

Show Me Your Tattoo: Creating A Successful Exhibit Around Veteran Narratives

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1. Talk to the community: What do the community that you want to engage have in common? What stories do they want to tell? What's important to them?

Definitely getting more tattoos. **This whole sleeve will be a military theme. It was a big part of my life; something I'm proud of. It would be a tribute.** I also want to get some memorials for my friends."

"It also carries memories of what I did on that deployment; **I'm hoping to add more stuff around it to build on the story.**"

I've always liked tattoos.

"This is my 4th tattoo...I got it because I was out of the service; I was injured and wanted to continue to serve others and **I really wanted to show my respect to our fallen comrades.** It reminds of the sacrifice some people have to make for the freedoms we have."

2. Showcase their stories: We interviewed veterans and then created an exhibit around their words.

We used tattoos but an exhibit could be done around art, photographs, letters, poetry, whatever the group embraces.

Here, Brandi talks about the story behind the tattoo on her back, which includes a picture of a phoenix.



Notice that the picture of her tattoo has a white border and a shadow attached to it. This is so the picture "pops" and draws the eye to it.



Brandi Binder
Age: 38
Branch: Illinois Army National Guard
Rank: Sergeant
Years in Service: 16.5
Primary Job: Supply Major and Degree Track at UIUC:
Masters of Social Work for Mental Health

"Camp Phoenix was my last deployment and I lost a lot and gained a lot from that deployment. **I was deployed to Iraq first and when I came home it was a lot harder to be home than I thought it was going to be.** I had met my friend Jason that was killed in Afghanistan, I met him in Iraq. He was from Ohio. When we all came home from Iraq, there were four of us, and we all decided that we just couldn't be home and that we had to go back overseas. We went to Afghanistan and we got split up. We all went in different directions and he was killed about a month after we got there. **I was stationed in Camp Phoenix and after he died, I realized that being home was more important than being deployed.** That was the moment that I decided that with the military, I needed to go on a different track, Camp Phoenix was a big part of that. **It was the moment that I decided that this (UIUC) was the school I wanted to go to and social work to help veterans is what I want to do.**"

3. Less is more: Exhibits often have far too much text. What is really needed? Now take half of that out. Use images, minimal text, and judicious use of bold. Also, try to be uniform with effects used, spacing, language, etc. Contextualize when you need to.



Marcos Estrada
Age: 42
Branch: Marine Corps
Rank: Master Sergeant
Years in Service: 20
Primary Job: Infantry Major and Degree Track at UIUC:
Executive Masters of Business Administration



"The one on my neck "Genuine Leather" dates back to when **Marines used to guard ships and they used to wear leather straps on their necks to protect them from sword slashing. That's where the term "Leathernecks" comes from.** I got it done in a kitchen at a friend's home from a buddy that made his own tattoo gun."

"It's a Marine Corps mascot, the English bulldog with a campaign cover [hat] and a chevron that I retired at. **Master Sergeant is the rank I retired at.** It's symbolic of my background, I was an infantry guy. Infantry guys tend to be grittier and less polished, instead of dressy and garrison. I preferred the grungy side. Then there is the Statue of Liberty weeping, which is symbolic of what our country is going through right now. Then there is the American flag."



Master Sergeant is a high enlisted rank and indicates that the Marine is a leader and expert in their area of specialty.



"According to stories, the Marines [in World War I] fought with such tenacity and valor that the Germans nicknamed the Americans *Teufelhunden* or "Devil Dogs." In Bavarian folklore, devil dogs were wild mountain dogs. The battle at Belleau Wood was real, but the German nickname was based on mythology. However, it wasn't long before a recruiting poster painted by Charles Falls appeared showing a dachshund wearing a spiked helmet and Iron Cross running from an English Bulldog wearing a helmet with the globe and anchor insignia on it. Written on the poster was "Teufelhunden - Devil Dog Recruiting Station." The poster was embraced by the Marine Corps and the public."

Colt, L. (June 12, 2015). "How the bulldog became the Marine Corps mascot" *Canidae.org*

Some Tips

- It always takes more time than you think it does. There will be delays because of illness, misunderstandings, and miscommunication.
- Use project management skills.
- Proofread closely and get a veteran or two to check that the jargon has been correctly interpreted.
- Exhibit cases don't have to be overflowing with stuff – a few books to highlight topics from each interview and some personal memorabilia from the interviewee's time in the service made for a far more aesthetically interesting and compelling exhibit.
- Talk up the exhibit and invite people to come see it.
- Take credit for the work you did and put your name on it. If you don't, a lot of people are going to be wondering who did the work.
- When interviewing veterans, don't be shy about going off script and asking for details or for explanations. Military life is its own culture and absolutely requires an interpreter.

How did we know we were successful?

- People are still talking about the exhibit a year later.
- Every time I passed through the exhibit location, I noticed people had stopped and were looking at the exhibit including taking pictures and posting about it on social media.
- We put out a press release and announcements on social media which resulted in a lot of community discussion and engagement.
- The exhibit was covered by a national newspaper (*Chicago Tribune*).

Acknowledgements

This exhibit could not have succeeded without the assistance of Nick Osborne, Director of the Center for Wounded Veterans and the UIUC Library Exhibits Committee.