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— MIAH WASHBURN
ACTOR, VETERAN

PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT

Veterans learn to express themselves through the arts



Robert Britt

Robert Britt is a writer, photographer and U.S. Army veteran with two deployments to the war in Iraq. He is currently serving a six-month fellowship with Street Roots and The Mission Continues, a nonprofit that connects post-9/11 veterans with service work in their communities.

BY ROBERT BRITT
STAFF WRITER

Every military veteran who's served since the Reagan years is familiar with the MRE, the pre-packaged Meal, Ready-to-Eat.

Inside the nearly indestructible brown bag, among the packets of crackers, jalapeno cheese and entrées as savory as chunked-and-formed chicken patties, is the lynchpin item: a green bag containing a mixture of powdered iron and magnesium.

The instructions are simple. Place the food packet in the bag, add water, fold over the top and lean the whole assembly against a rock or something while the water oxidizes the powdered metal, creating heat.

No matter where you are, a hot meal — a connection to civilization — is only minutes away.

It's from these instructions that Oregon National Guard veterans Sean Davis and Miah Washburn found the name for their newest endeavor. A Rock or Something Productions is their creative venture aimed at connecting veterans with the arts and to help their fellow veterans heal through writing. "It's to get their demons to escape through their pens or typewriters," Davis says.

"Not everybody can get fixed by talking about their problems with counselors," Davis says. "Everybody heals differently. If it's the arts that helps them heal, then I want to be there to help make sure that happens."

Last month, A Rock or Something published its first written anthology. "Rough Men Stand Ready" contains poetry and prose written by local veterans, their spouses and veteran's supporters.

Davis and Washburn, who served together in different platoons of the Oregon National Guard's Bravo Company, 2-162 Infantry, each bring to the A Rock or Something table a different aspect of the arts. Davis is the writer and Washburn the actor.

Davis paints and is working on his war memoir, an online literary journal and writings of all sorts. Washburn studies

theater arts at Portland State and has appeared in a Foo Fighters video, an episode of NBC's "Grimm" and an Oregon Lottery commercial.

Their partnership can be traced beyond the bounds of military service and to their work with the one-act play "Quixote Club," for which Davis wrote the script and Washburn acted a lead role. After realizing that nearly everyone involved with the project was a veterans, and that acting and writing was helping ease their transition home, the need for A Rock or Something was apparent.

"It turned into this thing where we can get vets running set, doing props and stage and set building, acting and writing," Washburn says.

Davis adds that the renewed sense of accomplishment and purpose helps the veterans know that they can do other things. "They don't have to think that the only thing they're good for was that one year of their life when they deployed," he says.

Davis, 39, grew up in McKenzie Bridge, Ore., and joined the National Guard on Sept. 12, 2001, after having already spent six years in the active Army in the 1990s. He served in Haiti, mobilized to New Orleans for Hurricane Katrina relief, and deployed to Iraq as a squad leader.

It was on that deployment that Davis earned the Purple Heart for injuries received during a complex ambush outside Taji, a city about 20 miles north of Baghdad. The attack killed his gunner, Spc. Eric McKinley, to whom the "Rough Men Stand Ready" anthology would later be dedicated and much of its content devoted.

"This whole project for me was to help veterans write about what they went through, because that's really what helped me out," Davis says. "I went through a deep depression and I was a really bad alcoholic for a long time. I didn't have my life together."

Davis stresses the need for combat veterans to get their stories out. "It's like venting," he says. "If someone sees a car crash, they're going to want to tell you

about it." Combat deployments, where death and destruction are the norm, are a long series of car crashes.

"They say a lot of the Vietnam and World War II veterans wouldn't talk about their time," Davis says. "Maybe it's a difference in generations, but I wanted to. I couldn't stop talking about it. I talked about it to the point that people didn't want to hear it."

"It helped me to write it down."

Washburn, 38, grew up in Tigard and joined the Marines before enlisting in the Guard after he returned to Oregon. In his nearly 20-year military career he has been stationed in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, deployed to South America, Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2014, he is scheduled to return to Afghanistan as first sergeant of his infantry company.

In addition to helping veterans express themselves through art with A Rock or Something, Davis and Washburn also look to fix the disconnect between the civilian and veteran populations.

"The intent behind the overall project is not to just to do everything by vets for vets, but to interface the veteran community with the local theater, film and writing communities as well — to get our work in front of the community," Washburn says. "One of the biggest perceptions in the veteran's mind when they come home is, 'I no longer belong to the society for which I went to war.' That's why getting us out in front of the community and showing that you do have a place here, that's going to be more beneficial to vets by and large than going to a PTSD clinic at the VA where you're in a little room with a doctor, and when it's done you go back out to the world you came in from."

"Rough Men Stand Ready" is in its second print run and the plans for a second edition are already underway, as is the paperwork to make A Rock or Something a nonprofit organization. Davis says they are working with the idea that the new edition would be devoted to humor, possibly sharing some of the gallows humor that commonly serve as a coping mechanism during deployments.