

# Life after war

Portland photographer Jim Lommasson leads a discussion about returning veterans and their need to be heard today

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It took 60 years for local photographer Jim Lommasson's father to share his stories from combat in World War II, and now the son is working to ensure that veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan do not wait to share their experiences with war.

Lommasson — a photographer, oral historian and author — is leading a public discussion on April 25 about veterans' combat experiences as part of the Oregon Humanities' Conversation Project.

Life After War: Photography and Oral Histories of Coming Home is being hosted by REACH Community Development at the Ritzdorf Court Apartments in Southeast Portland.

Lommasson, 60, is the son of a veteran of the famous Battle of the Bulge, the bloody winter clash in the Ardennes that claimed more than 35,000 lives and saw another 140,000 wounded, captured or go missing.

"When I was a kid, I heard the same stories that all my fellow 8-year-olds heard in the '50s and '60s from our fathers — the things that kind of agree with the choppy newsreels that we'd see on TV and in the movies," Lommasson said. "But that was all I knew from his experience."

His father received three Purple Hearts and a Bronze Star, but Lommasson said it wasn't until his dad was in his 80s and losing some of his cognitive abilities when he began to open up about his WWII experience as the two walked around Portland together.

"He would start telling me completely different stories than what he told me when I was eight," Lommasson said. "As we were walking, him with his arm, and me just kind of holding onto his arm, he would go into these moments of silence and then come up for air, basically, and start telling me these stories. I realized that he was reliving those war stories, and he's been holding these stories in for 60 years, and I think that was a real tragedy."

With that, Lommasson understood the connection to the current generation of veterans.

"He was basically protecting me and my mother and everyone around him, but I knew that today's soldiers need to tell their stories now. And we need to hear them now."

Lommasson began interviewing returning service members in 2007 and soon they were giving him items from their deployments. One of the first was a copy of a Baghdad newspaper printed before the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. Then came thousands of photographs taken by veterans while in Iraq and Afghanistan.

From those pictures and interviews,



At top, Christopher Arendt is a former Guantanamo guard. "People look at the Nazi concentration camps and wonder, how can you do something like that? It's really easy. It's a simple thing. You make one wrong decision and you spend the rest of your life explaining that decision. I've barely made any choices in my life, and then I ended up working in a concentration camp. You wake up every day, put your boots on and go to work at the concentration camp." Above and below right, two of the hundreds of veterans Jim Lommasson is chronicling for his book, "Exit Wounds."

Lommasson created the traveling art exhibition Exit Wounds, a collection of more than 1,500 photographs and written texts provided by Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. Lommasson supplemented the candid pictures with his own emotional portraits of veterans and allowed the work to serve as an oral and visual history project. "In a lot of the photographs you can see in people's eyes the pain that they experienced and are still experiencing," he said.

"During WWII, every American knew a soldier at war," he said. "During the Vietnam war, almost every American knew a soldier at war. But During the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, we only know two or three percent of the soldiers at war. My goal was for American people to get to know the soldiers that we send to war."

This month's discussion series is largely based on the Exit Wounds exhibit, which Lommasson is turning into a book project.

"The talk is really me retelling the soldiers' stories," he said. "I'm not professing anything; I'm not making any political statement. But one of the things that comes from storytelling is it transfers the responsibility from the individual to the group."

"Some of the things I do want to get across are: How do we move a nation to care? Who is served by mythologizing war and warriors? And what can we do as a community? That's where the discussion comes in," he said. "I don't come in with the answers. Since this is an Oregon Humanities Conversation Project, one of the main motives is to get the people in the room to have a conversation with me and with each other."

Lommasson cautioned that some people want to simply sweep the wars under the rug, "because it's troubling and they need to watch "Dancing With the Stars." It reminds me of that photo on the Internet with a sign

saying, 'America is not at war. The Marine Corps is at war; America is at the mall.' We were told to go to the mall and that's what we did. And we just kind of let everybody hang out to dry," he said. "We should never do that again. We should ask more questions next time."

Lommasson said Exit Wounds has been well received, especially by veterans and their families.

"I've had mothers and fathers tell me that after the veteran has talked to me they are finally coming around and talking to their parents and telling them things that they hadn't," he said. "So it really has been an amazing journey for me, and I'm humbled by the experience."

The Life After War discussion is free and open to the public. Those interested in attending can RSVP by calling Debbie Lowder at 503 501-5725.

At right: Mandy Martin and her Daughter Katrina. "How does a mother say goodbye to her five-year-old child? What kind of goodbye is it? Is it the last goodbye? Maybe, could be, maybe not—I don't know. So kiss her while she sleeps, pat her strawberry blond hair, one last take-it-all-in glance. Turn around—don't look back—keep going and walk out the door. For the last time? Maybe—could be—maybe not—I don't know."



PHOTOS BY JIM LOMMASSON