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Wounded Marines Train for Film Careers

By CHELSEA J. CARTER – 7 hours ago

SAN DIEGO (AP) — Joshua Frey looked through the view finder of his camera in a studio production lot, focusing on a group of helmets atop wooden stakes.

They reminded the former Marine of the memorials to fallen comrades he had seen before he was shot and hit by shrapnel from a rocket-propelled grenade in Iraq, which left him with partial use of his left arm, traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder that still haunts his nights.

Frey, like many disabled veterans, has struggled to find a career, to rebuild a life.

Now, more than two years after being wounded in Fallujah, Frey has enrolled in the Wounded Marine Career Foundation program, which aims to help wounded and disabled Marines and Navy corpsmen land jobs in the film industry.

The photos in the studio lot were part assignment, part therapy for Frey. Perhaps, he says, his attempt to use a camera is a new beginning, a path to a new career.

"There's so much riding on this, it has just got to work," Frey says.

With more than 29,000 troops wounded in combat since Sept. 11, 2001, job training for the disabled is a priority for the military.

But unlike many training centers, the foundation's new film boot camp aims to do more than provide skills that help the disabled find a career in film, video, sound design, graphics and photojournalism.

It also aims to let the wounded tell their own stories, says co-founder Kev Lombard, a documentary filmmaker and two-time Emmy-winning director of photography for the children's television show "Reading Rainbow."

Lombard came up with the idea for the foundation's Wounded Marine Training Center for Careers in Media program after being asked by a friend in the military nearly two years ago to document the stories of wounded veterans at military hospitals.

"It wasn't our story to tell. It was theirs," he said. "So I said how about we teach them to tell their own story."

In addition to veterans whose war injuries forced them to retire, the Marine Corps is allowing active duty wounded Marines to enroll.

Lombard and his wife, Judith Paixao, use private and corporate donations and federal grants to operate the program, which costs \$2 million for each 10-week session. They plan two sessions a year.

"This isn't about turning out the next Steven Spielberg," Lombard said. "It's about turning out a camera operator, a grip, a boom operator. These are good jobs with good pay."

Amy Lemisch of the California Film Commission says the boot camp appears to be offering nuts-and-bolts skills that are often missing from college film schools.

"It's almost like an apprenticeship," she said.

While jobs in the film industry are highly competitive, Lemisch said the students could find jobs if they develop the right skills.

The program's camouflage-painted building on a studio production lot in San Diego has a Marine Corps atmosphere. Posters from "The Sands of Iwo Jima" and "The Flying Leathernecks" adorn the walls, and the 20 students are broken up into five-member squads.

Paixao says Marines and Navy corpsmen are well-suited for film work because of their discipline and teamwork.

However, many of the wounded and disabled have been removed from military life for some time. As a result, the program emphasizes Marine Corps discipline, says photography student and former Gunnery Sgt. Nick Popaditch.

He has taken on the role of the program's gunnery sergeant, so to speak — briefing students on the day's events and helping new arrivals to San Diego navigate the city.

Popaditch gained widespread attention as the "Cigar Marine" during the fall of Baghdad when a photographer for The Associated Press captured him smiling and smoking a cigar. A year later, he was severely wounded in Fallujah by shrapnel from a rocket-propelled grenade that hit him in the face, damaging one eye and causing him to lose the other.

Many students have severe wounds that require modification of film equipment. Barry Green, an Emmy-award winning producer, worked with Popaditch to figure out how best to use video and still cameras with his injured eye.

"I'm feeling more comfortable with it," Popaditch said hours later, looking through the camera's eye piece.

Across the room, former Gunnery Sgt. Tai Cleveland, 42, worked on loading editing software onto his laptop computer.

It's the first step in what Cleveland hopes will be a new career. He uses a wheelchair since a 2003 training accident in Kuwait caused back and brain injuries, and supports his family on his disability check.

Cleveland dreams of one day building a production studio in his home in Manassas, Va., and he and his wife, Robin, have begun putting together a business plan.

"It's a way for me to take back as head of the household with a career that I can do from a wheelchair," he says during the lunch break.

Standing in the cluttered studio lot, instructor Levie Isaacks works with Frey, 31, of Clearwater, Fla., to complete the day's assignment: shooting a series of five photos that set a scene.

Frey focuses on the helmets, which sit near a box of blank ammunition. For a moment he considers taking pictures. But then he decides against it, saying later that the scene didn't look real.

Isaacks knows a bit what Frey has faced in war, having suffered post-traumatic stress himself as a Vietnam War veteran.

Isaacks has taken the road from combat veteran to Emmy Award-winning director of photography, whose credits include Fox's "Malcolm in the Middle" and the recent film "Grace," starring Elizabeth Shue.

"You look through that lens and the world is focused," Isaacks says.

On the Net:

- Wounded Marine Careers: <http://www.woundedmarinecareers.org/>