

February 3, 2008

Offering New Roles to Wounded Marines

By [RANDAL C. ARCHIBOLD](#)

SAN DIEGO — Two marines enter the Iraqi village and take aim.

“Tell me when,” one of them, Brent Callender, calls out, positioned just inside the flapping curtain of a doorway.

“Action!” the other, Ben Bagby, yells and takes aim — with a video camera.

Mr. Callender, 22, walks, leaning on his cane. Mr. Bagby, 24, shoots him, take after take, practicing tracking shots on a mock-up Iraqi village that was situated on a movie studio lot here where marines train for combat.

They are among 19 marines in one of the more unconventional film and media production schools around, the Wounded Marine Careers Foundation, a 10-week apprenticeship program guided by film industry veterans.



Here, a student casually peels off his shirt to reveal indentations and stitches crisscrossing a shoulder nearly obliterated by rifle fire. Another hikes up a pant leg to explain how his prosthetic limb works. And one, in the quiet of a “mess hall,” a store house for props, speaks of the nightmares that rob him of sleep.

But it is also a place where marines, most them in their 20s, see a path to dreams and a way to overcome their disabilities, with the guarantee of membership in the main production crew union at the end and producers already calling for their services.

Mr. Callender, of Downey, Calif., who was a lance corporal, said the program rescued him from despair over his injuries and his future. He broke his spine, pelvis, kneecaps and other body parts in September 2005 when he was shot by a sniper and then ejected from a vehicle that moments later hit a roadside bomb in the Anbar Province.

“I had no idea what I wanted to do,” said Mr. Callender, who in December retired from the Marines because of his injuries. “I was very depressed and just trying to figure out how I was going to be mobile and just get on with life after being wounded.”

An aspiring film editor, he shot a video of a rusting crane that served for him as a metaphor.

“It still has a control panel, but it is not working anymore,” he said. “I was thinking how something so immense can still be destroyed, whether by time or misuse or whatever.”

He added, “I’m a big guy, but I still fell.”



Advocates for disabled military personnel said there was a growing need for such programs as the wounded, 29,000 in action in the Iraq war, come home and are released from treatment. The government, mainly through the [Department of Veterans Affairs](#), runs an array of career programs for wounded service members, but Marine officials said they believed the film program could encourage more private and nonprofit involvement in retraining.

“Certainly, any successful training program can become a model for other groups who want to support wounded warriors in many different ways,” said Lt. Col. Stanley Packard, a spokesman for the Marines.

Ryan Kule, a 26-year-old Army veteran who lost his left leg and right arm in Iraq and runs a retraining program for the Wounded Warrior Project, an advocacy group, said wounded service members often have difficulty there because of injury-induced physical and mental challenges. Mr. Kule said he and others were pushing employers to more readily accept wounded service members.

“There are some employers willing to accept the challenges with hiring someone with an injury, and some would like more education on it,” Mr. Kule said, “but the majority are definitely willing to work with us because they understand the dedication, what the warriors have done for the country.”

The film program is the brainchild of Kevin Lombard, an Emmy-winning cinematographer and documentary filmmaker, and his wife, Judith Ann Paixao, who has assisted in his productions. A friend with ties to the Marines suggested that Mr. Lombard make a documentary on the wounded, but Mr. Lombard struck on another idea.

“Why not give these marines the tools to tell their own stories?” he said.

The Lombards sold their house in Connecticut and raised money from corporations and foundations. Through connections, they met with Stu Segall Productions here and were given space in a building next to the Iraqi village set. Most importantly, they won the approval of Gen. James T. Conway, the Marine Corps commandant.

“Once we had the commandant’s blessing, the waters parted,” Ms. Paixao (pronounced pie-SHOUN) said.

They whittled down scores of applicants to a first class of 19 and plan to offer another class in the fall. It cost about \$2 million, largely from foundations and private donors, for this inaugural class and they are raising money to keep the program afloat.

Mr. Lombard said representatives from several production companies had expressed interest in hiring the students, and the crew union, the

International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, had also promised to help find them jobs when they graduate in March.

The dozen faculty members, culled through industry connections, marvel at the speed with which the marines have picked up skills.

“These guys are basically trained to train,” said Barry Green, who teaches cinematography.

The students said they approached class with the discipline and resolve of a military mission.



“They, like me, are trying to translate their skill set into something concrete,” said Nick Popaditch, who lost an eye and has severely reduced vision in the other after a rocket-propelled grenade hit his tank. “You get into this weird world in the hospital where you are stuck there for long periods in this ghostlike status. You feel like your life is on hold, when you are used to moving through goals.”

Mr. Popaditch, 40, is among the oldest students. He has taken it upon himself to conduct morning muster and serve as the Marine conscience at the school, where posters of military-themed movies line the hallways and students obey a dress code of khaki pants and blue knit shirts. The presence of the Iraqi village caused some initial concern; simulated gunfire and grenade explosions occasionally pierce the air when the Marines and the San Diego Police Department train there. A few students refuse to enter that set; others take it in stride.



One, Jamil Brown, stepped into a house on the set and remarked, “Oh, I think this is where I got blown up. But it doesn’t freak me out that much anymore.” Joshua J. Frey, 31, of Tampa, Fla., whose arm was nearly blown off in combat, said he got depressed during his recovery and started drinking. But, he said, the program has given him new purpose.

“A lot of people come to the hospital and say they want to do this and that for you,” he said. “But these people took every step to actually get this going. They are so giving of every trick of the trade. I feel that love again.”