suicide Rate With Focus on Quality of Life

ANNE MARSHALL-CHALMERS | AUG. 24, 2023

For my first story, I took a deep-dive into a little publicized report on military suicides that had come out earlier in the year. I read about busted computers, poor living conditions, and a number of other daily stressors service members must endure—sinking vulnerable men and women into depression, and ultimately leading to a heightened suicide risk.

I discovered my civilian preconceptions about military suicide were largely wrong—military suicide is not always connected to the trauma of war— but also that it didn’t matter. This was a story about people who are suffering, after all, and to tell it well, I needed to simply study the issue, listen to those in the thick of it, and explore how to change the status quo.

“Daily stressors don’t happen in a vacuum or one at a time,” responded one military spouse. “Often you’ll hear from the service member that they are facing multiple ‘daily stressors’ for extended (chronic) periods of time ... We’re not giving our military members the tools to be successful, and yet we wonder why they struggle. Let’s do better for them. Congress can help here.”



Photo by Joshua J. Seybert, courtesy of the U.S. Air Force.



‘A False Memory’-As Confederate Monuments Topple, Some at VA Cemeteries Still Loom Large

RANDEE HOWARD | SEPT. 13, 2023

My left-turn signal blinked as I turned into Oak Woods Cemetery with 20 minutes to spare before closing. As I passed the grave marker for former Chicago mayor Eugene Sawyer Jr., as well as renowned scientist Dr. Yele Akande’s headstone, I discovered the 40-foot Confederate statue toward the back of the cemetery.

I couldn’t believe such a monument existed at a time when military bases honoring Confederate leaders are being renamed. I also couldn’t believe the cemetery’s informational plaque had the Department of Veterans Affairs logo on it, signaling that federal money paid for the maintenance of the site. I brought it up during our next team meeting, and I led our team to discover there were many other such VA-maintained Confederate cemeteries.

This story was my first byline and is one that began during a conversation with one of my professors at Columbia University. To see how a small tip turned into an impactful story that yielded a condemnation of the statues from VA officials has been truly amazing.

