

the WAR HORSE

2025 ANNUAL REPORT



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**Certainly appreciate all you and yours are doing
to keep us as well informed and solution-forward
as possible in this difficult time.**

— MARGRETHE LOHRKE,
reader

A Letter From Our Founder

Dear War Horse readers,

It feels surreal to write this. Ten years ago, I was filing the articles of incorporation and filming a Kickstarter video that brought The War Horse to life. Now, we are preparing for a second decade of impact.

Ten years is a long time, and it's an accomplishment that few entrepreneurs and businesses get to celebrate. My greatest joy as the founder has been witnessing teammates pour their hearts and passion into my dream, transforming The War Horse into our shared reality. I'm grateful to you for being a part of that journey.

Throughout the past decade, we've partnered with Fortune 50 companies, Ivy League universities, and leading foundations. We've partnered with newsrooms across the country, ranging from national outlets to local community publications. This reporting has led to changes in federal and military laws, earning us 20 journalism awards and participation in 10 prestigious fellowships.

I also remain honored to be a steward of our archive of nearly 500 Reflections. This collection of first-person stories by veterans and military families spans from World War II to beyond Iraq and Afghanistan, and, in my opinion, is a national treasure.

Since founding The War Horse, I've watched the news ecosystem be decimated and the military reporting ecosystem near extinction. In short, our work is more vital than ever, and our team is determined to continue growing and making a difference in the lives of veterans.

On behalf of The War Horse team, thank you for another incredible, impactful year, and for your ongoing support.

We can't do this work without you.

Onward and Semper Fidelis,



Thomas Brennan
Founder and Executive Director

News stories of 2025



War Horse Staff Reporters Dig Into Impact of VA Cuts

STORIES BY SONNER KERHT AND LEAH ROSENBAUM

Through deep sourcing, exclusive public records requests, and a persistent demand for accountability, investigative reporters Leah Rosenbaum and Sonner Kehrt captured the emotional toll on America’s veterans in their coverage of cuts at the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The headlines said it all:

“Battered by Cuts and Firings, VA Employees Describe Serving Veterans Under ‘Invisible Cloud of Dread,’”

“Exodus at VA: 10,000 Employees Are Resigning in September,”

“‘We Need to Terminate Treatment’: VA Mental Health Providers Say They Are Under Pressure to Limit Care,” and

“‘I Feel Lost.’ Anxiety Grows Among Veterans Cut Off From VA One-on-One Therapy.”

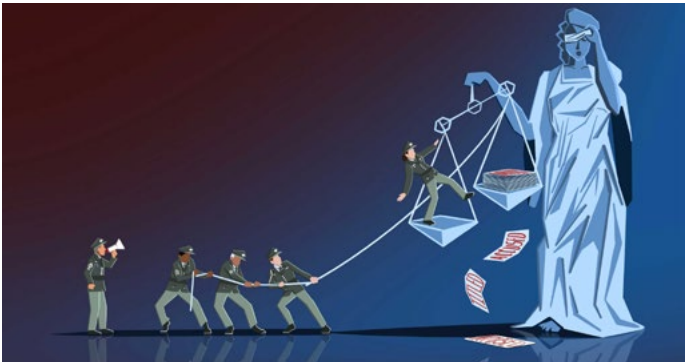
It started in March with Kehrt’s reporting of VA clinics across the country as DOGE cuts shook the faith of employees, many of them veterans who got into the work to help their fellow comrades. “Honestly, the last time I felt this level of fear was in combat,” a VA social worker and Marine

veteran who earned a Purple Heart in Fallujah, Iraq, told Kehrt.

Rosenbaum followed that story with an exclusive list obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request of 10,000 positions VA was cutting through deferred resignations. Some VA workers commented that it was the most detailed information they had seen about the scope of the downsizing, and more than they’d learned from VA leadership.

