

MEGAN KAHN

Veteran Homecoming Stories **A conversation with Justin Hudnall**

Last December the anthology *Incoming: Veteran Writers on Returning Home* was published by So Say We All, a San Diego-based literary arts non-profit organization. The Incoming project is more than just an anthology, it is a project that focuses the mission of So Say We All of creating opportunities for individuals to tell their stories, and tell them better via the literary and performing arts. Incoming's spotlight, however, is on "stories from veterans, in their own words, from their own mouths." Many of the 36 contributors are also featured in accompanying podcast-style audio Episodes where they cross the boundary from the page to the spoken word, as they read their stories and discuss their experiences to create an oral archive. Helming the project as founder, lead editor, producer and audio Episode host of the Incoming project and Executive Director of So Say We All, sits Justin Hudnall, a published writer, winner of the 2014 In-Cahoots Collaborative Arts Contest, and recipient of San Diego Foundation's Creative Catalyst Fellowship and Rising Arts Leader award. While not a traditional military veteran, Hudnall previously served with the United Nations in South Sudan as an emergency response officer, and the questions he poses to veteran readers in the audio Episodes indicates a man who clearly understands and empathizes with their struggles of returning home. Hudnall believes above all else in stories—that humans require them in order to function, that narratives are fundamentally part of our diet as a species.

Incoming's multimedia approach is as smart as it is encompassing, catering to readers and listeners alike, providing a medium to appeal to all in the same way that

Incoming has a story for everyone. I was moved by the written stories, contributed by war literature gravitas like Benjamin Busch, but also by newly emerging authors, and then relished how powerful these stories were when read out loud by those who composed them. Although the experiences of the authors often involve combat, the thematic preoccupation is about returning from war to reintegrate into your old life, but as a new person, and what that really *means*. The diverse veterans in *Incoming* remind us that while each of their stories and homecomings are unique, there is a common thread—one is never the same after involvement in war, and usually returning home is more challenging than leaving.

MK: What inspired you to start the *Incoming* project as a spin-off of *So Say We All*?

JH: *Incoming* was a natural extension of a much larger campaign we're fighting with *So Say We All*. We like to tell people who are on the fence about whether they have something to say or not, which are most of our contributors, "If you've ever had a bad day, and a drink, and a victim to listen to you talk about it, you're a storyteller. Welcome to the club, it's the one art form you can't avoid participating in."

That's not some altruistic ideal; we'd like to see the literary industry become much more populist in general, willing to invest more in developing voices and mentoring them rather than just waiting for finished novels and memoirs to show up at their door, because the majority of those come from people of privilege and education, which results in a monotone body of works available. If people aren't reading enough, I believe it's because they're not seeing their lives reflected in the stories being shoved at them.

Only 7% of Americans at any given moment have ever served in the military, but what our small warrior class does and experiences defines so much of what it means to be an American for the rest. After experiencing 9/11 in New York, I'm a very strong believer that there are no "civilians" anymore. They need to know what happens overseas because they're part of it, and not just in some ideological sense anymore. We no longer have the luxury of pretending our wars don't follow us back home.

So I believe the *Incoming* project—as much media as funding allows us to generate through it—is good for our democracy, to "bridge the gap" as the oft-used phrase goes, between the small minority that carries the burden for their entire

country's foreign policy, and the rest in order for them to understand the world they're living in.

MK: You say on the Incoming website that you choose to focus on “the homecoming aspect of the military experience” because many more veterans of our recent wars have died not in the line of duty, but after they return home from suicide or substance abuse. Many of the contributors give us an idea or glimpse of how a veteran might be led down one of these paths, but why do you think the transition back is often so difficult for military members?

JH: I like to use this analogy: if a person has ever been in a high-stress situation, where there's a work deadline looming, or a trip overseas, or a prolonged deployment to a foreign country where their friends and themselves are in constant potential danger, sometimes when it's all over they'll suppress a physical illness like a cold or a flu until they're safe and then it'll hit them. The body knows it can afford to rest and will let it happen, and attempt to heal itself, but first the symptoms exhibit. That's my experience with what we called in the UN, “re-entry sickness.” Aide workers I knew would go home on R&R for six weeks from South Sudan where we were stationed, only to show back up in-country after two weeks. That's what I believe is happening with a lot of our vets, except the mind doesn't heal like the body. It needs to resolve its realities, and what we experience overseas and come home to are so fundamentally different, a kind of manufactured schizophrenia can ensue if they aren't reconciled.

