

Service members see new 'action'

Wounded troops train for jobs behind camera

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At first blush, Marines don't seem cut out for, say, sound mixing or film editing. But it takes creativity to make do on the battlefield, and the military chain of command can mirror what's found on a TV or movie set. At least that's the thinking behind an innovative job-training program in San Diego for seriously injured Marines and sailors.



Jamil Brown checked sound levels before recording another student's film as part of his training in a 10-week program for seriously injured Marines and sailors. Graduates become members of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees. (Peggy Peattie / Union-Tribune)

various private sources, including a husband and wife who founded the program and have given more than \$250,000 of their own money so far.

Today's graduates, the first in the program, are grateful for their new skills, which would normally take two years of study and cost thousands of dollars to acquire.

"If you can't be hopeful about your future after taking this course, you don't have any hope left," said Nick Popaditch, a former gunnery sergeant who lost an eye fighting in Fallujah, Iraq, in April 2004.

"I was a trigger-puller and absolutely never, ever would have thought of doing this kind of work," he added. "But since I lost my eye, I've become a much better listener, which lends itself to sound editing."

Today, 19 Marines and former Marines will graduate from the program as card-carrying members of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees. The hope is that they will find work behind the camera or in post-production sound and image editing.

The free, 10-week program, run by the nonprofit Wounded Marine Careers Foundation, arose from a collaboration between the entertainment industry and the military and could serve as a template for military-corporate partnerships geared toward training wounded troops returning home from the service.

Funding is largely provided by the Department of Veteran Affairs, the Semper Fi Fund and



Nick Popaditch, a former gunnery sergeant who lost an eye fighting in Fallujah, Iraq, recorded sound for another student's movie at Stu Segall Productions in Kearny Mesa. (Peggy Peattie / Union-Tribune)

Labor statistics suggest the graduates are joining a burgeoning field. Employment growth in the motion-picture and video industries is expected to outpace the average among all industries over the next six years. Many of the jobs pay \$25 or more an hour.

“This program has provided a future for us when many of us saw no future for ourselves,” said Eric Cohen, 24, a medically retired Marine who suffered a traumatic brain injury from a motorcycle accident. “It has given us a life.”



Cinematography instructor Levie Isaack (center) demonstrated a camera angle to student director Jamil Brown on the backlot of Stu Segall Productions in Kearny Mesa. (Peggy Peattie / Union-Tribune)

For the past 10 weeks, Cohen, Popaditch and 17 others have studied writing, still photography, cinematography, editing and sound mixing six days a week in a squat building on the backlot of Stu Segall Productions in Kearny Mesa.

The rotating staff of instructors includes filmmakers, directors of photography, writers, editors, cameramen, sound men, photographers, graphic designers and other industry-leading technicians.

Altogether, the faculty holds a pirate's plunder of entertainment industry awards: three

Academy Awards, 27 Emmys, eight CINE Eagles and numerous others.

A recent day found James Egan, a professor at the University of Southern California's prestigious School of Cinematic Arts and an award-winning documentary film producer, teaching screenwriting.

Veteran movie sound man Chat Gunter was there as well. He flies in from New York University, where he has taught sound for 15 years, to teach sound mixing.

In the coming months, the staff will include graduates of the program and others who have disabilities. Combat veterans bring a natural affinity to this type of work, organizers said.

“We knew that they were young men who had made tremendous sacrifices for our freedoms,” said Judith Paixao, who co-founded the nonprofit group with her husband, Kevin Lombard. “What we didn't anticipate was the tremendous discipline and focus they would bring. It comes from within.”

Paixao and Lombard became interested in the plight of wounded Marines and sailors after talking to an admiral about making a documentary on the wounded. The officer asked if there was any job training the couple might provide.

The question struck a chord. Lombard's father was a Marine during World War II, and now his son wanted to give back. He quickly discovered he wasn't alone; many others in Hollywood – regardless of political leanings – felt the same way.

“Too many filmmakers take the stories of the wounded and give them five minutes of fame, but nothing more,” said Lombard, an Emmy-winning documentary filmmaker. “We proposed to assemble a team of our working colleagues from the entertainment industry and bring a school to the wounded, teaching them how to tell their own stories, and in the process helping them learn new skills as they prepare to get out of the military.”

Paixao and Lombard sold their home in Connecticut and moved to San Diego a little over a year ago, with the desire to create the best program possible to help students land and keep jobs.

Companies also wanted to help. Businesses such as Panasonic and Arriflex donated new and used equipment. Sometimes it wasn't enough for the first class, but the Marines and the instructors made it work.

Job-placement prospects received a huge boost when the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees agreed to give graduates a union card, something that can take years of work to get.

The union agreed to waive its entry fees and count the class time as industry experience to give the graduates the chance to work as soon as possible.

Lombard and Paixao are proud of their first class, but they constantly struggle to make ends meet and have spent more than \$250,000 of their savings to keep the program going. They estimate it costs about \$1.7 million to train each class.



Cinematography instructor Jola Speciale (right) gave tips to student Barrett Nance in a program run by the Wounded Marine Careers Foundation. (Peggy Peattie / Union-Tribune)

They have promised the military five more graduating classes in the next 2½ years, though where the money will come from is anyone's guess.

"It's the hardest thing I've ever done, but it's the most rewarding," Lombard said. "We've also learned how to ask for help.

"We want to set the example for the rest of corporate America of the training that can be accomplished, whether it's for plumbers or film editors. We need to get corporations to provide training."

Staff librarian Beth Wood contributed to this report.

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