



A soldier's story

Specialist Kevin Pannell learned the power of forgiveness after losing his lower legs in a blast in Iraq. Writing is one way he heals. It's also how he shares his lessons.

Kevin Pannell during a reading at the American Legion Post 134 on Northeast Alberta Street.

PHOTO BY SEAN DAVIS

BY SUE ZALOKAR
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Army Spc. Kevin Pannell grew up in Dierks, Ark., a town where a lot of people have never travelled more than 100 miles from home. They are good people, Pannell said – very strong, with hard opinions about things with which they have no experience.

But Pannell always felt he was different, and joining the Army was a way for him to serve his country and have experiences outside of his small community.

In that way, Pannell is much like many of the other veterans who left home to

serve overseas. And like them, he returned a casualty of war.

He lost his lower legs in a grenade blast in Baghdad in 2004. But he stayed physically active, and on a kayaking trip fell in love with Portland. In 2008, Pannell moved to Portland, and two years later, moved into a home in Sandy built by the nonprofit Homes for our Troops. The organization builds adapted mortgage-free homes nationwide for severely injured Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans.

"Oregon is home now," Pannell said.

Now, the former infantryman is celebrating another milestone. On Dec. 14, he was published in "War Stories 2015, an Anthology," along with other members of American Legion Post 134's writers' group.

The group, also called War Stories, is a mix of veterans and civilians, and that's the

point: to read, write, reflect and share about their experiences and impressions of war. The group was launched after Pannell met Sean Davis, a fellow war veteran, writer and commander of Post 134.

"We are trying to bring civilians and vets together to meet face to face ... to better understand the other's perspective," Pannell said.

That's important because "you can't expect society to totally re-adapt to you coming back into it," Pannell said, "just like society can't expect you to fully immerse yourself."

The writer's group and the book, published by Blue Skirt Productions, was funded by a grant from Oregon Humanities.

For Pannell, the writers' group is therapeutic. He has been writing most of his life, and when he was able to put pen to paper again after his injury, he wrote to deal with his emotions.

"There are only little pieces of me that struggle with adapting," Pannell said, "not to society, but to my involvement in the war."

The transition back from war is something Pannell said he has thought about a lot.

"I honestly feel like those of us who got what we call severely injured ... I really feel like we have had it a little bit easier than (those who did not). We have to live with these injuries every day, and that's a reminder, but I was at Walter Reed (National Military Medical Center) for a year and a half after my injury. I was spoon-fed back into society very, very gradually."

Service people who are not hospitalized have more of a culture shock, he said.

The emotions

Pannell's writing is filled with riveting and often tragic experiences.

"My writing tends to be super emotional," he said. "That is not necessarily how I live my life, but that's my outlet to purge that every now and then."



PHOTO BY PAUL RICH

While stories about soldiers often focus on the action, Pannell said, he prefers to focus on the emotions that happen afterward.

"You can be trained to go out there and kill a bunch of people," he said, "but what I

Pannell on a hike along Eagle Creek.

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