That's why I founded So Say We All and Incoming. It was a way for me, personally, to reconcile my role here at home in the present with what I carried in memory and experience. It wasn't a magic bullet, but it allowed me to continue that narrative and close the holes. We can medicate vets and give them free tickets to plays and throw them barbecues but that's window dressing. They need to have their life be one life, and part of that is on their civilian community. Such communities need to be made familiar with what their military has done, regardless of how they may feel about it emotionally or politically. That's a duty. Trauma happens to us all, we already have a common language, we just have to look past the uniform.

MK: You also say on the Incoming website referencing civilians that “we believe it is incumbent on us as civilians to understand why” referencing the high risk of death for returning veterans—is the book for veterans, or civilians or both?

JH: It's for both, but for the same reason. My favorite part of publishing the book was the response we've seen from communities on both sides of the wire. We've heard from vets from all generations begin reaching out about parts of their reentry struggle because of what they've recognized in these veterans. We've seen military wives reach out to Natalie Lovejoy because they've never heard elements of their experience reiterated in the mouth of another before. We've heard from friends and family of veterans saying they've found understanding in what their loved ones have gone through from reading our stories.

It reminds me of something a friend in AA told me once about why he goes, he likes to hear his story told by someone else. Kurt Vonnegut once said if you make someone feel less alone in this world, you've earned the right to stand among the doctors and lawyers of our society.

MK: Why did you decide to privilege the homecoming story over the combat story? The combat narrative seems to be the story the public expects.

JH: We focused on homecoming because combat is carried home. War and return is one story, not separate moments. Focusing, putting a box around combat, tells us nothing. It becomes a football play. Who went where, did what, died, killed. Those moments are the most impactful things a human being can live through, and they may never stop replaying that footage. But in isolation it lacks context.

Like our contributor Adam Stone created in his story, "Oblivion," where he watched through his scope as an Afghan boy walked through a minefield to retrieve ordinance to sell in support of his family. That story would register as a sad foreign event if he hadn't had the mind to tie it to thoughts of his own children when he left them and returned to them on the tarmac. Combat is painful because even the most gung-ho of us can no longer pretend we aren't killing or being killed by someone's family member, and that's always been the case. Linking the experience of combat to an aftermath more universally understood is necessary to avoid that experience being dismissed as a plague to be suffered by the other. That's the only reason we didn't ask for it specifically from our contributors.

MK: The contributors of *Incoming* range from famous authors in the war literature community to newly published authors. How did you decide as the editor who to include in *Incoming*?

JH: We took stories we felt were important to hear, and we were willing to do the work of editors and mentors on the craft side where it might have benefited the telling. I'm incredibly lucky to have had two great literary talents with aggressively good taste and instincts on my side in Rolf Yngve and Julia Evans. The necessity of the story was always the first priority. It's really amazing how writers with a need to write can rise to the occasion, when telling their story is the fuel of their ambition. It was a privilege to steward their works and has really opened my mind even further to how much talent is waiting to be found and honed. Mentorship benefits everyone, it's not a service. We're lucky as publishers to have the opportunity to do this.

MK: As an editor did you privilege the stories that were captivating and could be considered literarily excellent? Were there specific veteran experiences you were hoping to find?

JH: Captivating can be made literarily excellent if the relationship between author and editor is founded on trust that flows both ways. It's more about human connection than content or skill sometimes. The experiences we were looking for were about honesty, not situation. If you have an honest person, you can go anywhere with them, but you can't teach it. It's about being ready to go places of the mind and the soul. It's damaging or false to force it; it comes when it needs to.

MK: How do you define literary excellence, or "honest experience" within war literature since each veterans' story, their experiences, and the style they want to share it in, can vary vastly? How is "art" defined for war literature?

JH: I'm heartened to see the body of work that's come from 9/11 veterans because I was a child of the Vietnam war, and saw what the culture of silence and shame did to the Boomers, how little they knew of each other because of it. If I can give any new veteran voice advice it's this: don't try to be someone you aren't or tell a story that isn't your truth. Don't act for them, you'll come away feeling demeaned. There are no "golden stories." All we're doing in literature is slowly moving the needle towards an understanding of concepts that have been too difficult to unpack and explain, and every brave voice that attempts that chips away at the fog for all who come after them. That process is what I call art, and if that sounds like a war or campaign, it is, but it's the one war that does nothing but good and we're all in it together because our well-being depends on us fighting it.

