

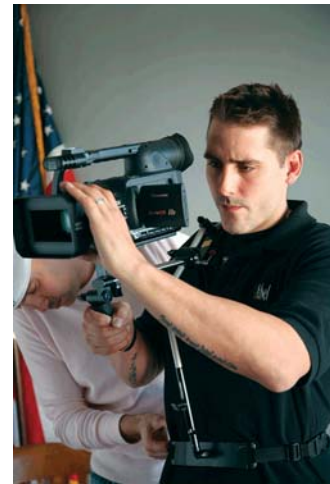


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"A Second Chance" - Behind the Lens

Medically retired Cpl Joshua Frey, assisted by Philip Levine, another medically retired Marine, is fitted with a specially designed camera harness in preparation for filmmaking classes—part of the efforts by the Wounded Marine Careers Foundation to provide civilian careers in media for those who have shed blood for their country.

*Photo courtesy of Wounded Marine Careers Foundation
Story by Allan T. Duffin*



From the outside, the building might not look like much. It's a 70-by-75-foot block of concrete that could pass for a storage shed. But this building happens to sit on the sprawling grounds of Stu Segall Productions, a 20-acre movie and television studio in San Diego. A closer look reveals that the building sports a fresh coat of paint in camouflage colors. Next door, a deuce-and-a-half truck sits ready to roll.

This setting could easily be a movie set. But it isn't.

Inside this building, wounded United States Marines and Navy corpsmen will be trained on a weapon completely different from the ones they're used to: a camera. During two 10-week courses each year, sponsored by the nonprofit Wounded Marine Careers Foundation, a staff of experts will teach 50 students the basics of filmmaking. Created by husband-and-wife filmmakers Kevin Lombard and Judith Paixao, the program gives Marines who can no longer serve on active duty an opportunity to move into civilian careers in media. (As of presstime, classes were scheduled to begin January 2008.)

Founding a New School

Lombard's father served in the Marines during World War II, then spent 20 years as an NBC news cameraman, winning four Emmys for his work. He passed his enthusiasm for the lens to his son, who began working behind the camera at age 7. "When I was 10, I was loading my father's camera and going out on assignments with him," said Lombard. During his 36 years in the industry, Lombard has matched his father in accomplishments, winning four Emmy awards of his own.

Lombard met Paixao because of their shared passion for the ocean. Two years ago they sailed a 48-foot boat from Milford, Conn., to Florida. “We’ve been on some kind of journey that requires risk and adventure ever since,” mused Paixao. The couple was married in 2007.

Lombard and Paixao came up with the idea for the school partly as a tribute to Lombard’s father, who passed away four years ago. “As he was training me, he said that eventually I would pass on my knowledge to a younger generation of filmmakers,” said Lombard.

That opportunity presented itself in September 2006. LuAnne Costello, wife of Vice Admiral Barry Costello, commander of the Third Fleet, was a volunteer at Balboa Naval Hospital in San Diego. While working with wounded veterans, she became concerned that their sacrifices would be forgotten by the general public. She asked Lombard and Paixao, who were friends of the family, to consider producing a documentary about the injured Marines and Navy corps-men she worked with at Balboa.

Lombard and Paixao were interested, but they wanted to do something that would have even greater impact. So they offered a counterproposal: gather a team of filmmakers to teach a course in filmmaking so that the wounded veterans could learn how to tell their own stories. “They’re in the hospital waiting for another round of surgery or physical therapy,” explained Lombard. “We thought that becoming a storyteller would be therapeutic,” not only for the storytellers but also for the audience that would view the stories later.

In addition to classroom instruction, Lombard and Paixao proposed that their training program provide job placement services. “Many of these young Marines joined to do their duty and serve the nation,” said Paixao. “They thought they’d transition out when they retired and possibly serve in, say, law enforcement. But with their wounds they’re unable to do that. So the school will give them a new set of skills and a way to move into the civilian workforce.”

Union Membership and Job Placement

Plans for a school swiftly gathered steam. Lombard and Paixao created a foundation to raise money and started hunting for board members, staff and a location for a schoolhouse. They tapped Marine veterans Dan Carrison and Rod Walsh, authors of “Semper Fi: Business Leadership the Marine Corps Way,” to serve as career transition counselors.

Still concerned about the veterans’ transition into film industry careers, Lombard came up with another idea. “I called up my union and explained what we were doing. They liked the program and said they would take the veterans in.” So in a unique arrangement, the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), which counts motion-picture technicians among its ranks, will waive its initiation fees and provide placement assistance for veterans coming out of the training program.

