



**Undisclosed Name
Army**

My seemingly innocuous tattoo represents many aspects of my life that may not seem obvious at face value. I have a drake mallard duck tattooed on my shoulder blade, in midflight turned 180 degrees so you see the length of his wings.

I received this tattoo in Costa Rica, where I was living at the time, from a fellow beach bum and tattoo artist. I was in the midst of an identity crisis, not sure of who I was, what I stood for, what I was doing with my life, or what I wanted to do with my life I was an avid outdoorsman, obsessed with nature—hunting, fishing, any activity that would lead me outdoors. Being at a crossroads in my adult life, I was wrought with uncertainty and indecisiveness. Should I join the military like Austin and Zach to make my sacrifice? Should I go to work to start making money? Should I pursue some career path that is deemed “successful” in society? Amidst all of this uncertainty, my beach bum friend offered a free tattoo. I saw it as an opportunity to permanently scribe the one thing I was confident about, my love for nature.

It brought me joy to explain the meaning of my tattoo to fellow soldiers after joining the Army a year later, in 2008. My tattoo also brought me comfort while deployed, a sample of natural beauty and reminder of something I love in the midst of such despair and ugliness.

**Brandon Alton
Marine, Desert Storm**

I'm a fan of self-expression and tattoos are certainly a great tool for that.

I originally wanted one and that was my USMC tattoo. I was eighteen. I started picking them up along the way. When I finally started making real money and having "disposable" income, the sleeves came—a back piece and my chest. I'm going to have the equivalent of a long-sleeved shirt by the end of the year.

What does it all mean?
An eighteen year-old kid was now a killing machine.
Fuck it! I want a snake tattooed around my leg.
Mid-life crisis, maybe.

All sorts of shit, I guess. I find it's a cool detector now. If you ask me something stupid: "Aren't you worried what that will look like when you're eighty?" That's an asshole questions. My response is usually, "They'll probably be pretty dry 'cause I'll be dead twenty years by then."

Tattoos mean or meant something of various degrees of depth.

Now they mean I have a bunch of tattoos.

**Jeremy Barnes
My Own Memorial**

In January of 2004 I deployed with what were soon to be some of the closest friends/brothers I would ever come to know. We were all selfless, putting one another before ourselves. The fear quickly subsided as we drove our soft-sided Humvees from Kuwait to Baghdad, Iraq. Our jobs changed with the mission, but the constant thing was always looking out for one another. Working with the Iraqi National Guard, going on missions, working in the office, and working in the hospital were a few of the high/low lights. I saw things that now twenty-one year-old should never have to experience. But we got through it. My brothers and sisters were doing it, too..

Sand storms, mortar attacks, and death seemed to go on forever. Digging through bodies to find ID for one of my brothers will never leave me.

Fourteen months passed in the desert before we were finally sent home. The war never stopped, though We all have it in our heads, we all struggle with it on a daily basis. I've continued to lose brothers and sisters. I won't let it take me, but it's taken my friends. It takes twenty-two lives a day. My arm is a memorial...a tribute...a reminder...a sense of pride for myself and everyone who served next to me...who continue to serve or were lost serving. The battle cross, or the interpretation of it, on my arm is more than a tattoo. It's more than art...it's love. Love for my brothers and sisters, and love for this great fucking country!

James Case

The story which goes along with my tattoos is the warrior spirit. I was a drill sergeant from 2006-2008. During that time it was a big push for getting new soldiers trained so they could repopulate troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. During that time period, I was training young men to be warriors and to live the warriors ethos. I trained over 1500 young men to head into combat. So as a trainer not only did I teach Infantry tactics but I also lived by the warrior mantra.

George Cooper

I've devoted my right arm to my military career. The first tattoo is dedicated to my tour in Iraq. It is the silhouette of the country, crossed by the ribbon in the lower left that shows the dates I was in-country. The top is stamped with my platoon's trademark. I've also been marked with the Jerusalem cross showing I have made my pilgrimage to the old city of Jerusalem.

Patrick Cunningham

I was first interested in a tattoo after visiting Kings Island with my son and a neighbor's son. The three of us spent the day riding and laughing. While walking around between rides we stopped at a henna "temporary" tattoo vendor. I got a dragon temp tattoo on my chest and the boys got similar designs.
Kind of a shared memory.