Rosenbaum later unveiled that VA psychologists were being asked to cut off longtime patients from one-on-one therapy, a consequence of critical staffing shortages. She tapped into a growing network of sources within VA and earned the trust of traumatized, angry veterans, who told her how VA was breaking the promise to care for Americans who sacrificed for their country.

Few stories in 2025 resonated so deeply with War Horse readers. Our reporters received dozens of emails from veterans who felt somebody had their back. Hundreds more turned to Reddit to share our stories and join a robust conversation. One reader wrote: “Your article helped me know I am not alone and wasn’t the only one suffering.”



They’ve Never Been Arrested. Why Does the FBI List Thousands of Service Members as Potential Criminals?

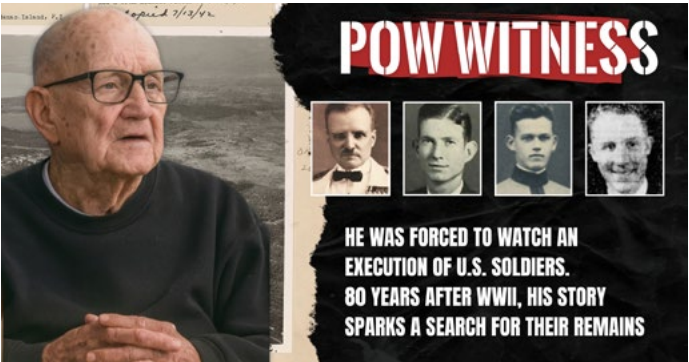
RACHEL FOBAR | OCTOBER 23, 2025

Contributing writer Rachel Fobar produced our **most-read news story** of the year on a guilty-until-proven-innocent stigma that only affects members of the military. The term sounds nonthreatening enough, but in the military, “titling” isn’t about taking ownership of a car or property. It’s what happens when a service member’s name is simply listed as the “subject” in a military criminal investigative report.

And here’s the problem: Every branch of the military shares those titling records in criminal databases with more than two dozen agencies, including the FBI, even if the case was dropped.

As Fobar’s story explained, the fallout can be devastating because the records are retrievable for decades. Veterans can be passed over for promotions, rejected on apartment applications, and denied firearms clearance. With the stain on their record, some vets struggle to get a job for years, adding to the stress for many who already battle mental health challenges.

Fobar introduced War Horse readers to a Texas mom and National Guard veteran who is fighting to clear her name in a lawsuit that has become a showdown over the military’s system of titling. “Why,” her lawyer asked, “are they fighting so hard to preserve something so wrong?”



He Was Forced to Watch an Execution of U.S. Soldiers. 80 Years After WWII, His Story Sparks a Search for Their Remains

KEN MCCLAUGHLIN | SEPTEMBER 12, 2025

Just how extraordinary has Ben Hagans’ life been?

