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# Combat to Campus

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# Combat to Campus

Margaret Bellafiore

**"S**ome guy in my class came up to me and told me he really supports the troops and thank you for your service. I was just back and I was in one of those moods. So, I said, oh yeah, so what do you do to support the troops? He kind of looked at me ... that attitude ... they kind of stump and stare at you. Do you buy a bumper sticker? Do you join a Facebook group? I was upset with the whole thing. You know, hearing about my people killing themselves. One of my friends killed himself, you know. Just hearing these people say they support the troops — when they don't do anything, actually." Mike A.

Soldiers are returning from war to college. For several years I did not even notice them. That seems to be the way they like it. The 289 veterans, now students, on the Bridgewater State University campus are almost invisible. However, they are in my classes. I didn't know anything about the military — I come from a family of school teachers — but I found myself wondering what it is like for a student to return from war. As an artist, I wanted to explore this reality with a piece about them.



Artist Book 1. By Margaret Bellafiore

I have done many oral history-centered mixed-media exhibitions with sound in the past. I began by asking a variety of people about a variety of topics and recorded their answers. I like recording what people think. I wanted to interview student veterans about their transition to college from deployment. I was torn about whether to express my own politics in the piece or at any other point in the interview process, or not say anything at all. I have a large body of anti-war work (prints, artist books, collages, and performance) that go back to Desert Storm. I curated an exhibition in a Boston gallery using Yoko Ono's title *War is Over (If You Want It)*. Most recently, *First Aid*, a book I made from a found first-aid kit, is on tour with an international collection of artist books, *An Inventory of Al-Mutanabbi St.* This work is a response to the bombing of an ancient bookseller's street in Baghdad in 2007.



Artist Book 2. By Margaret Bellafiore

In January 2010, the Office of Veterans Affairs at BSU sent a call out to all the veterans on campus to seek volunteers to participate in my project. Twelve students responded and indicated they were willing to be interviewed and recorded for a sound installation entitled *Combat to Campus, the Voices of Veterans*.

I did not reveal any of my past work to the students.

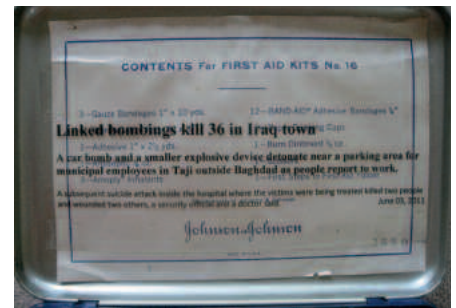
I wondered what they would think of me.

And I did care what that was.

I feel we are in a divided society over war and I feared I would be labeled as un-patriotic, un-supportive and even disrespectful.

I received permission from the Institutional Review Board to ask:

- What were your first days on campus like after returning from deployment?
- What do you know now that you wished you had known then?
- What strategies would you recommend to other students returning from Iraq and/or Afghanistan?
- What is the hardest part of being a college student?
- Do you participate in college activities? Why or why not?
- Are you still in the military? Why or why not?
- What do you miss most about the military?
- What are you studying?
- What are your plans for the future?



Artist Book 3. By Margaret Bellafiore

Their responses were revealing.

*"It definitely was an intense experience to go from, you know, being in a combat situation to being in a classroom, you know, you go from being surrounded by people in your platoon to people in a classroom, and I think the biggest thing that really hit me was being in a classroom is that it felt like nobody knew or acted as if there was a war going on. You know, there are so many things going on overseas and, you know, there are so many soldiers that are dying, becoming injured and there are more statistics with veterans with PTSD and suicide. And these things are going on every day. And being in a classroom, basically, it hit me that it felt like nobody knew there was a war going on."* Mike A.

The sound installation was exhibited at Mobius, a gallery in Boston, and also at the Bridgewater State Campus Center. I used the same audio material for both installations but had very different presentations. For the Boston gallery space, I rented several high-tech "audio domes" where the audience would stand under a clear plastic umbrella-like structure atop an eight-foot pole and hear the voices of the veterans being broadcast within the circular space.



*Photograph by Bob Raymond*

Student veterans met each other for the first time when they came to the receptions for both exhibitions. The exhibitions brought them together. I loved watching them greet fellow students with whom they shared so much but of whom they were unaware. They hadn't even known they were on the same campus together. They were amazed when they listened to the recordings of others, for many of them answered the same questions in the very same way. For once, I think they felt less isolated on campus.



*BSU students Juliann Manning (left) and Sullivan Cohen (right)*

At BSU, I created listening posts in a campus lounge area using headsets next to comfortable seating. The wiring was hidden in lunch bags and school backpacks, purposely manipulating the space to look like an "ordinary" student environment.

