

Speakers Bureau Gives Soldiers and Veterans Opportunities to Talk about their Experiences

By Lee McMahon, AW2 Stratcom

On a late spring day, several chapters of history gathered in an auditorium in the Baltimore Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Center. Former Prisoners of War (POWs) from World War II (WWII), Korea, and Vietnam, and a medically-retired Army captain from the war in Iraq, found themselves face-to-face for the kick-off event of the Army Wounded Warrior Program's (AW2) Speakers Bureau.

Retired CPT Shannon Tobia, an AW2 Speakers Bureau participant, volunteered to speak to the group which meets every month, about his experiences in the Army, as well as his service in Iraq. Through a series of stories, Tobia told the audience about his time in the military from enlistment to commissioning to his diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder. Tobia stressed that though the service of those in the audience and his own was separated by decades, some things in the military never change.

"Never underestimate the ingenuity of the American Soldier—for good or for bad," Tobia said.



Former WWII POW John H. (Jack) Meyers (left), AW2 Speakers Bureau participant Shannon Tobia (center), and former Korean War POW Roger Stone (right) shared a candid moment after Tobia spoke to the group of former POWs at the Baltimore VA Medical Center in spring of 2009.

Recalling stories from the battlefield brought laughter at times from the audience and nods of understanding at others.

At the conclusion of Tobia's remarks, Janet Ramsey of the Operation Enduring Freedom/ Operation Iraqi Freedom Program at the VA Medical Center presented him with a quilt and book featuring the stories of some of the former POWs in the audience. As Tobia walked from the front of the auditorium, a

former POW from WWII approached and encouraged him to continue telling his story.

The AW2 Speakers Bureau is currently in a pilot phase in the National Capital Region. For more details about the Speakers Bureau, or to request a speaker, please contact AW2 Strategic Communications at AW2stratcomm@conus.army.mil or call (703) 325-0080.

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AW2 Symposium Proves to be a Powerful Experience

By Sarah Greer, AW2 Stratcom

More than 60 AW2 Soldiers, Veterans, and Family members from across the country came together to share their experiences with others who have been through similar circumstances. They shared, listened, and bonded in their common goal—to impact change. The fifth AW2 Symposium, this year in San Antonio from July 8-14, allowed their voices to be heard.

AW2 Soldiers, Veterans, and Families came together to discuss issues that matter to them. The Symposium provided a time for them to reconnect with Family and other wounded warriors, and a time to celebrate success. Sometimes the work was emotionally draining, but the Army will use this information to make changes for this generation and the generations that follow.

“The delegates put in five days of intense work,” said AW2 Director COL Jim Rice. “They served as the voice for all AW2 Soldiers, Veterans, and Families, and their input is priceless. I am proud of their efforts and dedicated to seeing these issues progress to resolution.”



AW2 delegates Brenda Kraft (left), Devon Walsh (center), and Kristle Helmuth (right) participate in focus group discussions.

The final issues were chosen from more than 70 topics submitted by AW2 Soldiers, Veterans, and Families over the last year. The delegates divided into medical, careers, Family, and VA focus groups. Each group recommended their top issues and at the end of the week, all the delegates came together to vote on the top five issues. Many of the issues raised at previous Symposiums have already been resolved, including expanded treatment facilities for traumatic brain injuries and establishing Soldier Family Assistance Centers.



Ronnie Thomas, subject matter expert (standing), and AW2 delegates Darcy Quinlan (left) and Angelica Bracamonte (right) participate in focus group discussions.

“I really enjoyed visiting with all the Soldiers, Veterans, and Families this week,” said WTC Commander BG Gary Cheek, who spent five days at the AW2 Symposium. “We’re going to fix these problems to the best of our ability. The delegates have done their part; now it’s our turn to get to work.”

In addition to narrowing the issues, AW2 delegates had the opportunity to reconnect with their Families and with other AW2 Soldiers, Veterans, and Families. Many of

These delegates selected five top issues for Army leadership to address for the advancement of wounded warrior care—along with recommended actions:

1. **Concurrent receipt of retired and Veterans Affairs (VA) disability pay**
2. **Comprehensive psychoeducation for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)/ traumatic brain injury (TBI) servicemembers, Family members, and caregivers**
3. **Veterans Affairs (VA) education for Army Wounded Warrior Program Advocates**
4. **Stipend for primary caregivers of ill/injured servicemembers**
5. **Community support coordinators in geographically dispersed areas**

them found the Symposium experience very powerful.

“I came here not expecting much of anything, wanting to forget that my husband was in the Army,” said AW2 spouse Desirae Jones. “Now I’m so proud of his service and so grateful that I’ve had a chance to make things better for my Family and the other Families—and those that will follow.”

“The delegates in my group were among the best group of professionals I’ve ever worked with,” said AW2 Soldier SSG DeKeither Stamps, spokesperson for the careers focus group. “We felt a responsibility to help the Army return war fighters to their communities with the tools to succeed.”