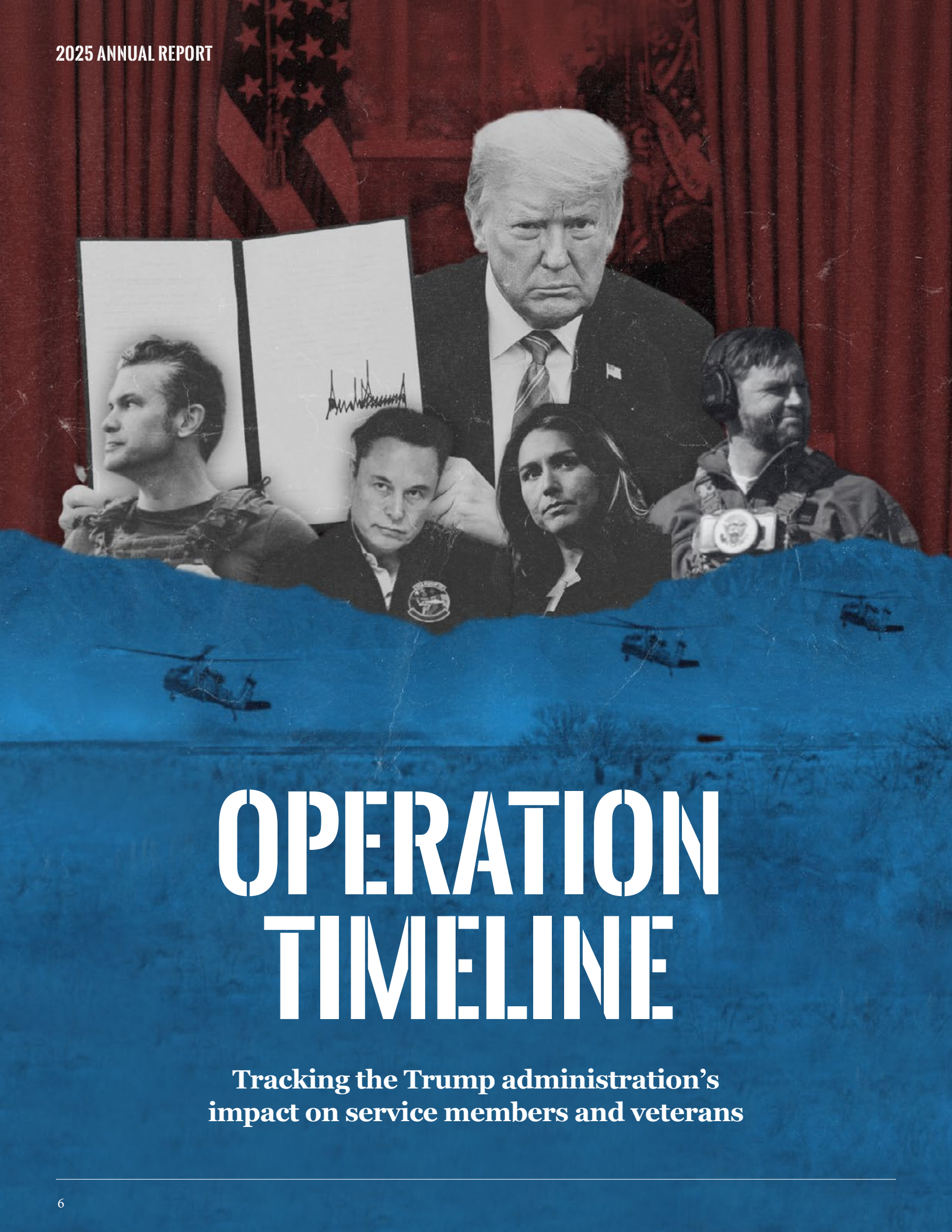
The Korean War veteran relived his days as an Army paratrooper by skydiving last summer to celebrate his 96th birthday, and even a freefall didn’t begin to answer that question.

Contributing writer Ken McLaughlin took a deep dive into Ben’s remarkable life story.

As a 12-year-old, he was a courier for the 43rd Infantry Regiment of the Philippine Scouts on Mindanao Island before being taken captive by the Japanese army. As a young POW, he was forced to watch the savage executions of three U.S. soldiers in July 1942.

Eight decades later, the retired firefighter’s still-vivid memory of those killings is providing clues for a POW/MIA group that is searching for the remains of the soldiers and also those of Army Brig. Gen. Guy Fort, the highest-ranking American military officer executed by enemy forces in World War II.

And the story continues. In 2026, McLaughlin plans to travel to the Philippines to update War Horse readers on the search team’s efforts to locate the soldiers’ remains.



OPERATION TIMELINE

Tracking the Trump administration's
impact on service members and veterans



When President Trump returned to the White House, he promised drastic changes to the departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs starting on Day 1, and, no matter how you felt about it, he more than kept his word. The impact on the military and veterans community has been profound.

The War Horse responded with **Operation Timeline**, an award-winning chronicle of the administration's day-by-day developments and actions.

With Operation Timeline, we tracked the revamping of military culture and use of force from Yemen to Iran, to Syria, Nigeria, and Venezuela. We followed the historic domestic deployments of National Guard members and Marines, kept tabs on the reassessment of women in combat roles, and covered revisions in grooming and fitness standards. From staff cuts to cuts into the disability claims backlog, we documented changes at Veterans Affairs.

