

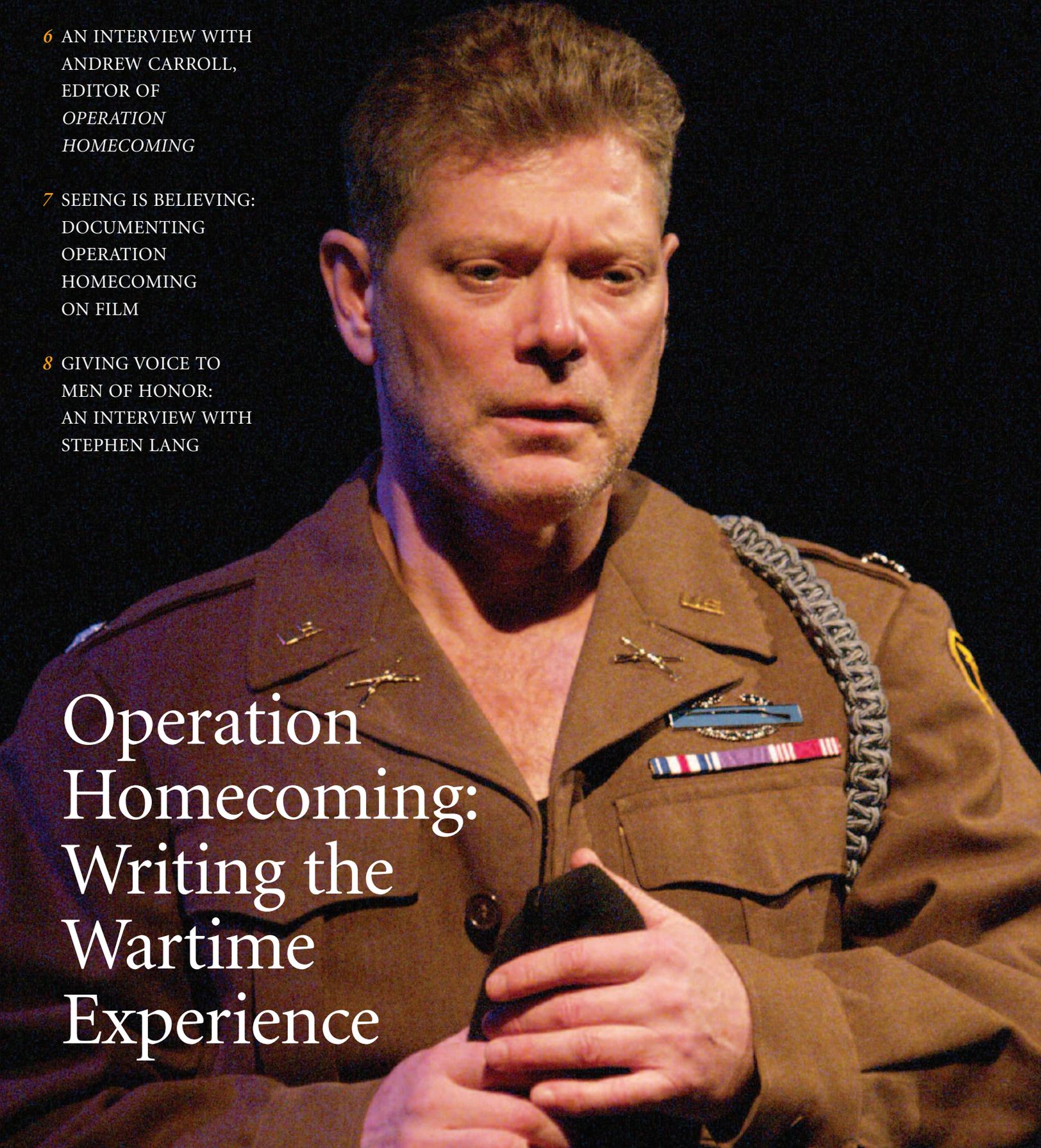
# NEARTS

A GREAT NATION DESERVES GREAT ART

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Operation  
Homecoming:  
Writing the  
Wartime  
Experience

# The Power of Story

## The NEA's Operation Homecoming Initiative

**Now widely viewed as a success,** Operation Homecoming had many opportunities to falter. Would prominent writers really join the National Endowment for the Arts's effort to teach workshops on military bases *during a war*? Would any troops attend? Would they feel free to express themselves while still in uniform? Would they do so before strangers? Would their family members do the same? Would they find value in the program? Would the public? The media? Would the writing be any good? Would lives truly be changed? The answer, to one and all, has proven to be yes.

In retrospect, the answer is not surprising. Across the millennia, from Homer to our day, art and literature have always had the power to transform lives.