MK: The stories aren't grouped into sub-headings, but in many ways each story flows into the next, whether by part of a shared experience, or thematic preoccupation. How did you decide how to order the stories?

JH: On behalf of my editorial collaborators we'd love to buy you a drink for noticing. It was a process of intuition. We felt that sub-headings would create a clinical break in an emotional flow, one that came organically from reading how these separate stories seemingly juxtaposed and commented on one another based on how they were placed. That's a testament to shared experience, and we wanted to highlight that as the through-line of the entire book by how we arranged it. Overly commenting on it would only get in the way of letting it be.

MK: Charlie Sherpa in his Red Bull Rising review of *Incoming* says that "There is, in short, something for everyone in this book: the profane, the sublime, and the mundane." There also seems to be a story that every person could relate to, whether from a similar experience, feelings, background, race, orientation, gender etc. Is diversity of voice critical in a compilation like *Incoming* considering the diversity of military members?

JH: One factor that informed our selection process was a mandate to represent the armed forces as they've served, which is incredibly diverse both in persons and experiences. One veteran writer I met at the last AWP conference remarked that they thought all veteran writers were the weird ones in their respective units, and maybe that's true. That's the cross writers always bear, right? We watch. We're the odd teen in the '80s movie. Stereotypes sometimes have a basis in reality.

But the thing that's remarkable about veteran writers is that wherever the story comes from, they still talk about the same things, and it's that prismatic approach that gives us something approximating the truth about a situation when you take them as a whole, not just through one lens. Gays and straights, rich and poor all shoot the same MK-19 at the same people shooting back at them, and the military may have a ton of fucked up double-standards in practice still, but blood will out in the end, and it is that pooling where we read our collective history.

MK: Are the homecoming stories in *Incoming* capable of providing a homecoming of sorts for veterans? Does that oversimplify the experience?

JH: The stories are vitally important for opening the conversation, but it's an agreement of two. We don't touch politics on our end, we're not interested in them, but we're aware they become politicized. What we all need, civilian and veteran alike, is a kind reckoning. We all need to resolve what we've been through, continue to perpetuate, and determine in some way what it means and where we're going from here. I take a lot of cues from the Black Lives Matter movement. Every time a young black man is killed, some talking head says that we need to have a conversation about race in the most abstract and toothless of terms. We need to have many such conversations along similar lines about war, about our foreign policy, about the impact on the lives of the real people who fight them, and we do, but individually. We have them in bars and in bedrooms. I'd love to see a revival and growth of what came from the Vietnam veteran Winter Soldier movement, of open discussion and interaction, and I'm hoping that becomes part of our work with *Incoming*. I don't think that level of discussion can happen without consciously creating the forum for it though, so that's the lot of organizations like ours.

MK: Can you speak about the accessibility of the stories in *Incoming*? Maybe I'm biased as a military member who spends my days around veterans who as you mentioned above, talk about the same things, but as I read through the stories in *Incoming* I felt like I could relate to, or at least imagine their experiences.

JH: Trauma is a universal human language. I relate this question to the movement to de-stigmatize mental health in general. PTSD for instance is not a veteran-only diagnosis, nor is it a sign of a person being crazy or weak, but rather the normal reaction to abnormal circumstances. Fear and anger, shame and guilt, compassion and forgiveness are available to us all. We live in interesting times, we are all shaken by a lack of direction and faith. Veterans continue to lead by being vocally honest about experiencing the height of these impulses, but they are not foreign to a civilian reader or listener.

MK: What inspired the ongoing audio Episodes, found on the *Incoming* website, that parallel the stories in *Incoming* by spotlighting the authors reading their stories and talking to you about them? Was an audio component part of the original vision for the project?

JH: We were very lucky in having an interested partner with our San Diego public radio affiliate, KPBS, in adapting this project for audio, but it was always on our minds. We're interested in exploring all mediums available to us to connect people with stories that can help grow their understanding of the culture they're a part of. The literary form began around the campfire after all, and radio is just the modern rendition of it. To access the audio Episodes go to <http://www.incomingradio.org/>

MK: The multi-media format of Incoming seems to fulfill our desire to experience storytelling both personally and with the author/creator. How hard has it been to garner sponsorship for the audio portion, even with interest from KPBS? Do you find investors interested in continuing and expanding the project?