This interactive reporting project became our way to preserve the history of the moment through a one-stop shop, with analytical tools like filtering options and corresponding source documents and news stories.

The custom-built Timeline began in partnership with the Human Rights Center at UC Berkeley and continues to be updated regularly by The War Horse staff.

While many major news organizations, such as The New York Times and The Guardian, presented Trump timelines, most ended at 100 days. Operation Timeline continued on throughout 2025.

The nonpartisan, nonprofit group We the Veterans and Military Families recognized Operation Timeline with its inaugural Patriotic Programming Award. Readers have also shared their gratitude.

"What an incredible idea to put together the Operation Timeline project—and it is so well done," wrote Jeff Parrott, of The Salt Lake Tribune. "From the 'We get it' to the filters and quality of content. Just awesome.

"I'm a big fan of The War Horse's work, and—as a veteran and newspaper politics editor—I so appreciate what you're doing for all of us."

Partners

What does it mean to bridge the military–civilian divide?



Less than 7% of U.S. adults are veterans and less than one-third have an affiliation with the military

What does it mean to bridge the military–civilian divide?

It’s core to our mission at The War Horse. And it’s a key focus of one of our most important strategies to amplify news, beyond the military echo chamber, about the human impact of service.

Less than 7% of U.S. adults are veterans and less than one-third of Americans have an affiliation with the military, so reaching a broader audience is essential to educating the American public about military service.

With the departure of seasoned military journalists after the sale of Military.com, and the Pentagon’s attempts to limit journalists’ access, we believe it is more important than ever to widely distribute our stories and work with other publications to help bridge the military–civilian divide.

Consequently, we’re not in competition with other newsrooms. We’re seeking them out to share our stories and help us reach communities across the country.

So when contributing writer and 2022 War Horse Fellow Jennifer Brookland reports for

us on the latest childcare shortage on military bases, you might have also read her story on the front page of The Salt Lake Tribune or in The Gazette in Colorado Springs. We partnered with both local newspapers to feature our story with photographs by their staff photojournalist.

You might have seen our reporter Sonner Kehrt’s story about the deportation of an Army sergeant’s wife on news sites like The Texas Tribune and Mother Jones. Or contributing writer Noelle Wiehe’s story about a Navy sailor’s struggle with an eating disorder on the front page of the Orlando Sentinel and at the top of The 19th, a nonprofit news site that covers gender, politics, policy, and power.

The War Horse’s Leah Rosenbaum teamed up with NPR’s investigative unit to expose how dozens of for-profit companies that charge veterans thousands of dollars for help filing for disability claims are ignoring warning letters from VA that their business practices may be breaking the law. Leah appeared on NPR’s All Things Considered to discuss the coverage.

All told, we partnered with 26 online and print publications, large and small, national and local, from USA Today to the Times Record News in Wichita Falls, Texas.



Reflections



My Job Was Army Cook. But Ranger School Didn't Care, and I Wasn't Going Home Without a Tab

MATT STONE | AUGUST 6, 2025

Editor's Note: In August, Matt Stone's gripping account of enduring Ranger School broke The War Horse's readership records, quickly attracting more than 115,000 readers. His underdog tale of grit and tenacity struck a chord among readers, with one commenting, "This is very helpful to me! We need to show up and persevere!!"

I joined the Army as a cook, thinking it would keep me out of trouble. I wasn't looking to be a hero; I just needed a reset. And the \$35,000 bonus didn't hurt. I figured I'd do my time, stay in the background, and come home with a decent story or two. By then, I'd have college paid for.

But the Army had other plans.

In basic training, I ran fast, didn't mouth off (much), and kept moving. That turned out to be enough. I finished as an honor grad, which came with **Airborne** and **Ranger** contracts. I signed on the dotted line before I really understood what I was getting into. Part of me liked the idea of danger. Maybe I thought chasing the hardest thing possible would prove to my family—a long line of military officers and lawmen—that I was worthy, brave. Maybe I just craved love and belonging.