Looking at the photo we took of the tattoo, I decided when the time was right I would get a permanent one. Because of my rank in the military it would have to be something small that could be covered. While visiting Florida, I stopped in Gainesville, a college town. I decided I would get a permanent tattoo. I decided to get a flame around a skull. I didn't particularly care for the skull, so I had it switched out with a heart.

The Lenia tattoos are always black and, in my mind, all tattoos are black. I wanted the flame to be black, and no color in the heart. So this tattoo was to honor my wife as "Flame of my heart." She would typically respond, "Love of my Life," but clearly she is still the "flame of my heart."

Tattoos really are addictive—though I didn't think I would get more than one. Years later, after I retired from the military, I decided it was time to get another tattoo. I started off doing tribal tattoos to recognize that we are "all part of the same tribe"—the human race. Slowly, the collection increased, focused on a single design in multiple phases.

I then discovered a design that I liked—and eagle head, also in tribal format. I centered the Eagle head on my right pectoral chest and filled in the gap with additional tribal designs. This eagle head was out of respect for the military experience, without a direct reference to any branch of service.

Bobby Easley

I have been an artist my whole life. I have always had a love for tattoos as far back as I can remember. I got several before I enlisted and, while in training, I got all sorts of requests to draw designs for the other Marines in my unit.

I drew them, usually for \$20-\$40, and was surprised when the Marines told me the artist tattooed my designs for hundred of dollars! They begged me to get some tattoo equipment and go to work on them.

When I was in the Marine Reserves, I bought some equipment and took a formal apprenticeship from a Vietnam Veteran named James "Rabbitt" Sanders. I apprenticed for a year, then began my professional career as an official tattoo artist.

I now have been tattooing for over seventeen years, and it has been very rewarding. I now own my own tattoo studio, High Caliber Tattoo (which is a nod to heavy caliber weapons.) I tattoo quite a bit of veterans and my studio even has pictures of veterans on the walls.

My tattoos are like chapters of my life, and many of them are reminders of my time well spent in the Marines.

Jim Ewing

I remember when I got my first tattoo. I was getting one along with my daughter. I got a lion one on my right arm; my daughter got a small tattoo on her back. Dave Sloan did mine and my daughter's the same day. After that, it was one right after the other.

I have two military tattoos. One is on my left arm and the other is on my right leg. I have an eagle across my chest. I also have a full back piece that has taken three years so far—and counting. The back piece is my Indian Family Blood Line. My Great Grandmother was a full-blooded Black Foot Indian. My Great Grandfather came to the United States at the turn of the 19th Century on a boat from Denmark. He met my Great Grand in Iowa and the rest is history.

I retired from the military in 2007. I am a Navy Vet, and I was overseas in 2004 and 2005 in the desert.

Leonard Frederick II

I served most of my time in the army in the 4th Int. Div. My actual unit was 1/8th Int in Fort Carson and then 2/8th at Fort Hood. I wanted to honor this time of my life, also to honor the brothers and sisters in Green I made. Because of this, I decided to wear my unit patch on my arm where it was on my uniform. I will wear it to death and beyond like so many others have.

As for the tattoo on my leg, it holds multiple meanings. I was injured in the army. I woke up one morning unable to walk. At the time, I was not sure how to react. I remained partly paralyzed for three months. I was finally operated on and the ability to walk freely was restored to me.

Since that time I have been given three time frames in which I would no longer be able to walk. I have managed to go past two of the time frames, so far, although my condition is degenerative and it's only a matter of time. So I'm a rotting torso and I wear one on my leg, mainly to remind me I'm still up and walking. The day has not come yet.

Jeff Jeffries

Most of the men in my family have served in the military. So, naturally, I served, too. I went into the Army right out of high school. I figured I'd get money for college and, really, what were the chances of a war breaking out in the next four years?!

I served on an M1A1 tank for two years when Saddam invaded Kuwait. Three days before I shipped out to the Persian Gulf I got my tattoo. I knew that it was something to symbolize the pride I had of being part of an armor crew. I knew that it was a badge to show that I had served.

Whitney Hamilton

I'm sixty. I served in the US Army from 1972-75, stationed in Ft. Knox Kentucky and Seoul, South Korea. It was such a different way of living, overseas. They were living primitive. Even though our barracks had a sense of home, it just wasn't the same. The air and the way of life was different. I wanted to get back to regular, everyday living. At the time, I missed my grandparents a whole lot. They raised me. My grandma used to send me homemade goods and canned goods. I especially liked pear preserves.