The success of Operation Homecoming is quantified publicly in the total number of bases reached, troops and family members involved, educational materials



**Judith Ortiz Cofer led an Operation Homecoming workshop at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida. Photo: The Boeing Company.**

requested, wartime writings submitted, copies of the anthology sold. Each of these measures matters. But after spending three years directing the project, I value highest the quiet private moments with the young men and women just back from the war, ones who took copious notes in the workshops and others who pointedly did not, ones who may or may not have submitted their writing to us, but were changed for the better nonetheless. They are legion. I include among those changed our workshop teachers, some of whom had not yet completed within themselves the story of their own wartime service. I include among those changed many of us at the agency and in the arts world.

That's the nature of Operation Homecoming: individual story joined with individual story to create an epic volume of who we are as human beings and what we fear, honor, love, abhor, and uphold in the hardest moments of our lives.

*Jon Parrish Peede*  
Director, Operation Homecoming

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**Stephen Lang as Medal of Honor recipient Colonel Lewis Millet in Lang's one-man play *Beyond Glory*. Photo: Diane Williams.**

# Operation Homecoming

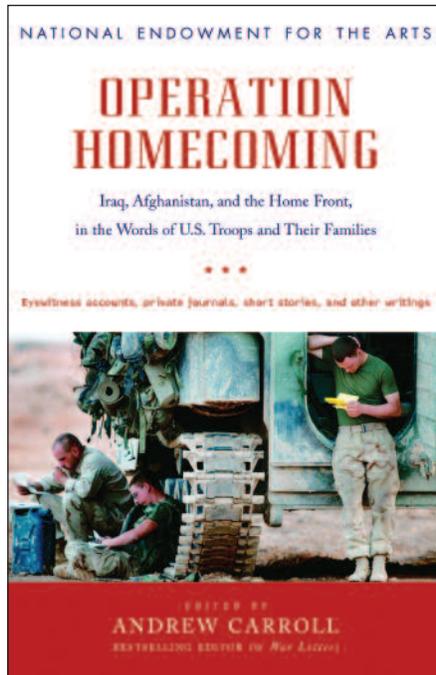
## Writing the Wartime Experience

**This September, Random House,**

one of the nation's premier publishers, releases *Operation Homecoming: Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Home Front in the Words of U.S. Troops and Their Families*, the culmination of Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience, a program launched by the NEA in 2004 to encourage U.S. troops to write about their wartime experiences. The anthology of letters, e-mails, personal narratives, poems, and short fiction is written by U.S. military personnel who served after September 11, 2001, and their immediate families. Edited by best-selling anthologist Andrew Carroll, editor of the landmark collection *War Letters*, the anthology *Operation Homecoming* is unique in its immediacy—all of the incidents that inspired the writing happened within the last five years.

Nancy Miller, a Random House Senior Vice President and the Executive Editor, says that after reading some of the submissions, the Random House team realized the anthology would be an important addition to the long tradition of war literature. "We were very pleased to find ourselves one of four publishers considered in the final round," says Miller.

"*Operation Homecoming* captures what



Courtesy of The Random House Publishing Group.

journalists in Iraq and Afghanistan cannot—the first-hand experiences of the men and women directly involved in battle and the reflections of their families back home.”

*Operation Homecoming* will be sold in bookstores and also will be distributed free of charge to military installations, schools, and libraries. Random House will sponsor a ten-city reading tour featuring Andrew Carroll and several of the book's contributors. (For an interview with Carroll about the new anthology and his experience with Operation Homecoming, please see page 6).

The Southern Arts Federation, the regional arts organization that administered the Operation

Homecoming program, will sponsor another reading tour reaching more than 20 military installations, libraries, cultural centers, literary conferences, and universities.



Marilyn Nelson discusses writing with a participant of the Operation Homecoming workshop at the Norfolk Naval Station in Virginia. Photo: Garrick Davis.

NEA Chairman Dana Gioia conceived the Operation Homecoming program during a conversation with poet Marilyn Nelson, a visiting writer at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point whose father was one of the famous Tuskegee Airmen. Speaking with Nelson impressed upon Gioia the necessity of

recording the voices of those who had the singular experience of participating in a war, either as part of the armed forces or as a family member of someone in military service.

“To paraphrase Robert Frost, Operation Homecoming is about preserving things it would impoverish us to forget. It celebrates and explores individual memory in a crucial historical period,” says Chairman Gioia.

Chairman Gioia also notes the importance of Operation Homecoming as a way to foster a connection between the troops and the rest of the American people. “One of the tragedies of the Vietnam War is that no one wanted to listen to the vets when they came back. If Operation Homecoming does anything, it creates a vehicle for conversations between the troops and their families and society.”

