

# The poetry of veterans, then and now

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## LOVELLA CALICA

Warrior Writers (from left) Michaelangelo Collura, Kevin Basl, Davelle Barnes and Christopher Wilson shared their work and answered questions from high school students at the National Museum of American Jewish History on Tuesday.

by **Anndee Hochman**

Davelle Barnes didn't know how to talk about what she'd experienced as an Army reservist in Afghanistan: 10-hour days spent laying fiber-optic cable in a ditch, weeks without a comforting touch or a hug, a numbing sense of isolation. "A lot of times, I was the only woman, or the only black woman, or the only black, queer woman," she says.

Then some hundred-year-old poems helped her find the words.

Barnes was at the Women Veterans Center on North Lawrence Street the day Lovella Calica, founder/director of [Warrior Writers](#), showed up to lead a workshop. Afterward, Calica gave Barnes some homework: Read this book of World War I poems, find two that resonate, then write responses.

Barnes paged through: [Wilfred Owen](#), [Siegfried Sassoon](#), [Robert Graves](#). Dead white guys. But their war didn't sound all that different from her own. "I was surprised at how much certain elements are the same: frost, cold, bloodshed, weapons," Barnes recalls. "I didn't think I would like their writing style, but I did.

"Nobody understood me, so I wrote. It was something to do."

When she came across Graves' poem "[It's a Queer Time](#)," about the nightmare twist of lethal risk and gauzy memory in a soldier's mind, she answered with a poem of her own: "I was too many roles in too many third world countries/ ... a two-headed woman, young in the oldest battle known to man: power."

Barnes read that, along with another of her poems and the World War I pieces that inspired them, during an event last week at the [National Museum of American Jewish History](#). The reading — organized by museum staff, [Moonstone Arts Center](#), and Warrior Writers, a 10-year-old creative forum for veterans in Philadelphia and elsewhere — was designed to connect the dots between 2017 and 1917.

It was also meant to conjure a mood. That's why the audience of 60 high school students entered to a soundtrack bright with brass instrumental rills: the 1918 music-hall song "Oh! It's a Lovely War!" That's why slides projected behind the readers showed the works of [Percy Wyndham Lewis](#) and [Otto Dix](#), including men crawling from a snow-fringed trench, tanks drawn so that they seemed to be grimacing as they rumbled ahead.

"World War I is an essential marker for understanding U.S. history," says Kevin Basl, another member of Warrior Writers. He was a mobile radar operator in the Army from 2003 to 2008, deployed twice to Iraq. "In those four years, Western civilization shifted industrially, artistically, culturally. It was the beginning of the 20th century."

It was also the start of a mood shift in war poetry: from verse that thrummed with valor and patriotism to poems that painted stark images of gas attacks, suicides, the tedium and terror of soldiering on for a questionable cause.

For ancient Greeks, drama captured the acrid taste of battle; photographs and film seared the conflicts of Vietnam indelibly into our minds. But poetry was the lingua franca of World War I, especially in England; soldiers scribbled verses from the trenches, newspapers published them, and readers relied on them for up-front glimpses of an increasingly devastating war.

Between 1914 and 1918, the world convulsed: Revolution seized Russia; empires crumbled across Europe; women in Britain and the U.S. agitated for the right to vote. "World War I poets

challenged the lies and myths of war: the nationalism and romanticism,” says Basl, who earned a master’s in fine arts in fiction at Temple University after returning from Iraq. “They spoke truth to power.”

So did last week’s writers. In addition to Basl and Barnes, Warrior Writers Christopher Wilson and Michelangelo Collura shared their work, also paired with selected pieces from World War I. Two of the four cited Wilfred Owen’s evocative, cynical “[Dulce et Decorum est.](#)”

*Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge...  
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots  
But limped on, blood-shod.*

The poem ends by quoting the Latin phrase *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*, meaning “It is good and fitting to die for one’s country.” Owen dubs it “the old Lie.”

Wilson, now an actor and poet, told the crowd that he wasn’t a writer before he served in the 173rd Airborne Brigade in Afghanistan. “But when I came home, I had all these experiences on my mind. In poetry, you can make some sense out of the war a little bit.”

The World War I poems lent not only candor, but structure and poetic strategies, to Warrior Writers members. Where Owen invokes the wartime horrors of his day — “Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!” — Wilson captured that same urgent cadence in his response poem: “Incoming! Incoming! Get to cover!”

Basl, prompted by reading “[The Homecoming](#)” by Joseph Lee, wrote of the strangeness of seeing his parents — his mother’s face wearied with new creases, his father’s muscle softened into paunch — at the conclusion of a tour of duty. They approached one another, he wrote in “Reunion Dance,” like strangers on a blind date.

And Barnes penned a retort to Sassoon’s “[Glory of Women](#)” because she thought the poet was too dismissive of a German mother’s contribution to the war effort: “While you are knitting socks to send your son/His face is trodden deeper in the mud.”

Clean socks matter in wartime, Barnes says. They prevent foot rot. And women who send their loved ones into battle understand the stakes intimately. She wrote, “Mothers know how medals are reinforced/by bone and sinew... We let you go, come back and leave us/Let us do our work.”

One hundred years after the United States declared war on Germany, 100 years after Siegfried Sassoon wrote “[Suicide in the Trenches](#)” — amid today’s flurry of tweets and Instagram snaps and smartphones in every soldier’s pocket — poetry still works, in some small way, to shatter myths, repair brokenness, and give voice to the roiling complexity of what veterans have seen.

“It’s like you’re wandering through the darkness,” says Collura, “and every now and then, you run into a few people who are speaking the same language as you.”

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