In addition, IATSE will count every hour of training toward the new member's listing in its Industry Experience Roster. That additional experience can mean hiring preference for union jobs. Why is IATSE going to all this trouble? "They just said that it was the right thing to do," said Lombard.

The next hurdle for Lombard and Pai-xao was to gain official approval from the Marine Corps. A November 2006 congressional ruling allows the Marine Corps to accept privately initiated gifts as long as they are presented on behalf of Marines who were combat wounded, injured or ill after 9/11. But the Marine Corps stressed that the film-training program shouldn't simply be a craft skills class. "They wanted to make sure that we taught a certifiable skill that will get these Marines meaningful jobs in the civilian world," explained Paixao.

Once the Corps blessed the concept, Lombard and Paixao kicked off fund-raising efforts with an initial goal of gathering \$2 million in private donations. The training program will be coordinated with the USMC Wounded Warrior Regiment, which was established last April at Quantico, Va., as a single point of contact for the medical needs of injured Marines. Any wounded Marine or Navy corpsman interested in filmmaking may apply for Lombard and Paixao's program.

From Storage Room to Schoolhouse

"This building has been a labor of love," said Paixao, standing outside the concrete blockhouse that she, Lombard and a battalion of volunteers have transformed into a school for the training program.

How did the school find a home on producer Stu Segall's studio lot in San Diego? One of the program's board members, retired Marine Corporal Philip Levine, approached Segall directly; meanwhile, a Marine contact at Camp Pendleton, Calif., introduced Lombard and Pai-xao to Segall, who is a big supporter of the Marine Corps. "He's been an angel for our foundation," said Lombard. "He said, 'I have a building that would make an ideal school for you.'"

In August of last year, Segall ushered Lombard and Paixao onto the lot and showed them a former storage building that they could use. "Stu said, 'I'll give you anything you need,'" recalled Paixao. "He has six prop warehouses on the lot that are very well-stocked—paint, wood, decorations, anything we could think of." Habitat for Humanity and 20 groups of active-duty Marine volunteers spent three months working on the building. In addition to constructing classrooms and laying electrical cable, they made sure that the facility could accommodate wheelchair-bound students.

Even the carpeting was donated. "Stu took us over to a prop house," said Pai-xao. "Inside were hundreds of yards of slightly used carpeting that had been rolled up for storage." That carpeting now blankets the floors of the school.

Lombard and Paixao funded the project out of their own pockets, putting their house on the market to bring in additional money. They're modest about their contributions, preferring to celebrate the accomplishments of the people who made the schoolhouse a reality. "Future students—wounded Marines—would come by after their medical appointments and help with construction," said Paixao. "One of them can't use his right shoulder, but that didn't stop him. He said, 'You have nine-tenths of me and I'm going to do whatever I can.' "

Curriculum and Instructors

The curriculum for the school will feature basic filmmaking classes. Instructors will teach creative techniques that will provide graduates with additional career prospects in the industry. "The last several weeks of the school will offer instruction in crime scene and forensic photography," said Lombard. "That way our students will have a skill set that police departments, the FBI or other law enforcement agencies will be interested in."

Class schedules will accommodate the students' regular medical appointments. The school day will begin at 11 a.m. with lunch, allowing the students and instructors to enjoy a meal together. Classes kick off at noon with three 90-minute courses back to back, then a dinner break at 5 p.m. At 6 p.m. the students will convene for the final 90-minute class of the day.

Lombard and Paixao have taken great pains to make the 50-day course as comprehensive as possible. "My belief is that no matter what job you want to have in media or the entertainment industry, you need to know the whole process," said Lombard. "We're giving these young heroes a well-rounded course that includes still photography, cinematography, sound recording, editing, lighting and writing."

The class of 25 students will be split into five squads of five students each. By running a variety of classes concurrently, Lombard and Paixao plan to keep the student-to-instructor ratio at 5-to-1. In addition, each squad will develop its own film project. Students will be issued brand-new equipment including a digital still camera, a high-definition video camera, and an Apple MacBook Pro laptop computer for writing and editing their projects. The Injured Marine Semper Fi Fund has agreed to fund the purchases of computers and software, and students will keep these items after they graduate.

To fully prepare their students to enter the film industry, Lombard and Paixao added a nontechnical course that they believe is critical to the school's curriculum: Media Ethics 101. "Some people with a camera think they have unlimited rights and no responsibility to the public or the viewer," said Lombard. "Having a camera is almost like having a rifle. The camera can be used as a weapon, and they need to be responsible with it."