JH: We are adapting our entire radio show past and future to an hour-long format to better distribute throughout interested public radio stations across the country. We want these stories to be played wherever there are veterans and interested listeners to hear them. Sponsorship has been a bit of a bear I'll admit, because our stories don't fit into any pre-conceived ideology, as they are not pro or anti-war. Anyone can object or support something they hear within any one given story we produce, because they reflect the complexity of an individual's experience. But, I've committed myself to looking and soliciting for support much harder than we have because one side-effect of doing this work is that I've discovered there are a dozen more stories out there worth hearing for every one we offer up. I think it needs to be a continual endeavor; I just want to find that funding so I can focus on the work of stewarding them.

MK: All of the audio Episodes are excellent but do you have suggestions for those new to the website?

JH: For first-time listeners I recommend episode one, which showcases an Army nurse at Walter Reed who never left the states during her enlistment, Kelli Hewlett, and Brooke King, who was forced into combat and its aftermath in the most aggressive ways. That one juxtaposition between the two accomplishes a lot.

<http://wlajournal.com/wlaarchive/28/media/Episodes.aspx>

MK: Kelli Hewlett's story "Beyond the Lines" as a nurse made me think of the thousands of nurses in during the World Wars and Vietnam who didn't feel like they were allowed a voice until years after their service was complete. Do you think the story of medical veterans is often still overlooked? Kelli calls the intensive trauma she saw and tried to process "mentally draining."

JH: Absolutely, and it that isn't just a veteran situation. Kelli Hewlett had a very concentrated role in caring for the elderly one day at Walter Reed, and a constant stream of maimed teenagers to care for the next. It jarred her in a way that is absolutely normal, and that serves a testimony to the silent burdens and secondary traumas that hit care-givers. That is a reaction that can be ameliorated by sharing the experience rather than relegating it to the isolation of hospitals and home-care, and if that requires people go into those places through the medium of storytelling or other means, we should be more aggressive about it. People react very differently to those who are visibly different from themselves. It's from a lack of exposure and that needs to be rectified, because no one should live in isolated circumstances. Whether you develop MS or got blown up, you still have the same active mind filled with the same desires you had before, and you deserve every opportunity to fulfill them and have your voice heard as the rest of us. Otherwise we're all just going to wind-up medicating ourselves out of the tribe and that does no one any good, because we all fall apart eventually, right?

MK: Kelli Hewlett explains that she "felt guilty sometimes because I wasn't on the front lines." The theme of guilt, manifested in different ways, weaves throughout many of *Incoming's* stories. Why do you think so many veterans focus on this emotion? Do you think it is challenging for civilians to understand this guilt?

JH: No, if anyone can relate to the guilt of a veteran it's a civilian. I like to say there's this game we all play where we dismiss our own problems. If you were shot and survived, at least you didn't get blown up. And if you got blown up, at least you lived. And if you didn't live, I hope the dead aren't as hard on themselves as the living seem to be, because that would really suck. Everyone knows someone who they feel is more deserving than themselves, but I'm not sure who really wins that game.

MK: In Episode 10 Lisbeth Prifogle reads her story “Therapy” and explicitly touches on the loss of self, a theme amongst the other veterans in *Incoming*. As a therapist asks her about her identity and if she was changed by the Marines she responds “I am who I am now” but then indicates she doesn’t exactly like this new person. Brooke King in “Redeployment Packing Checklist” and Episode 1 also echoes this sentiment when she remarks on an old photo of herself “The girl in the photo used to be you, but that’s not the face you see in the mirror anymore.” Do you think that the reconciliation of a past self, unencumbered by wartime experiences with a new self, exposed to war, is difficult for civilians to empathize with? Are there other life experiences that result in a before and after self?

JH: Yes. Who hasn’t had the moment of looking in the mirror in their 30’s and wondered what happened to the ghost of their happier selves. Were they ever as happy really as they like to remember? Who knows. I do know many civilian parents who after a few drinks will confide their yearning for the days when they could be wild without the fear of their choices impacting a life other than their own. I know married gay men who feel they came out of the closet too late and settled down too soon. I know people from all walks of life who feel like if they could just unfuck one part of their self-perception, they’d have it all figured out.

But again no, I don’t think that the “damaged veteran” stereotype is an isolated experience. I think people often put on the uniform with a load of baggage that predates their enlistment, and people who put on a suit and go to work in an office have that same story. I think experience of any variety will change a person and force a reflection among the self-aware eventually. The clarity of the veteran writer is that it follows more along the lines of a classic hero’s journey and recognizable narrative, but I’ve never in all my years heard something I felt was outside of my ability to relate to. I just don’t buy that’s possible. Everyone you meet carries an impossible burden.