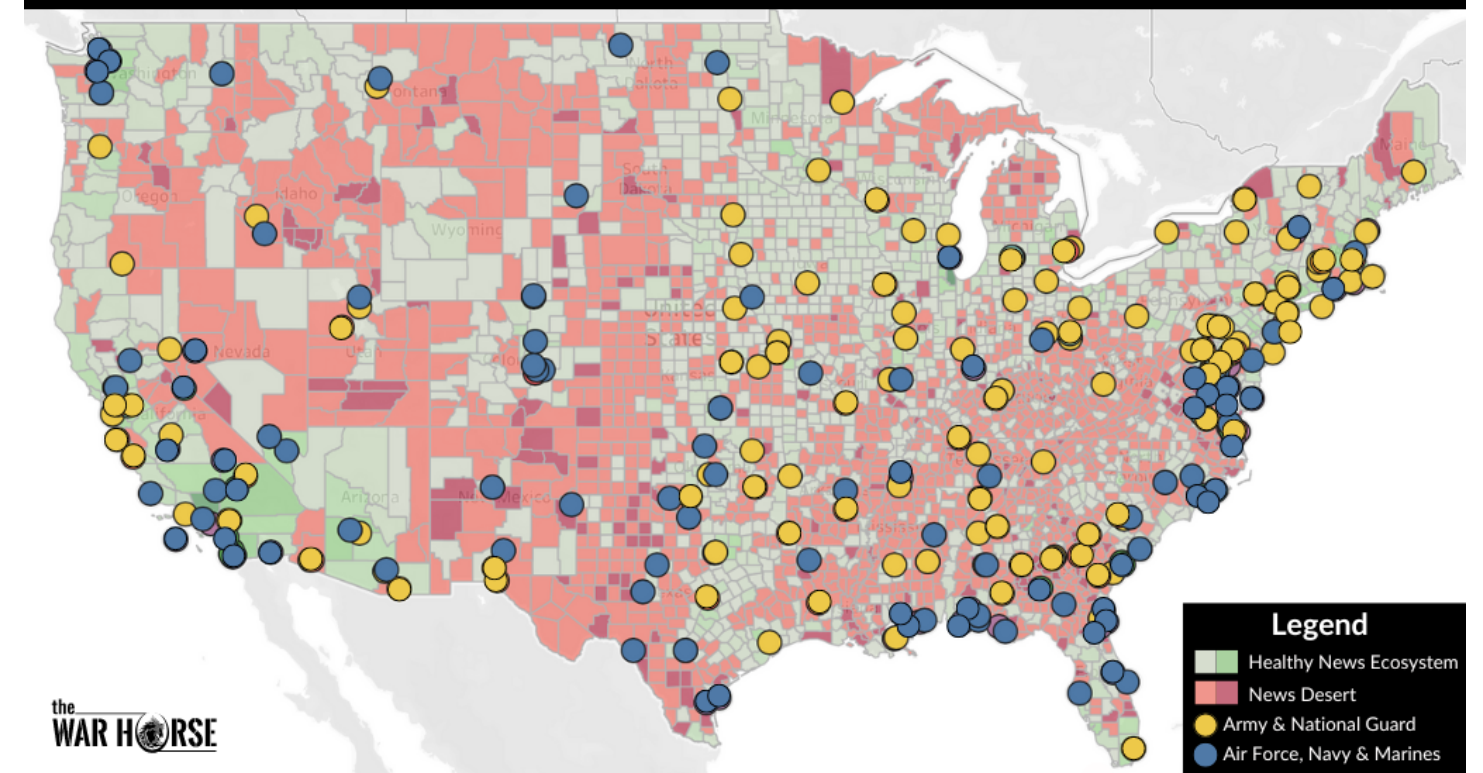
Military News Deserts Threaten U.S. National Security

For more than a year, The War Horse partnered with the University of Chicago, the George W. Bush Institute, and the Institute for Veterans and Military Families to research how the ongoing decline in military reporting impacts not only U.S. national security and the viability of the all-volunteer military force, but the everyday lives of veterans, military families, and our nation as a whole.

In March, the research was published and showcased how underreporting on military and veterans affairs leads to stereotypical views that widen the military-civilian divide and threaten national security. The survey revealed that while more than half of respondents said they have no or very little trust in the current media landscape to accurately cover the issues affecting military service members, veterans, and their families, more than 98% of participants trust The War Horse.

The Problem Is Growing Worse

News deserts disproportionately impact veterans and military families in communities across the United States, which threatens U.S. national security.



Inaugural War Horse Symposium

“One of the Best” Examples of Holding Power to Account

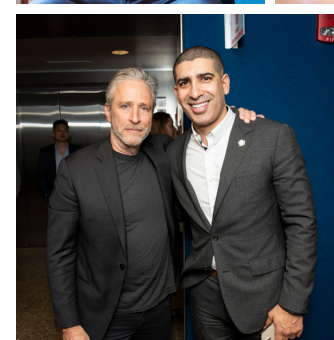
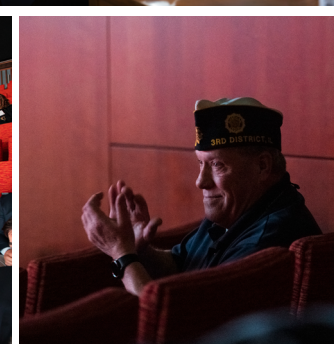
On April 6, the inaugural War Horse Symposium inspired millions of people to join a nationwide conversation about the human impact of military service, with bipartisan coverage spanning from legendary broadcaster Dan Rather and CNN anchor Kaitlan Collins to Sen. Marco Rubio and Jesse Watters of Fox News.