Growing up in the shadow of authority without empathy meant control passed for love and discipline passed for justice. I didn't grow up with guidance; I grew up with orders. When I finally made it through the jumps, the rucks, the push-ups, the yelling, the hunger, and the stress, I graduated to the 1st Ranger Battalion of the **75th Ranger Regiment** in 2009, and finally earned the coveted tan beret. Normally, that's where you'd celebrate. But for me, the easy days were over, and they were on back order until further notice.

Arriving at Ranger Battalion at **Hunter Army Airfield** in Savannah, Georgia, didn't mean you were done. It meant the Army had softened you like clay, beaten you into submission, prepped you for becoming your final, deadly, barbaric form. A form that knew one thing: Finish the objective or die. That's when the real test began—the moment that tan beret touched your head.



On my first PT test with the battalion, I ran a 33-minute five-mile. That got me fast-tracked to Ranger School before I ever deployed. And the infantry guys made sure I knew how they felt about it: I didn't belong. I was a cook. A support guy. The dude who made eggs, not war. To them, I got lucky and took a Ranger School slot from someone more deserving.

And to be fair, I understood. To them, I had skipped the line and snuck into the cool-guy club through the service entrance.

Not only did I skip the line, I was also wildly unprepared. They'd been trained in small-unit tactics, room clearing, patrol base operations, and fast-roping in less-than-ideal conditions. I'd been stirring spaghetti and perfecting my omelet flip. While they practiced battle drills, I was running food service pots and pans formations.

I’ve heard of only a half-dozen cooks in Army history who had made it through Ranger School. I was honored. And terrified. I wasn’t just going to Ranger School, I was doing it while Discovery Channel filmed the whole damn thing for a series titled *Surviving the Cut*. The revolution may not be televised, but my painful crucible was about to be.

I was behind from the start. But I learned to shut up, move fast, and bleed in silence. Ranger School didn’t care what your military occupational specialty was. The terrain didn’t care. The weather didn’t care. The wildlife didn’t care. You either kept up or you went home.

Bitten by a rattlesnake? Tough it out or go home. Mauled by a bear? Tough it out or go home. Frostbite on your toes? I felt I would need to amputate the dead ones or go home. And I wasn’t

**I was behind from the start.
But I learned to shut up, move
fast, and bleed in silence.**

going back without that 50-cent strip of cloth on my shoulder telegraphing that I was a Ranger.

Darby Phase? Straight through. I had this in the bag. Then came Mountain Phase.

I failed it once. Fine. I dusted myself off. Then I failed again.

At that point, I had a choice: walk away or keep climbing. Going home meant the struggle was over. But a new one would begin the moment I showed up at battalion without that tab. In Ranger Battalion, no tab meant no respect, no identity. Just a pulse with dog tags.

And that’s when it hit me: **The Myth of Sisyphus**.



The story of the king condemned by the gods to push a boulder up a mountain forever, only to watch it roll back down each time. Albert Camus said we must imagine Sisyphus happy, not because the task changes, but because he chooses to find meaning in the struggle itself.

It’s about defiance. Purpose. Owning your suffering.

In a world where vulnerability is punished, the ultimate act of defiance is choosing your own meaning through suffering.

Mountain Phase wouldn’t have the honor of breaking me. I would have the honor of breaking it.

And I did.

Third time around, I passed.

Then I got recycled in Swamp Phase. If you did

not receive a passing grade on patrol, you were recycled—no questions asked. Again, I kept going through hunger, sleep deprivation, poisonous plants, spiders, humiliation, and passing out after overheating. I watched guys quit. Lose their minds. Tap out.

Me? I kept showing up. One foot in front of the other. I was always the outsider, the cook with no business trying to be a Ranger. But I endured. I **rat-fucked MREs**, chewed coffee grinds like dip, and ran on spite. That was my fuel.

