

Military veterans seek support and release through song at LifeQuest music camp

By [Chris Richards](#), Published: January 25, 2012

COLORADO SPRINGS — After a rocket attack outside Nasiriyah, Iraq, shattered three bones in his spine, Kenneth Sargent's doctors told him he'd spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair.

Sixteen months later, he's walking. And he wants to write a song about it.

Sargent's phone is full of Prince hits. He likes Merle Haggard, too. But he doesn't care whether his song is R&B or country. He just wants it to be about how America doesn't understand its soldiers after a decade of war.

The 41-year-old Army staff sergeant was one of 11 veterans gathered at a plush hotel in this arid mountain town near Fort Carson last weekend to transpose their most difficult memories into music. The four-day camp was hosted by [LifeQuest Transitions](#), a Colorado Springs-based nonprofit organization that helps veterans navigate the uncharted leap from the battlefield to civilian life — and one of the few doing it through the arts.

On Friday afternoon, Sargent plopped down on songwriter [Radney Foster](#)'s hotel room sofa and began to talk. About Iraq. About the suffocating heat. About the perpetual anxiety of combat. About the numbness that slowly crept up his legs in the blurry hours after the explosion that broke his back. About the depression that clamped down once he returned home. About the nights he spent laying on piles of dirty laundry in his bedroom closet, hoping to find enough quiet, enough darkness to sleep through his nightmares.

Foster and [Darden Smith](#), two esteemed songwriters who have been involved with the camp since its inception, listen closely. As Sargent lets the words spill, they pick them up, assign them a shape, a melody, bending them into rhyme.

Ninety minutes later, they've finished "It Is What It Is," a song about a soldier finally embarking on the homeward journey that he's long anticipated — but in a medevac helicopter.

"These dog tags on my belt loop," Foster sings, "remind me I'm still alive."

The puddles that have been building in Sargent's eyes spill over. "This is the first time I've heard myself speak," he says. "It's like I'm hearing myself talk."

He slips out the sliding glass door, onto the hotel patio. Smith and Foster set down their guitars and follow him outside. As the afternoon sun sinks into the Rocky Mountains, Sargent crushes his Marlboro underfoot and exhales.

"I'm healing myself through you guys," he says.

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According to the [U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs](#), more than 13 percent of post-Sept. 11, 2001, veterans were unemployed last month, compared with 8.5 percent for the country. Veterans account for 20 percent of suicides in America, even though veterans make up 7 percent of the overall population. And according to the [Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America](#), the divorce rate among service members increased from 2.6 percent in 2001 to 3.6 percent in 2010.

LifeQuest started its music camp as part of its overall effort to help fight the reality those figures represent. The participants that they've invited are men and women, ages 26 to 56, from the Army, Air Force and Marines. Most are grappling with post-traumatic stress. Some have suffered traumatic brain injuries. Two will return to duty this year. All are continuously adapting to a home that feels otherworldly after years in combat.

The organization got its start by helping wounded veterans regain control of their bodies. As many as 300 veterans visit LifeQuest's 12,000-square-foot physical training facility each day, working to rebuild their strength, flexibility and coordination. Some train for competitions, while others want to be able to pick up their kids and put on their own socks. Sargent's experiences at the LifeQuest facility got him out of his wheelchair.

C.W. Conner, the 50-year-old Army vet who co-founded LifeQuest more than two years ago, approached Smith in 2010 to write a theme song for LifeQuest to help promote the organization's work. Smith asked if, instead, he could collaborate with some of the veterans in Conner's program. Conner agreed.

So the Austin-based songwriter invited his Nashville songwriting pals Foster and [Jay Clementi](#) — both of whom have plenty of country hits under their buckled belts — to last summer's camp in Beaver Creek, Colo. This year, songwriter [Georgia Middleman](#) joins the cast and the four are paid a small stipend for their work.

While LifeQuest is one of many military nonprofits working to help transition veterans, its music camp makes it somewhat unusual.

"The military tends to be a hyper-macho world that stereotypically would look down on writing or painting or music," says Matt Gallagher, a senior fellow at IAVA who has hosted creative-writing workshops for veterans. "But with these wars ending, I think we'll see an increase of young veterans channeling their experiences into art."

Rebecca Stinsky, a Marine who participated in last year's music camp, says it provided her with a rare emotional outlet. "You didn't want your family to know that you were flying a helicopter that caught fire. And when you talk with your friends, you make light of it," she says over the phone from Lexington, Ky. "So it was kind of the first time where I started spilling out random bits and pieces of things I remembered and things I saw."

Smith says that's the point. "What we're trying to do is to get them to write songs about the deepest, darkest

parts of themselves. But these people are trained to not access that,” he says. “It’s about creating that safe place where they can open up and unload. . . . When you turn the mirror backward, they realize the power of their stories.”