*"I miss the deployments. I was part of Second Scout Platoon, an infantry team of 24 ... I developed closer relationships there than I have back home ... These are the kind of people you can call any time of day or night and they will answer ... I miss that a lot."* Matthew C.

*"About two months after I was here, the emergency sirens went off, the weather sirens. After being in Iraq and hearing those same ones, it took everything that I could possibly do, not to, number one, to fall on the ground or run into a building! Other than that, it was fine."* Michele F.

*"You hear people complaining about stupid things. You just want to say something but you don't. You just keep your mouth shut just so you don't get in trouble."* Wilfred R.

Both exhibits displayed poster-sized color photos that I took of each student veteran who participated in the recorded interviews. These photos were evidence of their invisibility on campus: they don't look like soldiers.



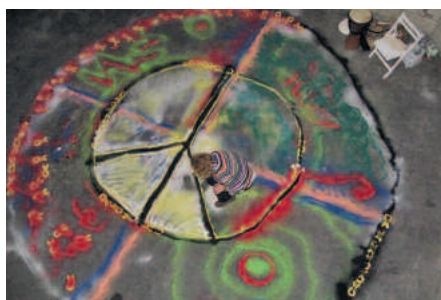
But, somehow, these stories from these student veterans did not seem political. Were they beyond political? Their experiences were so strong and so personal that I felt I did not have the right to comment. My internal conflict was a complex one. I decided to not include any of my



*Labyrinth (2006). Photograph by Margaret Bellafiore*

opinions after they spoke on the recording. I thought I was going to do extensive editing of the recordings. Surprisingly, I did not edit out one single word. Everything they said was important, and I wanted everyone to hear it.

*"I served as a combat medic for 18 months and everything there was to throw at me, they threw at me. I came home and I expected to be better than I was and I was not. I lived on the bottom of a bottle. Taking shingles off a roof is a far cry from the glory of patching bullet wounds and taking care of all your men. I thrived with these guys. I slept next to them. I ate all my meals next to them. I lived and breathed this sort of thing . . . My wife stuck around for me being drunk all the time, losing my job, almost getting arrested, getting into fights with family, losing our apartment, moving in with her parents. And I couldn't see straight and went through probably about a handle of alcohol a day. That is when she took my son and left! And said, if you want us in your life, you have got to get out of the military, you have to get yourself some help and you have to get this stuff over with. Not a real option there. My kids are everything."* David D.



*"Meditation." Artrages Peace Symbol (2007)*

*"Make it known to your advisor that just because you are older as a freshman, like 25, 26, 30, 31, 35 even, that school is different. You are not automatically going to know what you need. You need just as much advising and advice as the younger students."* Wilfred R.

I learned to listen.

When it came time for me to finally present the sound installation on Veterans Day 2010, I did not add my own point of view. I wanted the voices of the veterans to stand alone.

These student veterans spoke to me from their hearts. They were willing to let me, someone they did not even know, record their personal experiences and go public with them. I respect that. But how can I approve and yet, at the same time, disapprove? A paradox. These students taught me something about commitment to doing a job as best they could. And under extremely difficult circumstances. Many of them did it again and again with multiple deployments. And with ideals of loyalty, honor and love of country as motivation.

Have I changed my views? Not to justifying war, no. There has been a change in my understanding of what it means to be in the military. But this understanding comes with a deep sadness from hearing of the loss and damage done to these students because of war.

## COMBAT TO CAMPUS, THE VOICES OF VETERANS

a sound installation by Margaret Bellafiore

### PART 1

Exhibition at Mobius  
725 Harrison Avenue  
South End, Boston

November 11 through November 14  
gallery hours 12 to 6 p.m.

Reception on VETERANS' DAY,  
Thursday, November 11  
5 to 7 p.m.

www.mobius.org

### Part 2

Exhibition at Bridgewater State University  
Campus Center lounge  
(outside OSIL office)

November 15 through 18  
open 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Reception Wednesday, November 17  
5 to 6 p.m.

SPECIAL EVENT: Mike Anthony will do  
book signings of his book, *Mass Casualties*  
at both the Mobius and the BSU receptions!

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These student veterans are no longer invisible to me.

*"We know what it is to work hard . . . we're used to one hundred and twenty plus hours of P.T. and then running all over hell and back because our government told us to. We don't ask you to say thank you. The only thing we ask in return is for you to teach us. We're not here to get a pass. We're not here so you can hand us the piece of paper . . . we'll rise to whatever expectations you put in front of us . . . give us the tools."* David D.



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