Near the turn of the century, the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum (NVVAM) was dragged into recognizing the value of the collection as a weapon in the battle of PTSD. In 1999, a clinical psychologist from the RH Roudebush VA Hospital in Indianapolis brought a group of veterans on a field trip visit. The trip was very successful, but the fight to admit its success was just beginning. Several of the visiting vets were members of a Disabled American Veterans chapter and they began to organize for an exhibit at the hospital and to use digital images from our collection in a clinical setting.

What surprised me was the resistance encountered from some of the veteran artist members on the art committee. The main objection was the possibility that involvement in such a project might label the museum as a “nuthouse” with the “loony bin” collection. It seemed that the very people bitching about the implications were the ones who would benefit the most.

Around this same time period, there was other internal turmoil and conflict over the leadership of the museum. After agreeing that first and foremost we were an art museum by veterans on the subject of war, we began to digress. We finally put on a show in Indianapolis in 2001 and collaborated on Trauma & Metamorphosis in 2004 and 2005.

In 2008, we sent the Indianapolis Hospital an exhibit on OEF/OIF vets. As far as I know the initial digital imagery has been supplemented by new artists and continues the healing arts’ tradition.
In 2003, developments at the NVVAM had conspired to lead to the elimination of my “department” and I was at loose ends. A few weeks earlier, I had received a call from Bill, an artist in the Ozarks. His wife had died, his main contact with the outside world was gone, and he was tempted to burn all his art, life meaningless… etc.

Because I had a friend in Oklahoma and knew a few other artists along the way, a road trip seemed a good idea. In assembling directions, I was struck by the fact that the “map” to each artist’s abode included some form of the phrase, “Around the bend, by the end of the road.” Only one of the roads was recently paved and I made the mistake of attempting the first stop after dark. Looking for a pair of combat boots atop a fence post that marked the driveway was not easy by headlight. I saw a lot of bullet-riddled county road signs, courtesy of the friendly-but-well-armed folks fully prepared to keep it that way.

I finally arrived and discovered a house full of art with a family of artists involved in creating innovative concepts of form and function. Breakfast was cholesterol-busting organic oatmeal followed by a tour of a self-sufficient mini-farm, complete with a three-legged dog. Bill showed me that art could be made from anything, everything was fair game and that the process engages the mind in many creative directions. He certainly confirmed that I was on the right road.

Four hours away, Ron was about to open my eyes to an insider’s view to some of the mysteries of PTSD.

An imposing figure with a belly-button-length braided beard, Ron looked every bit the mad artist and I suspected that he mistook the tip of his beard for a brush. He took me over to a shoulder-high stack of stark black-and-white paintings that only somewhat resembled reality until he explained what I was looking at, but not yet seeing. After several more piles I began to get the gist and became curious as to how he learned his style. He almost whispered the first revelation:

When they had me locked up at the VA, they were pumping me full of meds and this guy would stick these inkblots in front of me and asked what I saw. Well I saw lots of stuff but I couldn’t tell him ‘cuz he’d think I was a crazy homicidal maniac and keep me locked up.

Ron showed me that an artist can’t resist and will draw inspiration from whatever circumstance brings them. Ron’s work became the centerpiece of 'Trauma &
Metamorphosis, because he managed to illustrate PTSD: how he got it, how it affected him and his family and the rest of the planet. His work banished any further fears of being labeled. He was 100% certified and his pride at being recognized validated everything.

The next stop was a short lesson in twisting and bending metal. Heat, heat and pounding hammer, pounding, pounding, until a new red-hot shape emerged to be plunged into hissing water. Sort of like a grunt with an M60 machine gun, pumped on bennies for a night ambush patrol. Always on the verge of and foremost in the mind, was control. Cold and calculating to begin until the heat of the forge and pounding force took the edge off the verge.

Billy demonstrated the strength and power it takes to batter the demons from below, into some semblance of order. Submission to the point of exhaustion with flair. Tough cookie waging a hit-and-miss campaign to come to grips with his service in a past life.

The final visit was to an old friend that went native and carved himself a niche in Cherokee Country. Rob returned from Vietnam addicted to China White and graduated from Nixon’s amnesty program. Navy SEAL-tough, he walks straight despite (or because of) a broken back and is recognized by the tribe for his craftsmanship and knowledge of the “old ways.” He had recently completed some courses in photography, printmaking and pottery, graduating with a Masters in P.P.P. He found his true calling in clay and amazed me with his total immersion into his new love. He knew the right phase of the moon to cut Bo-dark for his bows. He was toying with every conceivable method of printmaking from inception to the latest techniques. I learned more about clay, including where and how to dig for it while managing back pain, than I will ever use in my life except to better appreciate the fragility of it all. Art against all odds, beyond any reasonable expectation and in endless possibility was stacking up and waiting for his attention.

It was only the tip of the iceberg. After becoming familiar with the obvious, it was easy to round up more of the usual suspects for the premier of Trauma & Metamorphosis II in 2005.