It was the Vietnam era that I was in, even though I wasn't doing combat. People treated us differently. People said we were baby killers so there really wasn't a big welcome home. We didn't get none of that. People treat you differently today as a veteran than they did back then, but it was good to be back home. You didn't really talk about being a Vietnam veteran. I was stereotyped that way. I wouldn't even wear hats reflecting that time. I would really hardly talk about being a veteran. People today recognized that every aspect of being in the military is keeping this country free and safe—from the person who is doing the combat to the person cooking the food. It takes everyone to maintain the freedom that we have and enjoy here in the United States.

Brandon M. Hardin

I remember getting my first tattoo it was on my right arm and was quite painful because the tattoo artist went too deep. It was kind of scary in that it hurt so much and I hadn't eaten so it made me sick to my stomach. I wasn't so sure I could handle another tattoo until I was told that the tattoo artist sucked and he had scarred me. I later found better artists and really haven't had a tattoo experience so bad since.

I remember my experience in coming home when my friend died from a drunk driver on leave and I later got a tattoo on my right arm to remember him. His name was George Joseph Elias. It is an angel crying basically a warrior angel. This tattoo is on the back of my right arm.

I remember George being not only a great friend, but a great soldier. He was helpful in that he knew the Arabic language so he was a great resource as an interpreter when one wasn't available. Having a friend like this helps break up stereotypes about the Middle Eastern culture. George was of Middle Eastern descent, but he wasn't a terrorist. I hate those association stereotypes. People should not be stereotyped because of their heritage.

I remember my OVERCOME tattoo. It is one of my personal favorites because it helps me to remember that, "In this world you will have trouble, but take heart for I have overcome the world." Religion and Christianity are important to me and I don't believe in forcing my beliefs on others, only starting a dialogue and explaining my story of my life and the situations I've experienced to explain what my beliefs are.

I remember what my chest piece tattoo VENGEANCE IS BORN. This tattoo is important because of my association with hardcore and metal music. 9/11 was terrible and retaliation was important so this piece has implications of that retaliation as I at a young age joined the military prior to that horrific event, but felt that my involvement was important to me that I didn't just stand idly by and not do anything.

I remember my stomach area tattoo Another Day, Another War, Another Battle. Life is a war and every day you face obstacles and make decisions and choices that affect everything in your life or your daily battle and that means you don't have to be in the military to face the war of life. Life is hard and don't let anyone tell you it isn't.

6. My pinup pirate girl tattoo is a tattoo to remember my party days in the military and being over in Germany being able to drink and party before 21 years old. One of my buddies gave me a shirt that I still have that says "Just a pirate chasing booty." There were a lot of girls to chase in Germany. Most of those memories are good ones.

I remember my tattoo "It's our struggle that define us." "one day a woman said to me that it isn't true, because it only does if you let it. I don't believe that I believe every new experience and situation brings new struggles, blessings, and outlooks on the big picture of our lives. It would take a very talented person mentally to not let their struggles define them.

I remember my "trapped under ice" tattoo. It is about my personal struggle with PTSD and to remember vets who didn't win their battle in life and took their own lives (22 a day). I am fortunate and blessed to have survived war, and my mental battle with my own demons (my own PTSD) from wartime experience.

Jeff Kalk

I remember when I was 19 years old and I enlisted in the US Navy. I was stationed aboard the USS Nashville LPD-13. During my six years I was enlisted I traveled my places. During my younger years I never thought I would get a tattoo. It was not my thing back then. Fast forward to years later and I reflected on my navy years and I thought I wanted to start getting some ink. So I started with my US navy skull because I love skulls and thought it should be my first tat. My tattoo makes me feel strong and proud to be a part of something special. I am proud to be an American and being a Veteran. My tattoos express who I am. I continue to get ink today. Being a veteran in the ultimate brotherhood. Even at 48 years old I would do it all over again. God Bless our troops and thank you for your service.

Michael E. Newman

I got my first tattoo in 1970. I had been in the Navy for about ten months. I got my second tattoo in 1978; the third came in 1981. Then a long time went by until I got my next one.

I truly started I 2003 with a tattoo on my back to cover up the 1978 tattoo. I then booked another appointment for the following week. My tattoo artist worked on my whole back every week for the next six months. The tattoo took about 100 hours to complete. I then to a tattoo convention to enter my back piece. I didn't win. I went to another tattoo convention two months later and won two awards.