The day-long symposium, hosted at the University of Chicago’s Harris School of Public Policy, brought together award-winning journalists and the senior leaders shaping the future of the departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs. The day started with remarks from legendary reporter Bob Woodward and included conversations with comedian Jon Stewart, Medal of Honor recipient Flo Groberg, and many others.

“The War Horse Symposium was one of the best-ran, most interesting events I’ve attended in a while.”
- Sam Kille, Director of Communications for Report for America

“The symposium was sensational, beautifully executed, filled with insights, and very informative. Everything that one could want out of a symposium.”
- Charles Kravetz, former CEO of WBUR

“The United States military is about defending the Constitution, and the free press is part of the Constitution. Any major institution hears hard truths, and the press helps bring that.”
- Dep. Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks





The Shoulders I Stood on Were Gone. How Little I Knew of the Journey Before Me.

BOSTON GILBERT | NOVEMBER 8, 2023

A Delta Force unit zipped over the barren desert. Two Black Hawks contained assault forces. Four Little Birds carried riders and artillery. It was a perfect blue sky in Taji, Iraq. The operators stalked a high-profile target. All went according to plan until it didn't.

The date was Nov. 27, 2006. For the first time in his seasoned career, the flight lead heard, "Mayday, Mayday, Mayday!" over the radio.

Meanwhile, I was sound asleep in the bedroom I shared with my little brother. We lived in a small but comfortable home in scorching Phoenix. The morning commenced with what I expected to be a normal day at Corte Sierra Elementary School. Abnormal for a school

night, my mom told us we would sleep over at a friend's house that evening. Even my fourth-grade sensitivities knew something was off.

I missed my dad. He deployed two months prior and was set to return just after Christmas. I missed the smell of his Barbasol shaving cream lather. I missed him steering with his knees, convincing me the wheel of his 1992 Chevy Silverado moved by magic. We listened to '80s rock because, according to him, that was "real music."

Boom! An unidentified projectile removed the tail rotor from one of the Little Birds. An 80-mile-per-hour crash landing ensued. It was not long before the shooter showed himself.

Moving with intent, five weaponized trucks housing dozens of al-Qaida affiliates traversed the flat earth. Heavy machine guns with long-range capabilities enabled the trucks to fire first. The operators dug in the sand for cover as rounds cracked like fireworks.

My dad was skybound. Perched in his F-16 viper, he showed restraint during an air-to-air refuel as a call for air support pierced the radio. At 100 shots per second, his 20 mm Gatling guns devastated the lead trucks after he rolled off the tanker. A tight turn to initiate his subsequent attack dropped him 200 feet from the deck. He was pushing the edge of aviation and he knew it. After scattering the remaining enemy forces in a final act of fire, 500 miles per hour met the brutal fact of the desert floor.

Major Troy "Trojan" Gilbert died with his nose to the grindstone.

My friend's mother drove us to our home rather than to school the following morning. She was quiet. The front door opened, revealing my grandparents, friends, and other family members encircling the couch where my mom sat somberly. After hearing the unhearable, I retreated to the bathroom for solitude. I was nine. Dad was gone. I couldn't believe it.

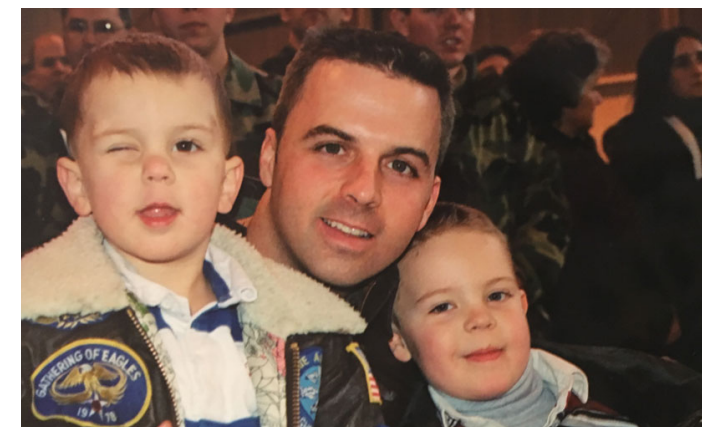
"When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves," wrote neurologist, psychiatrist, and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl.