At the time, I didn’t know why I kept going. But looking back, I think I was afraid of what it would mean to stop. There’s a kind of power in pain, especially when it’s the only thing that makes you feel like you’re worth something. The only thing that feels bigger than yourself.

Camus did not see Sisyphus as a tragic figure, but as a man who, by accepting his fate, transcended it. Because maybe the struggle itself is enough. I kept rolling that boulder. I have yet to meet a soldier who went through Mountain Phase four times like I did, but they are out there. Suffering just the same.

I didn’t come out of Ranger School elite. I came out fluent in suffering, starvation, silence, and

sleep deprivation. The kind of invisible pain you wear like a badge. I didn’t get comfortable; I just learned to live where comfort doesn’t and thrive there.

I cherish that tab, not for what it says I am but for what it taught me: that I can suffer with the best of them and still keep going. That I don’t need applause or permission to climb. The only one who determines my fate is me.

And that’s what I want to say to the young soldiers out there, the ones who feel like they don’t belong. Impostor syndrome runs deep in special operations, especially among those who make it to places like Ranger School.

No one really feels like they belong.

Because what we do isn’t natural. We’re trained to suffer, to push beyond limits most people never approach.

Just because you’re struggling doesn’t mean you’re broken.

It means you’re human and you showed up anyway. That is what sets you apart. ■



Matt Stone, a cook who earned his Ranger tab, served in the 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment from 2008 to 2012. After leaving the Army, he earned an associate degree in criminal justice, a bachelor’s degree in political science from the University of North Carolina, Asheville, and a master’s degree in international relations from American University. He is the author of *The Spelling Bee Champ* and the subscription newsletter *Grounded*. Most importantly, he learned how to turn struggle into meaning, chaos into lessons, bedlam into cosmic order.

More Voices, Richer Understanding



Nine veterans gathered amid Texas longhorns and thunderstorms in 2025 to attend The War Horse Writing Seminar for Black Veterans.

Black people have served in the military since the Revolutionary War, longer than the United States has been a country. Today, Black men and women comprise 17% of active-duty service members, but their stories are often overlooked in the nation’s historical record and narratives about military life.

Our writing program demonstrates our unflagging commitment to fully examining the human impact of military service. Over the years, we have invited veterans, military spouses, Gold Star children and siblings, incarcerated veterans, women veterans, and medics as we push to expand our collective understanding of war, sacrifice, and service.

In keeping with the largest service branch, Army-connected Fellows represent the largest group (45%), followed by the Air Force (23%), Marine (16%), Navy (13%), and then the Coast Guard (3%).

Our 2025 cohort marked a milestone in our history; with this eighth seminar, we have trained 100 War Horse Fellows.

The seminars require a tremendous effort from our team, support from our donors, and generosity from our Fellows, who bravely—and publicly—share their adventures, fears, grit, triumphs, and regrets with our readers. We have also welcomed more than 30 guest speakers who have mentored Fellows about storytelling, publishing, and the creative process.

With every seminar and every new voice that joins the conversation, we increase empathy and narrow the military–civilian divide.



Quotes from Fellows:

“In this political climate, it takes courage to do something like this. To uplift those of us who many in society forget about when we’re no longer in uniform. Giving women, LGBTQ+, disabled, minority, and combat veterans a chance to be seen. Allowing us the chance to be heard.”

– **Tashandra “Tasha” Poullard**

“As a veteran who is years removed from service, this seminar offered something that’s harder to come by than people may realize: real camaraderie and intentional investment. The decision to create a Black veterans–specific space mattered deeply, especially in the current climate. There was no polite applause or recycled/obligatory ‘thank you for your service’ talk. It was thoughtful, tangible support that made my service, and my voice, feel valued in a way that mattered and lasts.”

– **Tamara Geyer**



Quotes from Mentor:

“Being there made me realize how little I understood, as a civilian, about what military service truly demands—and how extraordinarily difficult and complex that experience can be, particularly for the women who serve.

