



Any of 3 Cubs' finalists in national veterans program can proudly carry the flag

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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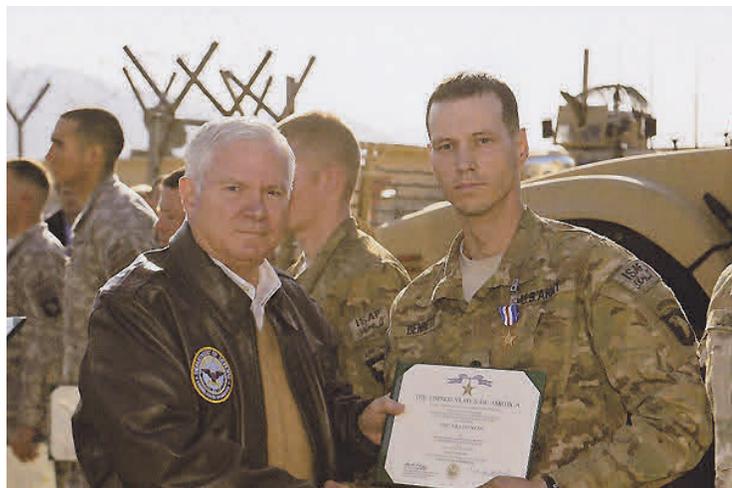
Rich Bennett, Rich Casper and Jim Wagner could talk war stories, both inspiring and tragic, all night.

But that's not the direction the trio of veterans are moving with their lives. Other than some post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)-fueled flashbacks, they dwell in the present with a hearty emphasis on the future in an attempt to help so many others who served their country.

St. Charles, Ill., native Bennett wants a direct, person-to-person approach. He's majoring in communications and public rhetoric at Northern Illinois University with the goal of talking about all the needs of veterans.

"One of the things I want to do is give back to the people who saved my life," said the Army veteran of Afghanistan, where he earned the Silver Star for courage under fire. "If it wasn't for the guys in my platoon I'd surely be dead by now. I owe these people. I want to continue to do things for these people – it's my life goals. To work with organizations like Wounded Warrior Project or something along those lines, or the Department of Veterans Affairs, assisting in veterans getting their benefits, is a dream for me."

Chicago resident Casper, camped out just a mile west of Wrigley Field, is an ex-Marine who served on presidential-guard detail at Camp David before deploying to Iraq. After suffering brain damage in surviving three improvised explosive-device detonations, he believes artistry -- whether written, musical or three-dimensional like ceramics -- can help heal physically and emotionally traumatized veterans.



Rich Bennett meets then-Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who presents him with the Silver Star Medal in Afghanistan.

“The great part of it is when I create something, I’ll make it through (anxious moments and reaction of others). “If I make a (ceramic) helmet, it will give me a sense of accomplishment. You can separate yourself from what happened to you. You can talk about it more easily. They’re not staring at you, this happened to me, they’re staring at the piece. It takes the attention off you. You can be as broad as you want (through art).”

Out in Dubuque, Iowa, Jim Wagner realizes veterans need a brick-and-mortar place to come together – whether just to talk, get assistance or work on crafts and skills, somewhat similar to Casper’s idea. A former Army recon squad leader who was wounded in Vietnam, Wagner believes veterans of all wars need a welcoming place like his Freedom Center.

“The way we were treated when we came back, I wanted to make sure veterans never get treated like that again,” he said of the sour Vietnam-era domestic atmosphere when enlisted men and officers alike were advised not to wear their uniforms in public. “So that’s how everything got started. I also have PTSD and got treatment for that. This is kind of a treatment for me. I love helping the veterans and in turn it helps me.”

With the possible exception of Wagner’s recent work in Dubuque, the trio’s efforts to further veterans’ rights and rehabilitation have operated under the radar. But the Cubs and Major League Baseball are helping bring their stories to light as part of a new initiative by MLB and “People” magazine to honor veterans.