I wanted my physical father, but I could not have him. From that moment on I was left with the tremendous task of filling the void he left. Symbolically speaking, his passing represented disintegration and chaos in my world. My role model father, the impetus for my life and the shoulders I stood on, was gone. How little I knew of the pilgrimage set before me. How

little I knew of the question entangled in my journey: How can I make meaning from my loss?

Parts from my dad's jet lay strewn across a carrot field. Prior to the arrival of U.S. forces at the crash site, insurgents filmed the scene and took his body from the wreckage. He was lying prostrate on a plastic sheet as smoke billowed in the background. They titled the propaganda video "The Missing." We buried an empty casket. Ten years passed before his recovery and homecoming.

I fondly remember my dad taking my mom, brother, and me to watch Star Wars: Episode III in the theater. He waxed poetic about collecting Marvel's early Star Wars comic books and watching the originals as a kid. It wasn't until years later that I understood the profound connection linking me and the protagonist of the original trilogy. Luke Skywalker tells his companions he wished he had known his father. Central to Luke's destiny is discovering the truth about his father.



A hero from a war bearing my dad's callsign also went missing. The Odyssey contains a much older example of the archetypal father quest found in Star Wars. Reeling from his father's absence, King Odysseus' son Telemachus is in turmoil. Immature, victimized, and disoriented, Telemachus is an embittered bystander as

suitors take advantage of the vacant throne on his home island of Ithaca. They ravage his kingdom and harass his mother.

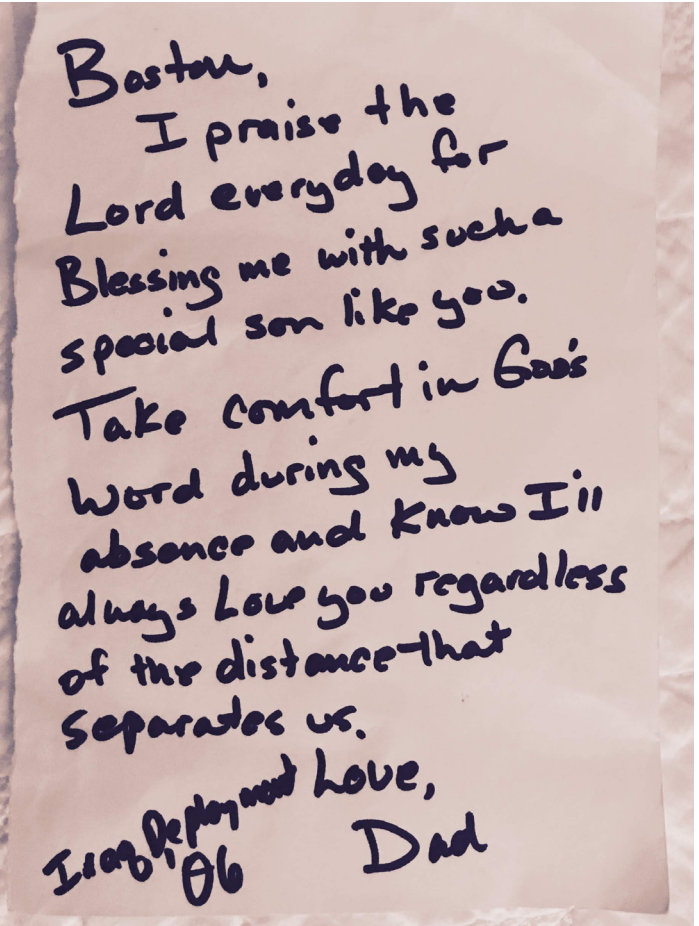
I puked on the flight back from the funeral. Was it the stress? The attention? Was I purging the tumultuous two weeks leading up to the service? I was just a boy when I gazed upon his white marble headstone for the first time. Little did I know his death marked my separation from childhood and my entry into a liminal space. It is not a coincidence that I found soccer soon after losing my father. The unpredictability and finality of his death proved to be fertile soil for the game to sprout as my primary identity. Budding as an athlete, soccer promised security, validation, and self-worth. Like Telemachus, who tells Athena, “Mother has always told me I’m his son, it’s true, but I am not so certain,” I was unsure who I was. Seeking individuation through soccer, I was subject to the instability of its every whim.

