



## ASU alum, Iraq War vet finds healing in his book, 'Soft Spots'

Clint Van Winkle, a Marine veteran of the Iraq War, was struggling to cope with life after combat upon his return to the States in 2003. Awful memories and images of devastation, callous violence and mind-scenes that included burned bodies and dead children were impossible to erase, and help was hard to find. Although he didn't know it at the time, he was suffering from post-

traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

A 2005 graduate of Arizona State University's New College of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences (B.A., English), Van Winkle found a small but important piece of the elusive healing process through his authorship of "Soft Spots: A Marine's Memoir of Combat and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," (St. Martin's Press, 2009) a book that evolved from essays he had written. The critically acclaimed book is a detailed account of his service in the early stages of the Iraq War and, more importantly, war's aftermath and his frustrating experiences upon his return home.

"This memoir of combat in Iraq, and the post-traumatic stress disorder that followed, contains more literary touches than most, and it's an admirable effort...it presents a vivid picture of what many vets endure," reads one review in Publishers Weekly. Another review, by The Washington Post's Juliet Wittman, notes, "Nothing gets held back in "Soft Spots"...despite the author's lacerating honesty, the narrative is dreamlike and surreal."

Van Winkle was a Marine sergeant in Iraq, commanding an amphibious assault vehicle section while attached to Lima Company 3rd BN 1st. He crossed into Iraq on the first day of the war and moved about the country constantly, encountering all the horrors of war as only a front-line combatant can. Among those horrors were "soft spots," the term used to refer to a fallen Marine, killed in battle, and accidentally stepped on in the midst of rubble. Marines.

Just as troubling were the images of war he carried home with him and could not lose. In a recent interview on CNN, Van Winkle noted, "I felt like I was losing control of my life. I was trying to figure out what was in my head, and I started writing. It helped me and, hopefully, it will help others."

The seeds of the book were germinated in Van Winkle's English 400 class at ASU's West campus, History of Literary Criticism, taught by Eric Wertheimer, chair of New College's Humanities, Arts & Cultural Studies. Among others, Van Winkle credits Wertheimer as an influence who reviewed his earliest essays. Wertheimer, in turn, recalls the author-in-waiting as one who gained critical perspective during his two-and-a-half years at ASU.

"I remember his intense interest in connecting his experience as a soldier to psychoanalytic theories of representation and identity during his class time and his independent study," says Wertheimer. "I also remember Clint as a very gentle and soft-spoken guy, very deliberate and careful in his writing and speech. He was determined to express his unique experience of war even then.

"I also believe Clint came to more fully understand the Iraq War as a student at ASU."

Van Winkle has recently moved to Chesapeake, Va., from Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) where his wife, Sara, is a kindergarten teacher. She graduated from ASU's College of Teacher Education and Leadership with a B.A. in elementary education at the same time as Van Winkle. The two will soon be on the move again, as Van Winkle pursues a Ph.D. degree in American studies from Swansea University.

His time at the West campus was shorter than others who graduated with him, as he completed his four-year undergraduate work cum laude in two years, enrolling in as many as 21 credits each semester.

"I was better prepared for college because of the Marine Corps," he says. "College moves at a much slower pace, so it was easy for me to graduate more quickly than most.

"I was uncomfortable at first," he says, echoing words from his book in which he wonders what his fellow Marines would think about him "hiding in a university" setting. "I didn't feel comfortable around other students, because I felt much older than all of them, even though I was only 25 years old when I first started. They spent their summers on the beach; I'd spent mine shooting people and trying not to get shot. What did we have in common? How could they ever begin to understand.

"The West campus was a good fit. The professors were very supportive."

Van Winkle also found support in Joseph Little, a veteran of multiple tours of war in Vietnam, who is a counselor at the Phoenix Vet Center. After countless frustrations and dead ends while seeking assistance for his emotional challenges, Van Winkle hooked up with Little, who administered Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy, a form of psychotherapy developed to resolve symptoms resulting from the type of trauma experienced by Van Winkle and many of his fellow combat vets.

"I don't know why the VA (Veterans Administration) can't get their stuff together," says Van Winkle when discussing the long line of psychiatrists who were unable to determine the cause or cure for his frequent hallucinations. "Joe is only technically connected to the bigger VA system. He did two or three tours in Vietnam. He understands.

"EMDR makes the experience new again. I was actually in Iraq mentally, reliving the experience. After I would snap back to reality, Joe and I would talk about where I had been and what I saw."

Van Winkle's post-combat journey is not complete, but he believes he has made progress. He credits his book, Little's counseling and Sara's "rock" support as must-have parts of the process.

"Each aspect of my healing process was needed and equally important," says Van Winkle, who carries a master's in creative and media writing from Swansea University. "I'm pretty far along. It's really hard to say where I am or how much I left to go. There are still rough patches. I don't believe I'll ever be healed completely. However, I can learn to deal with it better, which is what I've been trying to do."

Van Winkle hopes his book will serve as "medicine" to others who have walked and fought in the same boots.

"I've heard from a bunch of my buddies," he says. "They've been very supportive and many have opened up about their own struggles.

"Soft Spots' offers a glimpse of what it is like to have PTSD. I tried to capture the confusion that takes place in my head, tried to show the chaos that PTSD caused and how I dealt with it. I think the book is more helpful to family members and civilians.

"Combat vets know what it feels like."

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