30 veterans finalists in ‘Tribute For Heroes’

Bennett, Casper and Wagner – all loyal Cubs fans – are the trio of finalists for the North Siders in “Tribute For Heroes,” a national campaign that recognizes veterans and military service members and builds upon MLB and “People” magazine’s commitment to honoring our country’s heroes.

Three finalists per team, or 90 total throughout MLB, have been announced. One winner from each of the 30 MLB Clubs will be included in All-Star Week festivities and recognized during the pre-game ceremony leading up to the 2013 All-Star Game on July 16 at Citi Field in New York. A “Tribute for Heroes” winner will be featured in the July 12 issue of “People,” which hits newsstands Friday, July 12.

Fans are encouraged to visit TributeForHeroes.com to vote on their favorite stories through June 30.

The “Tribute For Heroes” campaign supports Welcome Back Veterans (welcomebackveterans.org, powered by MLB.com), handling the needs of veterans upon return from service as an initiative of MLB and the Robert R. McCormick Foundation. MLB has committed more than \$23 million for grants to hospitals and clinics that provide post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury (TBI) treatment to veterans and their families in a public/private partnership with “Centers of Excellence” at university hospitals throughout the country.

As part of its 2013 charity initiative, “People First: Help America’s Veterans,” “People” Magazine is partnering with Welcome Back Veterans and three other nonprofit organizations that are committed to providing assistance to military men and women. The effort will be featured in multiple editorial stories in “People” throughout 2013.

Welcome Back Veterans funds programs at Chicago’s Rush University Medical Center, The University of Michigan, Duke University, Emory University, Weill Cornell in New York City, UCLA and the Boston Red Sox’ Home Base Program at Mass General Hospital in Boston. These institutions are developing new programs and strategies to improve the quality, quantity and access to PTSD and TBI treatment for veterans, particularly those returning from duty in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“We’re proud to have Mr. Bennett, Mr. Casper and Mr. Wagner represent the Chicago Cubs in ‘People’ Magazine’s ‘Tribute for Heroes’ campaign,” said Julian Green, the Cubs’ vice president of communications and community affairs. “These three gentlemen stand out for their bravery while on duty and their ongoing commitment to fellow veterans following their time served. This campaign supports our ongoing efforts to honor military veterans before each home game at Wrigley Field.”

The Chicago Baseball Museum is encouraging fans to vote on the finalists for their favorite teams. If we had our druthers, all would be winners right now. There is no shortage of heroes and a crying need for more attention and medical support for those who have been injured or wounded in service, from World War II all the way to the latest returnee from Afghanistan.

“This project by MLB is really serving the public’s interest by honoring these veterans and the medical care that they need when returning from serving our country’s interests,” said Dr. David Fletcher, founder and president of the Chicago Baseball Museum.

“As a veteran myself, serving 10 years in the Army medical corps, I have seen first-hand the effects of traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder. Our veterans deserve the best care to take care of these heroes who need help to be able to find employment in the private or public sector when they return home.”

“Tribute For Heroes” is likely the least a litany of institutions can do to assist veterans. The three Cubs finalists’ stories are typical – they’ve been to hell and back. Returning as permanently changed men, mentally and physically, they are determined to give back to their former brothers-and-sisters in arms.

Bennett gets Silver Star from Gates

Bennett might have been the luckiest. He took the most withering fire in saving a colleague, and against odds came back physically unscathed. Then-Defense Secretary Robert Gates presented him with the Silver Star for his bravery while visiting Afghanistan.

In his first time at NIU, Bennett and roommates had to follow the news of 9/11 on radio, “as if we were listening to the Hindenburg (crash),” he recalled. Their TV had not yet been hooked up. Later, working as a bartender, Bennett kept watching TV news accounts of casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan. Eventually, the desire to personally do something about the long wars moved him to join the Army, where he was assigned to the legendary 101st Airborne Division. His recruiter suggested non-combat jobs, including human intelligence, for which Bennett’s aptitude qualified. Instead, he chose the infantry – and near-automatic danger with both Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts in full bloom.