The decade between my father’s death, confiscation, and return saw an eclectic array of service members hunt for his remains: SEALs, Green Berets, intel analysts, search dogs, and Marines chased the ghost. Their first discovery catapulted me back to Arlington National Cemetery for a second burial seven years after the first. A small box of toe bone fragments was laid on his casket.

Three years later, a tribal chieftain local to Fallujah disclosed the whereabouts of my father’s full remains. A 29-person team consisting of several members of Task Force 160, the unit that he died protecting, retrieved his body and escorted him home.

It is not a coincidence that I lost soccer soon after finding my father.

I underwent consecutive foot surgeries during my sophomore season of college soccer, only nine months after my father’s homecoming. Soccer as my chief identity was a house of cards, and it fell hard. The psychospiritual challenges that afflicted me during my two-year-long recovery resembled the struggles of my fabled forerunners from Ithaca and Tatooine. Ancient Greeks would have understood this juncture in my life as a *kairos* (καιρός): a word they used to describe the right, critical, or opportune moment for action.



Luke Skywalker’s lowest moment is when the tyrannical Darth Vader reveals himself as Luke’s father. For Telemachus, it is his depression at the suitors’ exploitation of his home and his mother, and his inability to do anything about it. Each character’s *kairos* was essential to the formation of their character and the discovery of their identity.

My *kairos* led to a personal revelation in a movie theater with my then-girlfriend and now-wife. Fans of the original *Lion King*, we spent a night out watching the digital remake. After grappling with the death of his father and evading his destiny, Simba has an encounter that changes the course of his life. The pride’s mandrill shaman, Rafiki, facilitates a communion between Simba and his father, Mufasa, who reveals himself as a ghost in the sky. In desperation, Simba pleads, “Don’t leave me again.” Mufasa’s response gripped me through the screen.

“I never left you. I never will. Remember who you are.”

To this, Rafiki questions Simba, “And so, I ask again. ... Who are you?”

Without reservation, Simba replies, “I am Simba, son of Mufasa.”

A tear slipped my guard and quietly rolled down my cheek. It clicked. I know who I am. I am Boston, son of Troy. Nothing can take that away from me.

In all three epic stories, the sons return where they started: basking in the simplicity of their secure identity as beloved sons of their fathers. Telemachus and Odysseus are reunited and slay the suitors. Luke Skywalker redeems Darth Vader by turning him from the Dark Side and reinstating him properly as Anakin Skywalker once again. Simba heeds Mufasa’s call to reclaim



his right as the one true king of the Pride Lands.

Renowned poet T.S. Eliot writes:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

Although I can never bring my dad back, I am invigorated by the prospect of making him come alive by accepting my unshaken identity as his son, boldly embracing the challenges in my life like he did, and living as well as I know how. In doing so, I gain an immense sense of myself through remembering and relating to him.

I would alter Frankl’s quote: “When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to know ourselves.”

Even in death, my father beckons me to uncover my unique personhood. ■



Boston Gilbert is the eldest son of Major Troy “Trojan” Gilbert, who was killed in action near Taji, Iraq, in November 2006 while providing close air support to a Delta Force unit. Boston is happily married to his wife, Eliana, and works for the military nonprofit No Greater Sacrifice. He is a 2023 War Horse writing fellow.

