

coverstory
BY GEORGE DICKIE



J.R. Martinez is among the hosts of "American Veteran," a four-part, four-hour series that premieres Tuesday on PBS.

There is an unspoken understanding among combat veterans that just escapes civilians. PBS attempts to shed light on the veteran experience in an upcoming documentary series.

In "American Veteran," a four-part, four-hour series that premieres Tuesday, Oct. 26 (check local listings), those who fought in conflicts ranging from World War II to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan tell their stories of military service – why they joined, how it changed them and how those who served should never be forgotten. There are nearly 18 million veterans in this country and at times throughout history they've been honored, reviled, ignored or forgotten but always they've returned to a world that doesn't understand them. And they always feel comfortable around their own.

Each of the four episodes is hosted by a veteran: former Marine and "The Price Is Right" host Drew Carey; Sen. Tammy Duckworth, an Iraq War Army veteran and Purple Heart Recipient; actor Wes Studi, a Vietnam War veteran with the National Guard; and actor J.R. Martinez, an Army veteran.

"I wanted veterans who had a range of experiences," explains Leah Williams, the series' director and producer, "to see how whatever it is that they're dealing with, that someone else, another veteran is also dealing with that as well, whether that's physical, emotional wounds, highs, lows,

whatever that may be. That is literally one of the reasons why we wanted to create this series."

One theme that surfaces in "American Veteran" is boot camp. Talk to any veteran and they'll tell you that you don't come out the same as when you went in, which was certainly the case for Martinez when he enlisted in the Army in 2002.

"One of the biggest things my recruiter told me right before I left to basic training," Martinez explains, "he said, 'Whatever you do, you do not want the drill sergeants to know your name.' ... Within the first, I think, day of arriving at basic training, they knew my name, and I quickly understood why I didn't want them to know my name. Because then it just became a target on my back: Martinez, Martinez, Martinez."

"But I believe honestly those are the things that really allow service members that are that naive about the world and that innocent in many ways to be broken down mentally and emotionally and find that thing inside of them so that those drill sergeants, the military can then shape them to be prepared to be these incredible service members they become."

"American Veteran" is part of an initiative that also includes a 10-part series of digital shorts on the PBS Voices YouTube Channel and a nine-part podcast available on all major podcast platforms.

PBS says 'thank you for your service' with four-part 'American Veteran'

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