Troops tell their stories

By Billy Cox
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When, as a child, Ryan Simonson pressed his grandfather for war stories, the old man never gave him much. He’d been shot down during a 1943 bombing run over Romania's Ploesti oil complex and pulled time as a POW. But he never opened the door much wider than that.

More than 70 years later, after having punched through Iraq with the Army's 2nd Battalion 70th Armored Regiment as a young second lieutenant, Simonson understands a little more about his grandfather's reticence, and about how some questions are universal.

“Not one week goes by,” says the 34-year-old teacher at Sarasota Military Academy Prep, “where a different student doesn't come up and say, 'How many people did you kill?' And it's not their fault. They're not exposed to it.

“So I say, 'Trying to relate this to you is like trying to describe purple to someone who's blind.' You can say, 'Well, you mix red with blue,' but they're still blind. You don't even have the most basic frame of reference to try to explain what it's like to be that tired, that hungry, that hurt, that burnt out.”

And yet, this evening at The Players Theatre in Sarasota, Simonson will join a
handful of other veterans on stage in an effort to close that communications gap. The engagement is part of a five-date, Tampa Bay-area series of performances called the Telling Project, which is exposing the public to first-person stories about the military experience.

“There's a lot of frustration among many veterans when they come home,” says Barbara O'Reilly, communications director of the Florida Humanities Council in St. Petersburg, which hosted the first presentation Tuesday evening. “There are degrees of public understanding about what those veterans have gone through, but I'd bet the majority have no idea.

“So this program is designed for both groups, because it gives veterans a platform to share those stories, which can be kind of cathartic.”

Conceptualized in Texas by writer/producer/director Jonathan Wei and spotlighting veterans unique to each community, the Telling Project has performed in 12 states and at least 17 cities across the U.S. since its debut in 2008.

This week marks the Project's first venture into Florida, and performances in Sarasota, St. Pete, Ybor City and Largo are being taped by WEDU for a Veterans Day public television documentary.

The Florida cast includes six veterans and one military wife, all of whom submitted personal stories that were then scripted into a flowing narrative. And the mix is eclectic.

Taylor Urruela of Tampa, for instance, lost his lower right leg to a roadside bomb in Iraq. Palmetto's Jessica McVay discusses being raped while in the Marines. And in a video snippet posted on the Florida Humanities website, Simonson recalls asking an Iraqi woman, “Don't you have any male children? She said yes, but you killed all of them.”

A consultant to The Patterson Foundation’s recent Legacy of Valor veterans project, Simonson prefers to save the details of that experience for the stage. But he
emphasizes that “I'm proud of my service and I'm proud of what I did.

“Nobody wants to go to war,” he adds. “But at the same time, imagine a doctor who goes to med school and does his residency and never sees a patient, a surgeon that never operates, a baseball player who trains his whole life and never plays a game. None of us wanted that stuff, but when push came to shove, it's why we were there.”

Amid the metallic thuds of baseball bats and the shouts of Little Leaguers, Twin Lakes Park seems as detached from the violence of Iraq as Pluto. The father of three busy young sons testing their skills on the field is also a coach now, double-checking tomorrow morning’s scrimmage times with other dads squaring away their sports gear.

But the war is always with him. Told he had a traumatic brain injury likely related to multiple explosion concussions, and susceptible to lapses in memory, Simonson was at West Point when the 9/11 terror attacks unfolded, having committed himself to military service while attending Pine View High School.

“Honestly, it sounds cheesy,” recalls Simonson, whose family had no real military traditions aside from his grandfather's role in World War II, “but I remember talking to my parents in the 10th grade and telling them I felt like it was all of our responsibility to do something for our country.”

West Point is where Simonson met his wife of 12 years. Both were mobilized for the invasion of Iraq after graduation from the U.S. Military Academy. Julie joined the 977th Military Police Company, but never made it out of Kuwait. She was medically evacuated to the States after suffering a debilitating reaction to the anthrax vaccine. Today, Julie Simonson is a Sarasota attorney specializing in elder law, estate planning, and veterans issues.

For Ryan Simonson, the 2003 assault on Saddam Hussein's regime was the first of two deployments to Iraq. His Army Task Force 2-70 formed the tip of the spear in western Iraq; by December of '03, the 2-70 had suffered a 10 percent casualty rate
and was described by the Los Angeles Times as “the most battle-hardened unit currently in Iraq.”

Among his tank platoon’s assignments was securing the western flank of Baghdad International Airport near the Abu-Ghraib District, not to be confused with the notorious prison. His interactions with the native population left a lingering imprint.

“Those conversations drastically altered my perceptions of the war,” he says. “I always thought, yeah, we did what we needed to do from a strategic perspective, but then talking to these families and seeing how grateful they were, how happy they were, saying things were better now, that was gratifying. At least that's what they were saying back then.”

Simonson recalls one especially surreal moment after his unit established a command post in the top-floor apartment of an Iraqi translator named Tariq.

“He had a PlayStation 2 and he turned it on and one of my soldiers said, 'Oh yeah, I know how to play this game.' I pulled Tariq out after they’d been playing for half an hour or so and I said, 'What do you think about this?' And all of a sudden the reality of the situation hit him and he kind of looked at me.

“He said, 'You know, if you'd told me a year ago that I would be sitting in my house in Baghdad with an American soldier playing “Desert Storm II: Back to Baghdad,” I would've told you you were a liar.'

“Yeah. There was one of my tankers sitting there playing a video game about invading Iraq. It was incredible. And Tariq enjoyed the game.”

Simonson, who teaches military studies at Sarasota Military Academy Prep, says he was eager to share his war story if for no other reason than to show how contemporary America is at such stark odds with his grandfather’s culture.

“With World War II, a huge portion of the population was involved, whether it was in the fighting, in the factories, in the food cards, the gas rationing, turning in your
shoes so the rubber could be reused,” he says. “I think maybe those veterans never felt a reason to share their stories. Everyone was involved, everyone suffered, everyone participated and sacrificed in some way.

“Today, nobody is denied gas because they’ve exceeded their quotas, nobody stopped eating meat and started eating Spam because the meat is literally being packaged and shipped overseas. So I feel like our generation has a social obligation to make sure the 99 percent of those who don’t know these stories get a chance to hear some different perspectives.”

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