

VFW Member's Photography on Display at Smithsonian

Stacy Pearsall's images from the war zone can be seen at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C., through January.

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When Stacy Pearsall entered the Air Force in 1998, she didn't know the adventures before her. A photographer with the 1st Combat Camera Squadron based in Charleston, S.C., Pearsall would travel to 41 countries before she was medically retired in 2010 from wounds sustained while serving her second tour in Iraq in 2007.

A member of VFW Post 10256 in Goose Creek, S.C., Pearsall said serving in the military was important to her. Her dad was in the Navy, and both of her grandfathers were veterans. Her sister, Meggen, was the first active-duty female A-10 crew chief in the Air Force. Pearsall's great-grandfather was a Marine in



WWI.

“My sister and great-grandfather were both definite inspirations,” said Pearsall, who would

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go on to earn accolades of her own.

She is one of only two women to be named the National Press Photographers Association Military Photographer of the Year and the only woman twice bestowed with the honor.

And now, Pearsall's work illustrating the war zone is on display at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery. Her images from the battlefield are included in *The Face of Battle: Americans at War, 9/11 to Now*, on display through Jan. 28. She is one of only six artists selected, and the only veteran.

"I feel completely unworthy in so many ways," Pearsall said.

During Pearsall's visits in 2008 to the VA hospital in Charleston, S.C., she began photographing — with permission — veterans waiting for appointments. She said the hospital's public affairs officer understood the value of art as therapy.

"This project turned me around in more ways than one," she said. "It gave me something to live for."

Her goal is to photograph veterans in all 50 states, a goal made easier with the help of the United Services Automobile Association (USAA).

At an art exhibition in New York City, Pearsall was introduced to a Wall Street financier who knew someone at USAA. She talked to him about what is now known as the Veterans Portrait Project.

Soon after, Pearsall received a phone call from USAA inviting her to Florida to make a presentation of the portrait project.

USAA agreed to sponsor her in locations throughout the U.S. where USAA has financial centers.

So far, Pearsall has photographed about 6,000 vets in more than 100 events in 27 states.

Each veteran receives a complimentary digital image to share with friends and family.

Those portraits and stories also are included in national printed exhibitions (see p. 17 for Pearsall's upcoming show schedule), showcased in video productions and shared via social media.

Pearsall said she hopes to ensure veterans' contributions to American military history are not forgotten.

"So many people have been really supportive of me," Pearsall said. "I'm just the bearer of the camera."

She also has attended VFW conventions where she photographs members. Those photos are part of her Veterans Portrait Project and can be viewed at www.veteransportraitproject.com.

Pearsall said her portraits represent the nation's 22 million veterans, who are men and women, young and old and racially diverse.

"This has been healing and cathartic for me," Pearsall said. "It has been equally healing and cathartic for veterans. They know exactly where I am coming from."

Photo caption: Pictured from left to right: Wes Moore, Army, Afghanistan; Paul Corbett, Marines, Afghanistan and Iraq; and Fred Nelson, Army, Persian Gulf War.

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