Our Writing Seminar for Gold Star Children and Siblings

In May, The War Horse hosted our sixth writing seminar and welcomed 10 Gold Star children and siblings to Lucky Spur Ranch in Justin, Texas. During the expenses-paid retreat, the cohort was joined by First Lady Jill Biden, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist David Finkel, editor Nina Rodriguez-Marty from Viking Press, and associate agent Chandler Wickers of SK Literary Agency.

“It was incredibly helpful to be in a remote location. It allowed me to disconnect from the chaos and distractions of the real world,” said Maria Rossi, whose father died by suicide on active duty. “The environment was perfect for what I had to do during my time there. It was relaxing and comfortable and just a beautiful place. It was almost impossible to not be inspired.”

Following the seminar, Rossi and Bailey Donahue, whose father was killed in Afghanistan, both participated in a live nationwide interview on WBUR’s On Point.

“The writing seminar was one of the most healing environments I’ve ever experienced. There was a beautiful balance of listening and speaking. The week spent with The War Horse was one of the greatest milestones I’ve ever experienced on a professional, mental, and community scale.”

— Bailey Donahue

“This seminar was life-changing for me. This seminar taught me to trust in myself, trust the process, and that I can do this!”

— Maria Rossi

“This was one of the first events I have been to where there was a health provider on hand. That was WONDERFUL!”

— Cassidy LaBouff

“Your loss is different than mine. Your families have made a sacrifice that can never be repaid. ... You aren’t alone. Your President and I are on your side. We keep you in our hearts. And we’re working to support you every day.” — Dr. Jill Biden

WHAT OUR SUPPORTERS SAY

"I fully believe in the value and vision of War Horse. The \$300 I earned for my piece was the first time I had been paid for my writing, and it made me feel like a million bucks."

"I worked as a civilian DoD clinical social worker for 10 years—I believe in the power of writing and sharing experiences. It is often more healing and profound for service members/ veterans than traditional talk therapy!"

"I'M RETIRED ARMY NURSE CORPS.
YOU GUYS DO GREAT WORK!"

I started reading the stunning, candid, powerful personal essays. I am learning much about the lives of military families. As a psychotherapist, it's important work.

"I read Bailey's article about becoming a Gold Star kid this morning. This is the type of article I'd love to see in our national paper. Thank you!"

"I valued not just your research and presentation of the facts, but I was comforted to see that you understand military culture from the inside. Not only that, but your reporting showed you to be an ally of women and people of color."

Amazing reporting on the Navy and Marine Corps aviation training. The themes the journalist brought to life are maddeningly similar to those in other military contexts. You do great work!

"THE FIRST ANNUAL WAR HORSE SYMPOSIUM WAS INCREDIBLY VALUABLE. I ANTICIPATE IT WILL BE A CATALYST FOR NEW ENGAGEMENT AND DISCOVERIES."

2023 FINANCIALS

YEAR	REVENUE	EXPENSE
2019	323,397	354,152
2020	552,282	373,240
2021	731,790	517,420
2022	854,741	800,718
2023	1,229,734	1,328,413

Our complete 2023 990 filing and audited financial statements can be found on our website.



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**Global Investigative
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A Message for 2024.

For seven years, our team has worked tirelessly to grow The War Horse, and this year, we achieved incredible milestones. Following this year's inaugural War Horse Symposium, famed journalist Dan Rather wrote about the event. His statement is poignant.

