

'You don't stop experiencing it': Veterans share experiences during Patton Veterans Project film screening (copy)

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Family and friends from near and far gathered at the University of Wyoming student union to learn about and share some of the many experiences the veterans had during in their time serving in the military.

The Patton Veterans Project has been traveling the country bringing together veterans to tell their stories through the powerful medium of film.

Benjamin Patton, founder and president of the Patton Veterans Project, and his professional film crew have helped nearly 1,400 veterans by making more than 300 short films since the project's creation in 2012. Patton is son of the late Maj. Gen. George S. Patton IV and grandson of World War II's General George S. Patton Jr.

During the event last Thursday evening on the UW campus, 12 veterans shared three short films they had made when they participated in the "I Was There" workshop in December 2023. They were split into groups of four during the three-day workshop and tasked with creating a short film showcasing their experiences.

“The Veterans Center was created to support military men and women who are leaving and transitioning from military life to civilian life,” said Mike Leeman, U.S. Army veteran and Cheyenne VA peer support apprentice. “It’s a transition I experienced 12 years ago and you don’t stop experiencing it. Twelve years later, and I am still going through the transition as many of you who have left service can attest to. It’s an ongoing, lifelong experience.

“In basic training, I remember, we were all sitting there. We had just gotten our uniforms and our drill sergeant sat us down and he said, ‘First platoon, take your right hand and put it on your right chest,’ and we did. He said ‘what is that?’ and like a bunch of dummies we said ‘that’s my name.’ He said, ‘That is your name. Now take your right hand and put it on your left chest,’ and we did. He said, ‘what is that?’ We said, ‘the United States Army.’ He said, ‘That is right, the United States Army and it is right over your heart.’

“Twenty-nine years later, when I came out of service I realized it will always be here in my heart,” Leeman continued. “It will always be a part of my life. It will always be what defines me, what created me, what made me and what moves me forward for the rest of my life.”

From that workshop came “Pawns” by Daryle Dickens, Patrick Lim, Jeff Miller and DeShann Schinkel. It’s a story about the possible dark side of alcoholism and isolation following deployment and transition back to civilian life.

“About the Brothers” by Leeman, Darleen Hansen, Paul Plume and David McCollough, is a story about the loss of brothers in combat.

“Family First” by JD Dolan, Dean Nelson, Alexander Rahn and Eric Wright, is a story about the shame and fear some service members have after serving for a short period of time.

Gov. Mark Gordon also was in attendance. He told a few stories about his father, Crawford Gordon’s, time in World War II and how Crawford was a friend with Patton’s father. He also gave a ‘thank you’ to those who are serving and have served for the U.S.

“I remember they were sharing some stories about Vietnam and the last thing I remember was Ben’s dad saying, ‘Well God damn it Buck, we did some good stuff too!’ So to everyone in this room — God damn it, you did some good stuff, too,” Gordon said. “... John Shiffer, who did so much for veterans service and mental health in this state, was telling me one time ‘Mark, you know, when we were in Vietnam you want to say it’s all about America and how great it is. But it was about getting our buddies home.’ That is what tonight is all about. So God bless you for all you have done, this state thanks you, but thank you especially for taking care of your buddies.”

The night was important to many of the veterans who participated because they found fellow soldiers who are going through the same transition they are.

Leeman was especially impacted by this process. While deployed on Christmas Eve, he lost three members of his team. For many years he has not enjoyed the holiday because of the dark memories that it holds. But sharing his experience with fellow soldiers and making the film “About the Brothers” — he found solace.

“I came away from this loving the thing,” Leeman said. “I am still recovering. But this year, for the first time in 15 years, I enjoyed the day (Christmas Eve).”