“I was an able-bodied person who did his part for his country,” Bennett said. “People like to wave the American flag out front, but ask them what they’ve done for it, some people won’t be able to give an answer. And I wanted to be able to give an answer to my grandkids someday.”

Once deployed to Afghanistan, Bennett realized he’d not be fighting a clear-cut enemy. As in Iraq, the insurgents preferred to pick off Americans one at a time or in small groups.

“We lost a couple of guys to an IED where there was no (enemy) contact afterward,” Bennett said. “There’s a lot of anger. You want them to come out and fight. I was trained for combat. A lot of anger. I was angry for months. I tried to understand.”

He got his enemy contact soon enough, in Sept. 2010. Just a private first class, Bennett was made squad leader after two successive sergeants were wounded and injured in a fall. The lowest-ranking enlisted man in charge turned out to be cool under fire in the forbidding Korengal Valley.

“I had nine guys, including a medic,” he said. “It was three months into my deployment. We took fire. The medic was shot, I saw him, it’s my guy. I ran out (35 meters) and I covered him with my own body. We’re still taking fire, so I called for help. One of my other guys comes out to help, and he gets shot in the hand the second he comes out. So I tell him to go back into cover.



Rich Bennett takes a break from combat in Afghanistan.

“There was a wall of gunfire. I didn’t understand why I didn’t get shot. There’s rounds whizzing by my head. I told everyone to stay under cover and wait for the fire to subside (when air support came in). When it did, I dragged the medic into a building. A couple of guys came to help. I gave him an IV to give him fluids. Now I’m the medic. We called in a medevac chopper, and they got there in 30-35 minutes. It was very brave of them – they could have come under fire. They got him out and he’s recovering today. He was shot in the neck. The bullet went out his back. All it did was sever a bunch of nerves in his left arm. Now he’s just a little weak on his left side.”

With his Silver Star handed to him by Gates, Bennett now wants to increase the quality of communication involving veterans. His efforts are all in the future after he graduates NIU.

“I’ve always been a fan of writing and speaking, and I want to translate that through my education,” he said. When I tended bar, I listened to people. Real-life comes out when you’re tending bar, talking to people about real issues and real problems. It’s not so stuffy. Communicating for me is something that was natural.”

Bennett no doubt will talk about the same kind of leadership in peacetime that he displayed in war.

“It’s not do as I say, do as I do,” he said of competent modern-day military leadership that emphasizes teamwork, not top-down command. “It’s important to perform with your platoon, otherwise you will not get anything done. I thought it was important to lead from the front, not lead from the desk. I don’t point to where people go. I say, I’m going, follow me.”

Meanwhile, writing and other fine arts was something that was not natural for Casper, growing up in the small central Illinois town of Washburn.

“Before I went to Iraq, I wasn’t really into art,” said Casper, a strapping 6-foot-5 physical specimen. “I was going into the infantry. I wanted to go overseas, and I wanted to fight.”

Casper survives 4 IEDs

As a Marine traversing dangerous areas in armored vehicles, Casper was not shot. Instead, he encountered IED’s four times in 2007. The vehicles were never blown up. But he suffered physically each time.



Rich Casper and mother Shelly Casper flank President George W. Bush in the Oval Office.

“The first time the bomb blew up nearby, I suffered torn cartilage in my chest from (the blast) pressure,” Casper said. “Then I had three straight Class 2 concussions. Two (explosions) were a couple of weeks apart. I had daily migraines. The fourth was directly underneath my truck. The last time was the first time in Iraq thought I was going to die.”

Returning home without the Purple Heart he figured he earned, Casper was diagnosed with TBI on his left side. That made him a changed man, instantly. The right, or creative, side of the brain would take over some of the damaged functions of the left side. Casper soon developed his latent artistic side.

“I didn’t know how to play guitar or write music,” he said. “Now I’ve got the itch, I’ve got to write it down.” He learned how to play guitar.

Advancing his enlightenment, Casper applied to the School of the Art Institute without any logical background. Amazingly, he was accepted. He is finishing his masters degree.