<http://wlajournal.com/wlaarchive/28/media/Episodero.aspx>

MK: I love that you mention the hero’s journey narrative as Lisbeth Prifogle also says that she needs “to be the hero of my story” which is part of the reason it is hard to admit that she might not like her new self, or want to discuss her experiences with someone else. When you interview her, she says that there is an expectation that veterans want to talk about their experiences,

but that most of them don't, but that writing is an outlet where you can share your story without talking to someone else. Do the writers you ask to record Episodes struggle with crossing the barrier from writing to out loud reading and then interviewing?

JH: To-date I haven't had a contributor in print decline to go on the radio with me, but I wouldn't think too much about it if someone declined the invitation. If they did though I wouldn't assume it was because of fear. They're already plenty naked by what they've allowed us to publish. If anything, the radio allows us to meet the rest of their lives, contextualize them better, show that the poignancy of what they talk about in their story is contained within a life just like anyone else's. That's where the resonance really happens, in the beer drinking and child-rearing and graduating of college, not in the worst days of our lives necessarily but in how we bear them.

MK: Episode 8 highlights Benjamin Busch who says that writing gives experience a way to speak, especially war experience, which cannot be given to anyone else except with language. Do you think that the *Incoming* stories are more powerful when the audience reads them, or listens to the authors read them?

JH: I think it's a different experience of equal power. Hearing someone read a story is important—especially because it's our rule that only authors can read their own work—because it's presented as such a powerful testimony of self and allows such a connection between strangers. Usually when someone is speaking softly in your ear, it's an intimate moment, and radio is able to capture that brilliantly. Reading a work though allows for more reflection and personalization of the story, and perhaps more internalization happens in that medium. There's really no wrong way to connect to your tribe, just subtle variations. I'd pursue any genre available to us.

<http://wlajournal.com/wlaarchive/28/media/Episode8.aspx>

MK: All of the Episodes focus on contributors from *Incoming* except Episode 5 with Brian Turner. What drove the decision to include him in the audio archive but not the written one?

JH: The act of publishing a book is a very labor-intensive endeavor, and we're hoping to publish more with veteran writers. But the audio format is much easier and faster and negates the legal quandaries of publishing rights. The book has become a springboard for us to enter into a dialogue with many more veteran writers than those who submitted. If we're able to publish them in future works we will, but for expediency sake we want their voices heard and for people to hear them.

<http://wlajournal.com/wlaarchive/28/media/Episodes.aspx>

MK: In each episode there is a soundtrack accompanying the authors when they read that so beautifully captures their tone and cadence. What drove the decision to include music as authors read their stories?

JH: The amazing relationship I have with Chris Warren entirely made this possible. I wasn't set on having scoring, but we worked in the same shared artist space in San Diego and he offered to take a crack at them once he heard about the project. Once I heard what he could do with them, I couldn't imagine them any other way. Chris adds a contextual ambience to these stories without overshadowing them, imbuing them with a quality closer to what the speaker felt than words can communicate. My life is language-based, and I'm constantly striving to achieve with spoken and written narrative what music can do. Having both work together seamlessly makes people drive off the road when they hear it, because they forget it's a story they're being told. Rather they feel it in the present with an immediacy no other collaboration could really provide. A happy accident is a vast understatement, but I couldn't imagine planning such a collaboration. The impact on the musicians he works with has been a profound story as well.

MK: Are there any authors in particular that surprised you during their readings or subsequent discussion? Is there an Episode that held particular special meaning for you?

JH: All of our contributors have volunteered up stories and information that I've found incredibly interesting and unexpected. I guess if I had to pick one it would be Alex Flynn, the machine gunner whose double MoS was combat photographer videographer. Alex was a shit to edit, because he can barely speak for ten seconds without employing his extensive vocabulary of profanity which public radio does

not allow, but he was also the most natural and honest conversation I had, and a lot of what he said to me stuck in my head. He talked about how if a person can hold a camera in combat without shaking, they need to do that job, we all need them to do that job, because it's important and people need to see what they're recording. I think about him every time a journalist is killed, anytime anyone is killed really, because now I see it not only as a loss of life but a silencing of a voice. If he were scripted—and easier to edit for the censors—he may not have said that. I'm so glad he did. Shit though he was in the editing room. Nothing but love, Alex.

<http://wlajournal.com/wlaarchive/28/media/Episode3.aspx>

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