Nelson concurs, “It’s very important to keep military personnel in contact with the majority culture, and to encourage self-expression as a way to fight post-traumatic stress.”

The program was the second partnership between the Arts Endowment and the Department of Defense (DOD), following DOD’s support for the NEA’s Shakespeare in American Communities program on military bases. The Boeing Company enthusiastically signed on as a sponsor, a partnership that has since led to Boeing’s involvement in two more Arts Endowment initiatives—Great American Voices, which brings selections from opera and musicals to military bases, and the Big Read initiative to encourage American communities (including military bases) to discuss great works of literature.

Over the course of Operation Homecoming, distinguished American writers, some of whom were veterans themselves and all of whom had written about the military in some way, conducted writing workshops on domestic and overseas military bases for troops and their families. More than 24 writers led workshops, including Nelson and Jeff Shaara, author of the Civil War novel

*Gods and Generals*. Shaara notes, “In the workshop there was a real cross-section of people—the 20-year-old private and his wife, a career officer, a retired civilian, and everyone in between. Each one had a story to tell, and no one had ever asked before.” He was sometimes surprised by what had drawn participants to the workshop.

“There was a young woman there with her husband, and I thought she’d say she was there because of him,” he recalls. “Instead she said she had a grandfather who sailed on Navy destroyers in WWII and faced German U-boats. She said, ‘I’d like to tell his story.’”

The response to the project by servicemen and

women and their families has been overwhelming. By July 2005, more than 6,000 individuals had participated in Operation Homecoming workshops and activities. Workshops were held at 33 military installations, including Cannon Air Force Base (New Mexico), Camp Lejeune (North Carolina), Camp Zama (Tokyo, Japan), and Naval Station Pearl Harbor (Hawaii).

Although each writer’s approach to leading a workshop varied, all agreed that it was important to make

the participants comfortable, especially as beginning writers. Jeff Shaara opened his workshops by telling participants about how he had gotten into writing. “[I told them] that you had to be passionate about the subject, that I discovered characters in history I was passionate about. I told them, ‘The advantage for you is that you’re the character.’”

The NEA provided Operation Homecoming participants with additional resources to complement the workshop. An audio guide provided insights into the writing process by respected authors including Richard Wilbur and James Salter. The CD also featured readings of war literature from the Civil War to the present, including Marilyn Nelson’s poem “Star-Fix” and a selection from Bobbie Ann Mason’s novel *In Country*. In addition, participants had access to an Operation Homecoming Web site that includes essays on writing

**Troops listen to an Operation Homecoming workshop led by Tobias Wolff at Camp Pendleton in California. Photo: The Boeing Company.**





such as Dan Rifenburg's "What is Poetry?" and a streaming video of author Richard Bausch's June 2005 workshop at Fort Drum, New York.

Stephen Lang, a veteran actor known for his portrayals of military heroes, also participated in Operation Homecoming, touring his one-man play *Beyond Glory* to more than 26 U.S. bases in Europe and Asia. Lang also conducted writing workshops and held post-performance discussions with the troops. (For an interview with Stephen Lang regarding his experience with *Beyond Glory*, please see page 8).

Writers did not have to participate in a writing workshop in order for their work to be considered for the project anthology. The NEA received more than 10,000 pages of submissions, and convened an independent panel of writers to review the submissions and recommend the best for consideration. Ultimately, work was selected for publication based on literary excellence, historic importance, and a desire to present a diversity of genres and life experiences.

In June 2006, the public got a sneak peek at the anthology when *The New Yorker* magazine published a 16-page section of excerpts from *Operation*

**Richard Bausch presents ten points of advice to young writers at a workshop at Fort Drum in Watertown, New York.**

**Photo: Betty Doherty, US Army MWR.**

*Homecoming* as part of its Summer Fiction: Life During Wartime issue. Next spring, a documentary on the program, by the Documentary Group, in partnership with WETA, will air on PBS as part of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting's *America at a Crossroads* series.

The impact of Operation Homecoming will last long into the future. Military bases will be able to conduct

writing workshops for personnel using the Operation Homecoming materials developed by the Arts Endowment as well as an educational film, produced by Red Car, currently in production. (For more on the Red Car project, please see page 7).

All of the submissions received for the anthology will be housed in an open government archive. This archive will be accessible to the American people who, in the words of Jeff Shaara, will be able to know "what their sons and daughters and husbands and wives and brothers and sisters are really experiencing."



Courtesy of *The New Yorker*.

# Illumination of Extraordinary Things

An Interview with Andrew Carroll, Editor of *Operation Homecoming*



Andrew Carroll, editor of *Operation Homecoming: Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Home Front in the Words of U.S. Troops and Their Families*. Photo: The Boeing Company.