To gather instructors for the program, Lombard and Paixao approached a number of distinguished industry veterans. The faculty includes still photographer Phillip Caruso

(“Forrest Gump,” “Ca-sino,” “Men of Honor”), cinematographer Tsvi Lubensky and writer/producer James Egan, who teaches at the University of Southern California.

“I immediately said yes,” said Professor Mark J. Harris, a three-time Oscar winner who leads the advanced documentary production course at USC. Early in his career Harris created a short film about veterans returning from the Vietnam War and the difficulties they had in readjusting to life on the home front. “I know the kinds of problems that veterans face and have a great deal of empathy for their struggles,” he said.

A producer and screenwriter with 40 years experience, Harris looks forward to helping place graduates in the industry. “I know a lot of people in the industry and, over the years, have helped many of my students find work,” he explained. “I am approached all the time by filmmakers looking for recommendations for interns and graduating students they can employ. I hope my contacts will be able to help the graduates of this program as well.”

Harris noted that the graduates’ military experience is a big plus in the search for a job in the industry. “The unique nature and high profile of this training program will work in their favor,” he explained. “I think they will find employers receptive to hiring them.” In the end, though, Harris noted that the key to getting hired is the ability to do the work. “That’s what will ensure their long-term employability in the industry,” he added.

Wounded Marines Behind the Camera

While the teaching staff boasts decades of experience, the students in the training program are no less distinguished.

A member of the Company A “Raid-ers” of 1st Battalion, Fourth Marine Regiment, Corporal Benjamin Bagby was on his second rotation to Iraq in late August 2004 when a rocket-propelled grenade exploded three feet from him and other members of his squad. Bagby suffered severe wounds in the hands, right arm and left leg. He would no longer be able to serve on active duty.

Forced to find a new career, Bagby decided to pursue a lifelong interest behind the camera and signed up for classes in a local program. “After I graduated from The Los Angeles Film School in August 2007,” recalled Bagby, “my résumé ended up in Kevin and Judith’s hands, and they contacted me about their program.” Bagby quickly became one of the initial 25 students in the Wounded Marine Careers film school.

What does he hope to get out of the classes in San Diego? Like many of the students in the program, Bagby’s goal is to become a director of photography for television, commercials and feature films. “I would like to create art that can inspire, teach, move, and open the eyes of the audience,” he explained.

Another student, former Gunnery Sergeant Tai Cleveland, was injured in Kuwait in August 2003. He suffered neurological damage and currently gets around in a wheelchair.

Because he lives on the East Coast, Lombard and Paixao are arranging temporary housing for him to attend their film classes in San Diego.

Like Bagby he has long dreamed of becoming a filmmaker. “I just have to identify my physical limits, learn how to adjust when I reach them, how to surpass them and allow for recovery,” he said. “Most days the pain is so unbearable that I can’t think, but I’m determined to complete film school, get my master’s degree, and have my own business either editing, shoot-ing and hopefully making films.”

Corporal Joshua Frey is looking forward to the first day of classes. “For those who have fallen, this program will make sure that they are never forgotten,” he said. “For those that are still fighting the fight, they can rest assured that patriotic Americans are doing incredible things to take care of their injured Marines recovering at home. And for those that are strug-gling with recovery and looking for a new avenue, it’s a new career, a new chance.”

A Second Chance

With the first classes just around the corner, the students are looking forward to getting started. “I have a second chance at life and an incredible support system, and I don’t want to take it for granted,” said Cleveland. “My wife always reminds me that we get one chance at life and you can’t wait until the end of the line and request a do-over, like we did when we were little. You have a second chance to live life—or life will pass you by, and you’ll end up wishing you had done something.”

For Kevin Lombard and Judith Paixao, opening the school is not only a personal milestone, but a way to honor those who have served. “We feel very responsible to the Marine Corps,” said Paixao. “Some people think it’s fascinating that the Marine Corps would be training Marines in media skills. We think it’s an opportunity to revolutionize how stories are told.”

Editor’s note: For more information or to donate to the Wounded Marine Careers Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation, call (203) 253-5116, or visit www.woundedwarriorcareers.org. Allan T. Duffin is a freelance writer and television producer based in Los Angeles. He served 11 years in the U.S. Air Force and was awarded the Bronze Star medal for outstanding leadership in a combat zone during the current conflict in the Middle East. His Web site is www.aduffin.com.