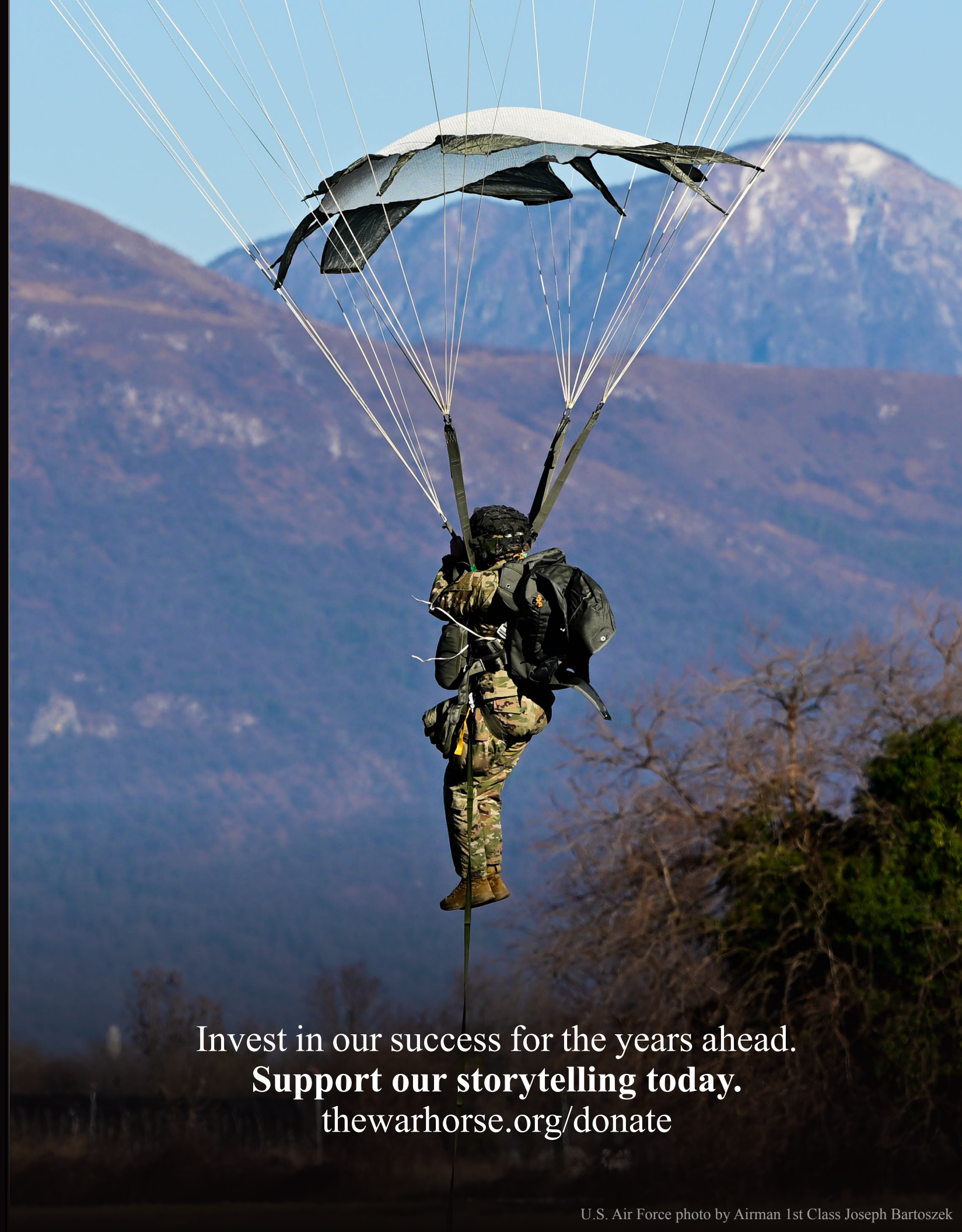
“We can support our troops without blindly saluting the institutions they serve, and we fund. Indeed, insisting that our defense dollars be well spent is a form of support for our service men and women.”

The War Horse is a voice of temperance and the antidote to our country's apathy about military action. Our newsroom defends the rank and file, as well as their families, by bridging the military and civilian divide, because if Americans don't understand the value of our human capital that serves in uniform, then they will never understand the tragedy of its misuse.

We can't do this alone.

Join The War Horse team on our exciting journey.

Invest in our success for the years ahead.
Support our storytelling today.
thewarhorse.org/donate





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Cover photo: U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Breanna Klemm