Operation Purple® Camp: Kids Serve Too

As part of the focus on Families, the children of AW2 delegates participated in a week-long urban adventure camp during the Symposium, made possible by collaboration with the National Military Family Association's (NMFA) Operation Purple® camp. They enjoyed outings to Sea World, the Alamo, the IMAX theater, the San Antonio Children's Museum, the Incredible Pizza Company, and horseback riding. On Saturday, the parents joined their children at Sea World for Family Night.



AW2 Family the Echangs enjoy time together during one of Symposium's events at Sea World.

The theme for camp was "Kids Serve Too." During the week, camp counselors emphasized the important role children play in all military Families and how motivational their support can be as parents recover from their injuries. The counselors for the teenage group even wrote a song on this theme, singing "The smiles on their faces keep Families strong" while the teenagers sang "We serve too" in the background.



Children of AW2 delegates participated in Operation Purple® camp activities, such as horseback riding, during the Symposium.

"We had the ultimate urban adventure camp," said Liz Larsen, NMFA Representative. "Your children are great examples of a military child. We focused on fun and on learning about themselves and their Families. They're proud to be in military Families. They worked together and formed close-knit groups."

Some parents were most excited about the connections their children were forming.

"This is the first time the boys have gotten to meet other kids whose parents were injured in the war," said AW2 Advocate and spouse Kathreyn Harris.

"I expected my eight-year-old to enjoy Operation Purple® camp," said AW2 spouse Christina Grimes, "but my teenage daughter was even more excited. She met three other girls whose fathers had the same injuries as her dad, and they spent most of the time talking about their experiences. We've been looking for programs for the kids, and there's nothing out there like this!"

Career Expo and Job Fair

More than 50 delegates arrived early for a Career Expo and Job Fair, hosted by the AW2 Career and Education Section.



The Harrises, an AW2 Family, are all smiles during their time with Shamu at Sea World.

Delegates had the opportunity to meet with recruiters from 17 employers representing the federal government, nonprofits, and private companies. They also participated in workshops on resume writing, interviewing techniques, and starting a small business.

AW2 Veteran Derek Duplisea, who found a job through the 2008 Symposium Job Fair, shared his success story with delegates. "There is life after being wounded in Iraq," he told the crowd. "There are jobs available based on your skills and your will to succeed. You can recover and be a productive member of society."

For more information about activities at the 2009 AW2 Symposium, visit the AW2 blog.



The AW2 Symposium had a Career Expo and Job Fair that featured recruiters and workshops.

AW2 Education Initiative Provides Free Education and a Career

By Scott Cox, AW2 Career Coordinator and Tania Meireles, AW2 Stratcom

The AW2 Education Initiative at the University of Kansas (KU) provides AW2 Soldiers and Veterans the opportunity to receive a free master's degree in exchange for a position in the Army, either as a civilian or a military employee. The participants in the Initiative are thriving and feel thankful for the experience.

"I got hooked up again," said AW2 Veteran Wes Fine, who has been in the Initiative for one year.

"It has been a wonderful experience and really positive for my Family," said AW2 Soldier CW3 Ari Jean-Baptiste, who also has been in the Initiative for one year.

Fine received shrapnel wounds and lost one of his eyes during a mortar attack in Iraq in 2005. He was living in Hawaii with his Family and thought he was lucky to be alive, but knew he wanted something else. His AW2 Advocate told him about the AW2 Education Initiative, and he knew it would be the best thing for him.

"I am fortunate to have this opportunity. The faculty is amazing," said Fine.

Jean-Baptiste suffered extensive injuries to his foot and back in Iraq in 2007. He has been in the program for a year now and enjoys the challenging classes in political science. His wife and two children are with him in Kansas and are thriving in their new environment.

"I look forward to meeting the challenges ahead. My Family has been my key motivation and strength," said Jean-Baptiste.

Currently, there are 12 AW2 Soldiers and Veterans in the program, with five Veterans who were recently selected and accepted by KU. Three AW2 Soldiers are still active duty. Several students, all maintaining at least a 3.0 grade point average (GPA), will graduate in the spring 2010.

Eligibility

Eligibility continues to be an AW2 Soldier, Continuation on Active Duty (COAD) or

Veteran status, Bachelors degree or higher, and qualifying injuries must have been incurred in Operation Iraqi Freedom/ Operation Enduring Freedom, but need not be combat related. In addition, selected candidates will be required to successfully obtain and maintain a Secret clearance.

Eligibility includes meeting applicable KU graduate school entrance requirements. If selected by a nominating board, candidates will be notified by the board before December in order to provide sufficient time to be accepted by a KU graduate school as part of the AW2 Education Initiative eligibility requirements. Not all of the approved AW2 Education Initiative programs at KU require a Graduate Record Examination/Graduate Management Admission Test (GRE/GMAT), but for those that do, a good GPA and/or excellent GRE/GMAT results are important.