“I do ceramics, do photography, write and play music,” Casper said. “This is all brand-new to me. It hit me so hard. It blows my mind being at the Art Institute. People wondered why I didn’t know (classic painters) -- no way you know anything about art. I got tossed into this culture. I’m this oddball guy, a Marine infantry guy, these people don’t understand where I came from. It’s a weird feeling.



Rich Casper took fellow vet Jesse Schertz (second from left) to write with the band Blackjack Billy in Nashville. From left: Rob Blackledge, Schertz, Casper, Jeff Coplan and Noll Billings.

“I still get migraines. I still get anxiety feelings. Through art, it’s been dumbed down so much that it’s actually livable, it’s enjoyable. I want you to see you can be masculine. I’m 6-foot-5, not the typical artist, that through my experience you can do this. It’s life-changing, and I’m so excited to go on this journey.”

Casper began to theorize other veterans would benefit similarly in which art would be a form of therapy. He combined his new love of music and songwriting in helping other veterans. It has morphed into his new foundation, Creativets.

One of his first tasks was to take amputee vet Jesse Schertz to Nashville to meet with a band called Blackjack Billy. They collaborated in songwriting sessions.

“Jesse said the three-hour writing session did more for him than all the therapy he did at a VA hospital,” Casper said, “because he was able to creatively let go of his feelings. He’s so motivated to keep on with the artwork.”

Another similar Nashville trip was recorded by Casper and posted to YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PorFKkfc1hc>.

Raising small amounts of funds here and there, Casper has ambitious plans for Creativets.

“You don’t know where PTSD will hit you,” he said. “Memorial Day hit me hard. I want a facility that’s open 24 hours. Say it’s midnight and I have these emotional attacks on me. I want to be able to go to a place, be by myself in ceramics. Have a room for ceramics, room for recording, drawing. Different rooms for creative outlets, or have people to get you through moment. Also an art gallery space to show off the veterans’ work.”

A brand-new facility has been quoted as costing \$20 million. A more practical solution may be donated warehouse space for which Casper has been made aware.

Wagner builds vets’ home-away-from-home

Wagner already has realized his dream of four walls and a creative space for veterans in Dubuque. His efforts, begun nearly four decades after his Vietnam Army service, are an outgrowth of his own journey that ranged from combat to dealing with PTSD.

While draft resisters got far more publicity, Wagner went when he was conscripted into the Army. Eventually he was assigned to the 199th Infantry recon operations. He was a squad leader.

“A company had 50-100 troops,” Wagner said. “We went out with 6-8. They put us on choppers, which dropped us off somewhere in the boondocks.”

The assignment was to spot the Vietcong or North Vietnamese Army and relay their position back to base.

“The only problem was they sometimes spotted us before we spotted them,” Wagner mused.

The only good thing is with recon, we had all kinds of support. I worked straight with a colonel. If we needed air support of artillery...they took good care of us.

“A lot of time we didn’t know how many we were up against. Several times I thought we’re not going to make it out of here, but we did. A lot of my guys didn’t make it, that’s hard, you get that guilt that it was your fault. We did wonder why we’d take an area, then have to take it again a few weeks later.”

When he returned to the United States, Wagner knew he was off-center, but couldn’t put a finger on it.

“When I came back, I was having trouble,” he said. “Naturally, you self-medicate and do all that stuff you shouldn’t do. I didn’t think there was anything you could do. I didn’t know what PTSD was. I thought it was just me. As I got older, it got worse. It’s like boiling water in a pot. Eventually it will run over.”

Years later, Wagner got a handle on the PTSD through treatment at a center in Tomah, Wis. Then he settled down to life in Dubuque. His first veterans-care volunteer work was Operation We Care around 2006.

“I started that because so many of the veterans were falling through the cracks,” he said. “I started out re-working wheelchairs along with walkers and canes. We’d take care of veterans and families.”

An outgrowth of Operation We Care was Give a Lift to a Vet, which supplies a new van every 2–3 years for transporting veterans to and from medical appointments.

