
Artist highlights the many invisible wounds of veterans

By **Doree Lewak**

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This Veteran's Day, artist **Susan Barron** is shining a spotlight on former Army soldiers suffering from the wounds of war — both physical and emotional.

Her new exhibit, "Depicting the Invisible" — on display at the HG Contemporary gallery until Nov. 26 — consists of portraits of 13 vets and their stories.

"I have a whole new appreciation for what it means to be a combat veteran and to come back and deal with the invisible wounds of war," she told The Post. "PTSD is a daily struggle," as are, she added, addiction, homelessness and suicide. According to a June report from the US Office of Veterans Affairs, there are as many as 20 veteran suicides a day.

"They . . . put their life on the line so we can live free," Barron said. We can't let them down when they get home."



For Sandor, the hardest part of the day is “when I’m by myself and everything goes quiet,” he told The Post. “When I’m at home at 10 p.m. and sitting in my recliner . . . that’s when it gets loud.”

The New Jersey native was deployed to Iraq in 2003, and suffered a brain injury after an IED detonated on a road in December 2007. It was difficult for him to walk, think or write. “I lost the memory of my childhood in the IED attack,” said Sandor, 35.

Nine years later, he said, “I don’t respond to stress well. With PTSD, I go into panic mode. I look like a monster reacting to a butterfly.”

About six years ago, Sandor went with his wife and parents to the New Jersey State Fair. “We’re all having a great time,” he said. But then he noticed a beer tent, and his mind started racing about people getting drunk and getting “unpredictable.”

“I had an anxiety attack, and I was gone.”

But he remains hopeful. The birth of his first child, Emma, in 2017 has been a “beautiful distraction,” said Sandor, who runs a storage facility. “I honestly don’t know if I believe in God, but I do believe in new beginnings.”

Sgt. Renoula A. Trotter, Port Saint Lucie, Fla.



"I joined the Army after college because I wanted to be a medic, I wanted to save people in Africa. But God has other plans for us," said Trotter.

Before she was even sent to war in 2010, "a star soldier raped me," recalled Trotter, 34.

"I [was] deployed to Afghanistan with my rapist." She never reported the attack because "I didn't want to be a victim or a whore for the rest of my military life."

She admitted to Barron that it compromised her. "I am sworn to do my duty as a medic, but I [could] not bear to save this guy who raped me."

Confiding in Barron is the first time Trotter has gone public about her experience.

"My closest girlfriend has no idea. My parents have no idea. I didn't want them to know I was raped," she said.

"It's easier to suppress these feelings like it never happened. I feel ashamed that I [didn't] come forward and tell my story, but it is too emotionally draining and destructive."

Sgt. Russell “Rusty” Carter, Springfield, Pa.

Since he was in Afghanistan, But things first turned nightmarish in June 2010, three months into his deployment to Afghanistan, when a 500-pound bomb dropped by the Air Force in friendly fire exploded six meters from him. The resulting traumatic brain injury set off lingering memory problems as well as “really bad photo-phobia” — headaches triggered by bright lights.

Then in January 2011 — two months before he was due to return home — the passenger truck in which he was riding careened 50 feet off a bridge in Kunar Province, landing in a ravine. The next thing he remembers is waking up at Walter Reed National Medical Center in Washington, DC, five days later. Doctors broke the news that Carter would be permanently paralyzed from the neck down.

Amazingly, he took it in relative stride. “When you’re over there, and you see the stuff I see, it’s pretty easy to deal with a situation like this. Just to make it back alive is something to be grateful for,” said Carter, who is 30 and single.

After spending 16 months in hospitals and undergoing extensive therapy, Carter can now move his arms and wrists and drive his wheelchair. “I’m still having fun with life. I shoot pool three nights a week and go to [NFL Philadelphia] Eagles games,” said Carter, who’s medically retired from the military.

Despite losing the ability to walk, he’s grateful that his PTSD isn’t worse than it is. “I’d rather have the physical injuries than the mental [ones] any day,” Carter said. “I’ve lost more guys from my unit from suicide than we lost in Afghanistan.”

Spc. Craig McNabb, 52, Rocky Point, LI



As a combat military police officer, the LI-based specialist was stationed for four months at Ground Zero in 2001 — an experience made all the more harrowing because of PTSD related to his time in Iraq.

“Right off the bat my PTSD started,” McNabb told Barron of 9/11. “I’d fill and stack up body bags. There were also a lot of bones and pieces of people. I can still smell the smoke.”

He was then stationed in Iraq for 15 months beginning in 2003, and will never forget traveling home for Thanksgiving on a “human remains” flight alongside taxicab-yellow suitcases of remains. “To this day, every time I see that color yellow, it brings me right back to that. You just can’t get away from it.”

Any slight threat of confrontation can set off issues of anger and fear — depression, bouts of road rage and petty fights with strangers while jockeying over a gas-station pump.

“I wake up thinking of the war, I go to bed thinking of the war. At restaurants, I have to sit facing the door, so I can see everybody,” said McNabb, a married father of three whose son served in Afghanistan. “This is the toll of war . . . My mind is always trapped in another place.”

Six years ago, he suffered a mental breakdown. “I was suicidal. I thought about it quite a few times. They locked me up [in a VA mental hospital],” he admitted. “What keeps me going is my family. If I didn’t have my family, who knows what would have happened?”

Having retired from the Suffolk County Sheriff’s Office in 2015, McNabb, who relies on anti-anxiety, depression and mood medications to manage his PTSD, said he feels like a part of him never really came back from Iraq, and he can’t figure out how to fill that hole. “I’m not putting on my military uniform, I feel like I don’t have a purpose anymore, and I’m depressed.”