That hooked me!

I went to get tattooed every week for the next ten years. Sometimes it was twice a week, sometimes it was two times in one day. From 2013-2016 I slacked off and only went a few times, every few weeks.

My body is 90% covered with tattoos. At this time I go to at least five tattoo conventions every year. To date, I have one 107 awards for my tattoo artists. I've been in magazines and many photo shoots, and totally enjoy the tattoo industry. I have approximately 600-700 hours of tattoo work on my body.

Jeff Piper

After basic training we, as a platoon of 35 soldiers, were confined to the barracks awaiting orders. I was 17 ½ years old and was acting lieutenant over these heroes. Some knew where they would be training or serving next and some didn't. As we gathered to share the night, I thought back to 16 weeks earlier when we first met. There had been everything but friendships and now we were really a team, united in a strong kinship.

The conversation between drifted from topic to topic, home, girls, family and finally to a story of an infantry Sargent from our unit who had redeployed for a third tour of duty in a combat zone. On his first patrol his squad triggered a land mine known as a "bouncing Betty", a ground based trap that propels itself into the air, and detonates around chest to head height sending shrapnel in multiple directions to inflict more damage. Three were killed during this incident, and an effort to match the limbs to the bodies was made in the field. There was no guarantee that it was done correctly, which was greatly disturbing to us all. This led us to the conclusion to mark our legs in some way, so that in

the event they were separated from the rest of you, they could be returned to their original owners. It sounded like a good idea.

We appropriated India ink and combined sewing needles, thread and a #2 pencil into tools and our area became a tattoo parlor. There was not an artist in the platoon, but we all had something self-inked on a leg or two by morning. Girls to smiley faces and even "Mom" incased in a heart were sported by our platoon. What I poked out on my own leg, was a flower, but one with deep rooted origins.

In 1970, a few years before my own enlistment, I was serving as a paper boy delivering headlines of the Kent state shootings during student protests. Four unarmed students were killed by National Guard soldiers on site with instructions to protect the peace. The famous picture of a young girl placing a flower into the end of a soldier's barrel as a sign of peace was forever burned into my brain. This flower as a sign of peace represented what I felt soldiers were really meant to do: protect and preserve. I have worn that flower on my leg for many years; a sole flower to constantly remind me of what I feel is truly the most important duty of a soldier, to preserve our country's peace.

Some of the inspirations for the other tattoos within my platoon didn't come back to share their stories, but I know my guys were buried with their correct body parts and given the respect they earned as soldiers.

Bob Seitz

At the age of seventeen I graduated from high school. Two week later I was sworn into the Navy and was winging my way to San Diego for boot camp. The last thing my mom said to me before departing was: "Don't get a tattoo, you will be sorry." I think a lot of the younger felt the need to show their manhood in some way, and what better way than to get a tattoo?

After several months in boot they gave us an eight hour liberty to go off base. Outside the gate, on the main drag was Painless Nell's Tattoo Parlor. AS we looked around at the different designs, all I could hear was my dear ole mom's voice in my ear; however, my manhood was at stake.

Nell starts at bottom when the USN is to go...what the hell is this, it feels like she is using a dentist drill without the Novocain...plop, I fainted. Yes, I flopped right into ole Nell's lap. So much for my manhood theory.

My tattoo is faded now, but not my memory of my Navy days.

(Standing watch on the fossil with my boathook, looking for the mail buoy. You have to be a sailor to understand.)

Aaron Turner

The back piece is for all the ones who never came home. "Til Valhalla" is the Viking battle cry that we will all see each other again when it all ends. The second time I was due to leave and go down range I broke my back training for the operation. I did not recover so I had to leave the Marine Corps after 16 years. The thought of abandoning my brothers was the most painful thing I have ever experienced.

Being a veteran of other operations I knew I could help others cope with some of what they would see. I have those demons that peek out occasionally that remind me of the necessary horror we all signed up for. Abandoning them made separating even worse. I, to this day, think of those who still put it on the line without much thought of why other than it needs to be done. Saving another human from hardship is the greatest calling and most do it without thinking of their own hardship. The most selfless group on the planet that I am proud to call brothers and sisters.

My demons were a battle at first. I tried all the typical relief but they still shown through. The fight took years, much longer than the event. Being that I have been through it I knew I could help and be the light in the dark for some. I could even show how to avoid some the horror.