In 2009, everything was hunky-dory with lots of exhibits out touring, including one in northwestern Illinois with several artists including Rob and myself. A week before Veterans Day we gathered for an enjoyable opening and at the end of it, retired to local motels for much needed sleep. At around 4 a.m. my cell phone woke me up and plunged me into a nightmarish reality. One of Rob’s sons was calling: “...a terrible accident, where’s dad?” I couldn’t remember and passed out trying.
A few hours later another call with more details: a fiery wreck and a horrible end. This time I couldn’t go back to sleep and the first series of flashbacks were serious enough for me to recognize the symptoms for the first time personally. Up to that point everything was tolerable with only moderate self-medication and meditation, but now a new low. I began to prepare to follow Rob back to Oklahoma but was having trouble keeping focused. I prepared a list: cholesterol medicine, extra socks, water bottle, insect repellent, bayonet, grenades, flares and bennies. I had problems with merging past and present. Rob was six hours ahead of me before I got my act together enough to go.

Update en route: tragic, burnt beyond recognition, beyond belief, beyond dental records or even the marvels of DNA forensics. Positive identification was needed for release of the remains; it would be difficult. During the drive, I found myself on a winding road in a convoy back to base camp near Dak To. I was able to maintain until dark when the memory of an accident came calling at a truck stop.

The convoy was late in leaving and a few miles from base camp when darkness fell and tracers came at us from the tree line. I was with my platoon on the back of a cattle car when it started and climbed up on the cab of the truck to see what’s up while on the horn to the old man. Some trucker hauling a diesel fuel tanker ditched his load around the bend of a curve that we couldn’t avoid. The driver and I spotted the tanker at the same time. I braced and he swerved. The edge of our trailer ripped the side of the tanker open, and the impact rolled me on to the hood and landed me on my feet in a ditch, with a cigarette dangling from my lips and fuel rising past my ankles. I watched the fuel pouring like a waterfall from hell on the guys trapped on the back of the trailer. I swallowed the cigarette, gritted my teeth and began to deal with moving the injured to the relative safety of an improvised perimeter. In a few hours we were back in base camp and I took what must have been my first full breath. I was overwhelmed by the smell of diesel, but I didn’t have a change of boots and so it lingered a while.

A big shuddering spine shiver came with the realization that it was only by a miracle that I didn’t burn to death. A smelly pit stop brought on a state of chaos and dread that was over 40 years old but just as powerful as the night it happened. Back with a vengeance, insisting, persisting like a poltergeist until dawn.

A last report by phone to compound the tragedy, another fatality, an innocent civilian in the other vehicle involved in the crash and I began to worry on how all this would play out when I got there and how long it would last.
During the next few days during lulls in the visitation of friends and relatives, Rob started planning for the construction of a memorial sculpture for his son. I could see him considering the materials he would need and stroking the air to find the form it would take. Art was alive in the face of death and would not be denied, which made my trip home bearable. The smell finally faded and dread went back into the past but the visit was mind blowing. The VA raised the dose on Rob’s meds while he self-medicated with the healing power of art.

At some point, someone in authority ordered and had installed all manner of pastel colored prints of friendly landscapes and pretty flowers in the halls of the VA. Mistaken in the belief that anything on the subject of war would be a distraction, confrontational and/or cause a decline in productivity. The resulting display can barely be considered good decorative art and a total waste of frames, space and opportunity.

Exhibits by veterans should be proudly displayed and viewing required by all personnel with comments and discussion encouraged. What may be a distraction at first, will bring about awareness that all veterans are united by common bonds. As understanding increases, productivity will follow. The VA’s mission clarified, both staff and patients will be reinforced by the visual manifestation of those bonds.

JERRY KYKISZ is an artist and board member at the National Veterans Art Museum in Chicago, Illinois. The museum was founded by Vietnam veterans.
HELEN WHITE, Thousand Yard Stare—20" x 16"—Acrylic

War, Literature & the Arts
Ron Mann, NAM, Where it all began.
Itchy finger... it happened to everyone... “Is it ______”... fear and anxiety taking over at a moment of panic.
RON MANN, I’m Sorry—24" x 20"—Acrylic on canvas
Me telling my wife ‘I’m sorry’ a million times
RON MANN, Ours By Day, Theirs By Night—20" x 16"—Acrylic on canvas
Walking a thin line between right and wrong, between day and night . . . footprints are used on birth certificates.

War, Literature & the Arts
RON MANN, Reflections—36” x 24”—Acrylic on canvas
Reaching for a friend slipping away.
STEPHEN HAM, from Moment in Time: World on Fire—all 15” x 11”—All ink on paper

War, Literature & the Arts
STEPHEN HAM, from Moment in Time: World on Fire—all 15" x 11"—All ink on paper
War, Literature & the Arts
JOE FORNELLI, Metamorphosis—all 12" x 9"—Limited edition lithograph

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