Master's Degree Programs

There are 13 different master's degree programs approved for the AW2 Education Initiative. History, Public Administration, International Studies, Information Technology Management, Computer Science, Sociology and Political Science all require a GRE. Anthropology does not require a GRE, but a GRE is highly recommended. Economics, Higher Education Administration, Supply Chain Management, and Curriculum & Instruction do not require a GRE or a GMAT. Business Administration requires a GMAT. A potential candidate should consider taking the GRE/GMAT early.

Space limitations in some programs may require a candidate to go to an alternate program.

Incentives

Veterans selected for the program will be hired into the Army, with full pay and benefits, in a position with pay equivalent to a GS-9, and with potential for promotions (wage increases) during the



AW2 Family the Jean-Baptistes during an award ceremony in June. CW3 Jean-Baptiste received two Air Medals—one with V device, the Army Commendation Medal, and the Combat Action Badge.



AW2 Veteran Wesley Fine received the Bronze Star Medal and the Army Commendation Medal during the award ceremony in June.

program or upon successful completion of an advanced degree.

All approved books, fees, and tuition will be paid for by the Army. The Army will pay the Veterans and Family PCS costs from current home to the university and then from the university to the post graduate assignment.

How to Apply

The recruitment for the fall 2010 class for the AW2 Education Initiative at KU started in July and application packets will be accepted until September 30, 2009.

Application packets must contain:

1. Detailed cover letter
2. Detailed resume
3. Complete official college transcripts

For more information, visit the AW2 Blog, contact your AW2 Advocate, or contact Scott Cox, AW2 Career Coordinator, at (703) 325-6925 or scott.cox4@us.army.mil.

Humor, Strength, and Academia

By Tania Meireles, AW2 Stratcom

Even a sense of humor can lead the way to an education, and retired SPC Garth Stewart is a prime example.

Stewart joined the Army in June 2001, and was in the Mortar Platoon of the 3rd Infantry Division. Things had become quiet in Iraq for a few days in spring 2003. But while walking down the highway on April 5, 2003, Stewart stepped on something.

"It was like something punched me in the foot, and I went flying through the air," said Stewart.

He went to reach for his rifle not knowing what had hit him or the extent of his injuries and saw his leg badly bleeding. Medics assisted him quickly, and within three and a half weeks, he went from surgery tent to two Iraqi hospitals to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC. At first, his toe was amputated. Then infection set in and doctors performed two more amputations past his ankle. The last amputation to below his knee provided him a more comfortable fit with a prosthesis.

Stewart's strong military Family genes—his father and mother were both Marines, his mother recently retired from the Army National Guard, and his little brother is in the Navy—invigorated him to get back to the Army as soon as possible. That was what kept him going during his recovery. He was only at Walter Reed for three weeks and survived through the pain of weaning himself off of pain killers.

"I was really lucky. I had a quick recovery."

He went to Ohio to be with his Family and received the rest of his outpatient care from the Veterans Affairs Healthcare Systems of Ohio and Minnesota.

"I had lost a lot of weight because the pain killers upset my stomach. The first weekend I was home with my dad, I think I gained 10 pounds. It was a better atmosphere for me to be with my Family."

Within three months of his amputation, he was back to Fort Benning, GA, with the rear detachment of his unit and remained in the Army for almost a year and half before medically retiring in late 2004. He enjoyed the hand-to-hand fighting program at Fort Benning and was certified as a level I instructor before his injury. After his injury, he kept with his training and teaching and was certified as a level II and then a level III instructor.

"Martial arts is fun when you are good. Lifting weights gets boring. Grappling really works every muscle and it feels good."



In the last months before retiring, Stewart was walking through a book store and saw a book of cartoon strips by Jeff Danziger, political cartoonist and Vietnam Veteran.

"It was just by coincidence that I saw that book. I thought the cartoons were very funny and on point. Jeff Danziger really understands Soldier humor."

Stewart enjoyed the book so much that he called the publishing company to find out how to write Danziger a letter. Danziger wrote back and eventually offered Stewart a place to stay in New York and tours of the universities there. Danziger arranged for students to give Stewart a tour of New York

University and Columbia University. Stewart decided to apply to Columbia University and was accepted.

To pay for his dorm room at Columbia, Stewart invested his Traumatic Servicemembers Group Life Insurance payment in the stock market and took money out every month for his expenses. He majored in History, was involved in the mixed martial arts club, and really enjoyed his time there. *The Columbia Daily Spectator* even featured him in an award winning article entitled "The Untroubled Soldier."

"The students were respectful, fun, challenging, and interesting. And I really enjoyed the Literature and Humanities course. It was a great books class, and I think every person should take it."

He graduated with a bachelor's degree in May 2009 and plans to attend graduate school at Columbia in the fall.



"I am going to get my master's degree in Education, and I want to be a high school social studies teacher."

He isn't sure where he is going to live after finishing his master's degree, but has enjoyed living in New York so far. Two things are for certain, he is determined to not let anything keep him from doing the things he wants to do and he will overcome any obstacles that cross his path.

Stewart's motto is based on his desire to keep succeeding despite challenges, "I do my best work out of spite."

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