“I was deeply moved by both the seriousness and the generosity with which the writers and mentors approached the seminar. The writers were exquisitely chosen, and the group came together with remarkable ease, as though they had known one another for years rather than having met only days before.”

– **Georgia Bodnar**, *founder of Noyan Literary*

What Our Readers Say

Fort Moore Was Named After My Parents. A Letter Mom Wrote Shows Why It Shouldn't Go Back to Benning

“Really appreciate the opportunity to publish the article. We were told it made it into the DoD daily summary of relevant press articles last week,” wrote Steve Moore, son of Lt. Gen. Harold “Hal” and Julie Moore.

The Hidden Costs of Caregiving: Meet the Kids Taking Care of Wounded Veterans

“Another compelling and critically important story. Thank you,” wrote Dan Woodward, a 2022 War Horse Fellow. “Too often, the caregiver is forgotten...and far too often, we never think of the kids. Great work and such an important reminder.”

‘No Purging on My Ship.’ She Hid an Eating Disorder and Lost Her Navy Career. It Saved Her Life

“This is a very real experience for many—out of shame, guilt and fear...most hide the extreme measures that tend to be taken to be considered fit,” wrote reader Olivia Nunn. “While I didn’t have an eating disorder, I can relate to the extreme measures taken to meet the semiannual height and weight requirements every year that I was in.”

Veterans Reunite With ‘Precious Cargo’ 50 Years After the Fall of Saigon

“This piece is incredible,” said Janine Zacharia, a Stanford journalism professor and former Washington Post Jerusalem correspondent. “And this twist...‘Was it the jubilation of her anticipated reunion that overwhelmed her bruised and burdened heart?’”

My Job Was Army Cook. But Ranger School Didn’t Care, and I Wasn’t Going Home Without a Tab

“Truly an excellent story of overcoming barriers. Never give up!!” – reader Roger Furnival.

The Fight After the Fight: My Dad’s War Didn’t End When He Left Vietnam

“Writing about my dad keeps his memory alive for me and all who loved him, and reading other stories reminds me that I’m not alone. I cannot express enough admiration for the work that The War Horse does.” – Andrea Madden, Reflections writer.

2025 Major Donors *(those who gave at least \$1,000)*

Organizations	Individuals
Acton Family Giving	Dr. Claire Barnett and Laura Joyce Hubbard
Adirondack Trust Company	Kevin Barre
Community Fund (Flynn Family)	Sheila Casey
BakerHostetler	Betty Dahlquist
Busboy Charitable Relief Fund	John Edelman and Suzanne Krohn
Builders Initiative Fund at The Chicago Community Foundation	Michèle Flournoy
Drue and H.J. Heinz Charitable Trust	Keith Goggin
The Heinz Endowments	Michael Hirsch
Keker Family Foundation	Sue Hoppin
Jonathan Logan Family Foundation	Alexander Mason
Knight Foundation	Robert Rosenthal
May & Stanley Smith Charitable Trust	Daniel Woodward
The Miami Foundation	Michael J. Zak
The Reva and David Logan Foundation	George Zimmer
David and Linda Shaheen Foundation	
The Silverman Family Charitable Fund	
War Heroes Initiatives Fund at the Charlottesville Area Community Foundation	
The Weber Family Foundation	
The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation	

2025 Financials

SUPPORT AND REVENUE	Without donor restrictions	With donor restrictions	Total
Contributions	\$1,127,947	\$1,074,736	\$2,202,683
In-kind donation	204,432	–	204,432
Net assets released from restrictions	100,000	(100,000)	–
	1,432,379	974,736	2,407,115
EXPENSES			
Program services	957,465	–	957,465
General and administrative	496,167	–	496,167
Fundraising	165,285	–	165,285
	1,618,917	–	1,618,917



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The War Horse News
500 Westover Dr. #39399
Sanford, NC 27330
contactus@thewarhorse.org

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