* * *

At breakfast on Saturday, Clementi click-clacks lyrics into his laptop while Army Sgt. Tyler Daly, 26, and Army Lt. Col. Pat Marques, 44, turn the tablecloth into a battle map.

A plate of sliced honeydew becomes a bunker. The glass of grapefruit juice is a tower. A coffee cup is a Bradley, the infantry vehicle both men spent hours in, wondering what might happen when the gate drops open. A few hours later, they have a song about war zone adrenaline and the punishing withdrawal that sets in back home.

Each day starts this way. The veterans split off in groups with the songwriters for sessions that last about three hours. Smith, Foster, Clementi and Middleman gently ask hard questions, then turn these soldiers’ unfathomable memories — innocent children killed in firefights, the makeshift bomb that took your friend’s life instead of yours, the guilt that refuses to let go — into verses and choruses.

Marques remembers the agonizing decision of having to take a critically wounded soldier off life support. John C. Buckley III, 56, a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel, reflects on the pain and pride of sending a son off to Iraq and the joy of having him return. Marine Cpl. Angel E. Gomez, 26, recounts his struggle to regain his sight, speech and ability to walk after an explosion left him with a traumatic brain injury. Air Force Senior Airman Jennifer Stone, 30, talks about suffering post-traumatic stress not from combat, but from the two bullets that struck her in a drive-by shooting while she was home in Denver between deployments.

There’s an unshakable pride that courses through all of these stories, as well as an altruism that manifests as an allergy to the first person. As lyrics get ironed out, the veterans often push the songwriters to change the “I”s into “we”s.

Army Staff Sgts. Nicholas Denning, 30, and John Wall, 29, seem particularly conscious of this as they chip away at a tune with Foster called “Faded Glory.” Denning wants it to express the survivor’s guilt felt by anyone who has lived through war. He comes up with a few rhyming couplets and tosses them to Foster like he’s pitching batting practice.

“Like the colors left out in the rain,” Denning reads from his spiral notebook, “all my heart knows is pain.”

“You’re pretty good at this,” Wall says.

“I got issues,” Denning says.

Everyone laughs.

* * *

Prepping for the Sunday night concert that will close out the camp, Clementi and Air Force Staff Sgt. Stacy Pearsall, 32, want to tell a different kind of story. “When we did this thing last year, it was like people were ready to get in the fetal position,” Clementi tells her. “We gotta switch it up.”

They decide on something funny, upbeat and a little steamy — because, in addition to being forbidden, romance is tricky business in a combat zone.

Clementi wants details. “Well,” Pearsall says, “phone sex is impossible when you’ve got five people behind you trying to use the phone.”

Between giggles, the duo settle on a melody and the song evolves into a story about two soldiers trying to keep a red-hot romance on the hush. They call it “Silent Partners.”

It’s the lightest tune written all weekend, but it’s still rooted in struggle. Pearsall, who experienced war at its ugliest as a combat photographer, feels the projection of invincibility demanded in military culture is multiplied exponentially for women.

“I think you try very hard not to be identified as a woman, all you really want to do is be your occupation,” she says. “You spend so much time fighting that title, it becomes a persona. And part of that persona is to be tough and close off your emotions. . . . It’s counterproductive to the healing process. These layers of emotions are stacked on top of each other, and it all starts to erode from the bottom.”

She also knows how cathartic songwriting can be. Pearsall and Wall attended last summer’s camp and have spent this weekend helping other participants unlock their memories.

And while a program such as this can touch only a dozen individuals at a time, the hope is that the music will reach thousands more. In the coming months, Smith, Foster, Clementi and Middleman plan to reconvene in a Nashville recording studio to put some of these songs on tape. They’ll eventually be released on iTunes, alongside the six-song EP that resulted from last summer’s camp. The veterans each get a songwriting credit and will earn royalties from the sales. And while the first EP has sold only a few hundred copies, Smith and Foster plan to try and peddle a few of these tunes to big-name artists in their milieu. Foster says he can hear Brad Paisley tackling “It Is What It Is.”

Foster sings it at Sunday night’s concert with gusto, along with a dozen other songs he and his colleagues helped pen over the weekend.

“Faded Glory” sparks an audience singalong. “Silent Partners” earns try-not-to-spit-out-your-iced-tea laughs. The evening is a disorienting swirl of exhaustion and uplift, its emotional gravity pulling in every direction.

When Foster belts “It Is What It Is” in his West Texas twang, Sargent stands toward the back, mouthing along.

I’ve been counting days backwards,

Till I get back home.

A soldier goes where he’s told to,

Till he gets the job done.

Filming the performance with a camera in his right hand, Sargent raises a thumbs-up with his left.

He’ll return to duty in 35 days.

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