But there was much more to come.

“I had a garage, where I was rebuilding a car,” Wagner said. “Some vets started stopping in. I’d have coffee for them. Pretty soon I couldn’t work on the car, there were too many vets in the garage. I felt something’s got to be done for the vets. They need a place to go.

“A partner, Al Rowell, and I outfitted a building. We worked 12 hours a day, seven days a week. The building was 1,500 square feet. We opened up, and soon outgrew that place. We had to move to our present place -- 3,000 square feet. We have vets sign in. We had 5,000 signatures in one year.”

The Freedom Center features a workout room and a huge shop where veterans can do woodworking. Also offered is an arts-and-crafts center. Recreation activities center around a pool table and huge-screen TV. Visitors simply can just lounge around. All without a fee to the vets.

“We work very close with the VA,” Wagner said. “They’re kind of shocked to know what we do to help the vets a lot.”



**The mainstays of the Freedom Center in Dubuque.
From left: Chris Salladay, Jim Wagner and Craig Leslier.**

Perhaps Bennett, Casper and Wagner will put their efforts together, thanks to the common bond of service and the recognition by their beloved Cubs and MLB. The urgency to serve veterans is they have gone where no one really should ever go. They have seen intractable enemies. This wasn’t the United States overpowering Germany with men and materiel – the power of vintage General Motors, Ford Motor Co. and U.S. Steel at

full-blast – in 11 months of fighting in Western Europe. And with hundreds of thousands of beaten German troops frantically trying to surrender to the Americans and British to avoid the horrors of submitting to the Soviets. And with the Manhattan Project percolating in an attempt to beat Hitler to hellfire.

Enemies insidious, tough to defeat

The enemies Wagner, Bennett and Casper faced were insidious and possessing values foreign to most of humanity.



In the Freedom Center's shop, Jim Wagner watches Mark Pabst working on the scrollsaw. Rob Peterson (sitting) and Craig Leslie (standing) work on other projects.

Wagner found dead Vietcong with small bags of rice, but much larger bags of marijuana. The pot was used to relax the poorly-equipped soldiers for their probable fate.

Bennett finally realized the nature of his Taliban enemy.

“They go to combat knowing they’re going to die,” he said. “They’ll easily lay down their life. Let’s say a Taliban member attacks you and you get him. You saw an RPG come out and you put your .50 cal on him and kill him. Well, now that guy’s got two brothers and three sons, and now they’ll want to return the favor. The second you kill one, you got two rising up in his place. If you ask me, that’s a tough nut to crack.”

Bennett, of course, is as brave and patriotic as they come. But after service, after analyzing the people and culture, he makes a conclusion that seems in synch with any foreign power that has ventured into Afghanistan, then wondered how to get out.

“This may be the best analogy, but I thought growing up, the best revenge is to live well,” Bennett said. “In Afghanistan, the best revenge is to die well. If their father is going to die, I’m going to join him.

“A lot of missions would be to build roads. They don’t want us to build concrete roads. They don’t think that’s worthwhile. They have no problem with dirt roads. They don’t want the advancement. Some are simple farmers, some are warriors. You’ll never know which one you’ll meet in a particularly day, they’re one or the other. They live in their small clans and they don’t care that Karzai is the (Afghan) president. They don’t want to go larger, a single unified country.

“It’s culture shock. It’s much more different than anything you see growing up in the US. It changes your perspective.”

We're in for a long, hard slog, lasting far past the end of U.S. combat missions in Afghanistan.

"To foresee an end game is going to be hard," Bennett said. "There's never going to be a time when you look at Afghanistan or Pakistan or Iraq and say, we got them all. Terrorism is over. All of Al Qaeda is dead. It's an impossible goal.

"So if you asked me, the end game almost is we just have to leave. How long do we want to put our troops through this? Have we returned the favor? Have we delivered a proportional response to the attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent soldiers being killed? I hate to say it – it's almost a risk-reward.

"At this point, do we think we're going to get them all? If not, what are we going to do?"