*Washington writer Andrew Carroll is the founder of the Legacy Project, a national, all-volunteer project to seek and preserve wartime correspondence. Carroll taught several Operation Homecoming workshops in addition to editing the published anthology.*

**NEA: What was your initial reaction to the Operation Homecoming program?**

**ANDREW CARROLL:** When I first heard of it, I thought it was a great idea but nothing was going to come of it. You're talking about a group of people [the military] that's reserved and reticent. It's anathema to military culture to express individual opinions and emotions. But as I learned more about the project and got immersed in it, I thought it was one of the most brilliant ideas ever.

**NEA: Given the reticence associated with military culture, why do you think the workshops were so successful?**

**CARROLL:** I asked that question myself quite a bit. There's one answer I remember in particular, from a group at Fort Bragg. Someone said, "It's the first time anyone's asked [to hear our stories]."

**NEA: What was it like to lead a writing workshop for military personnel?**

**CARROLL:** I was thunderstruck by how open the troops were. Usually, when you're hearing [war] stories, it's been years or decades since the troops have served. This was so immediate. I prefaced my workshop by talking about my first visit to a military base, to say that we're all new to something. I told them, "A lot of you are new to writing—don't be shy about asking questions and don't get frustrated if the writing gets hard. You all have extraordinary stories, you have amazing discipline, and you're intelligent—that's what you need to be a writer."

**NEA: What makes the *Operation Homecoming* anthology so different from other collections of war literature?**

**CARROLL:** There's been no anthology like this before. This anthology contains the work of active duty troops, but also work by relatively young people who have retired from the military. This is their first-hand experience. This anthology is also significant because the NEA has focused on many different genres, not just letters. There are poems and short stories and memoir and e-mail. We've never had this kaleidoscope of genres before.

I think this anthology is also significant because it gives people an idea of what these troops are sacrificing, not just physically but emotionally. It helps to bridge the disconnect between the military world and the civilian world. If this book can help us appreciate who these men and women are and what they're called to do, that's a good thing.

The reader gets to know these individuals, not just as statistics, not just as faceless soldiers or airmen or sailors or pilots. They have a background, a biography. Words like courage and honor and camaraderie are kind of hollow if you don't understand the nitty gritty of warfare. It helps us to better understand what these troops [are] going through.

**(Illumination continued on page 7)**

# Seeing is Believing

## Documenting Operation Homecoming on Film

**Lawrence Bridges's first reaction** to submitting a proposal for a documentary about the NEA's Operation Homecoming initiative was fear. "I had to face the reality of the journey I was going to take," says Bridges, president of Red Car, a Los Angeles-based film company. "Was I willing to undergo the experience of working with these war stories? Would I be able to relate?"

Ultimately, Bridges applied for the project, deciding that it was necessary "so that other people can experience this very human condition of war." The in-progress film focuses on the historical, literary, and, most significantly, human aspects of Operation Homecoming. "There's a lot of news coverage and political reporting on the war, but there's very little envisaging of the people who are actually there," says Bridges. "I want to show that these troops are us, everyday Americans."

This is not Red Car's first experience with documenting an NEA initiative. In 2004, Bridges helmed *Why Shakespeare?*, a short film showcasing the Shakespeare in American Communities program and how involvement with Shakespeare and live theater could positively change the lives of young people. *Why Shakespeare?* features a roster of celebrities—Tom Hanks, Julie Taymor, Michael York—and young people reciting Shakespeare and reflecting on their experience with the Bard.

Since May, Bridges has proven that he's more than up to the challenge of documenting another historic project, working with his crew to capture NEA Chairman Dana Gioia and some of the program's workshop leaders—including writers Marilyn Nelson and Andrew Carroll—in candid discussions of their experience with the project and with literature. Bridges even has lined up actors such as Kevin Costner to recite passages from the anthology on camera.

Most significant, the filmmaker has captured the voices of the troops themselves—reading the work they have contributed to the anthology and reflecting on their experiences as soldiers and writers. These interviews especially move Bridges, who recounts that nearly all of the interviewed military personnel were overcome with emotion when filming first started. "These troops were giving me permission to enter the most private

parts of their hearts," says Bridges. "It's not the kind of opportunity you'd have other than in this context."

Bridges expects that the completed film, which will be used on military bases for future writing workshops, will be available by the end of the year. He hopes that the experience of the film, ultimately, will be one of connection. "I think this is a healing film—people will understand their own humanity."



Troops from all four branches of the U.S. Armed Forces participated in Operation Homecoming. Photo: The Boeing Company.

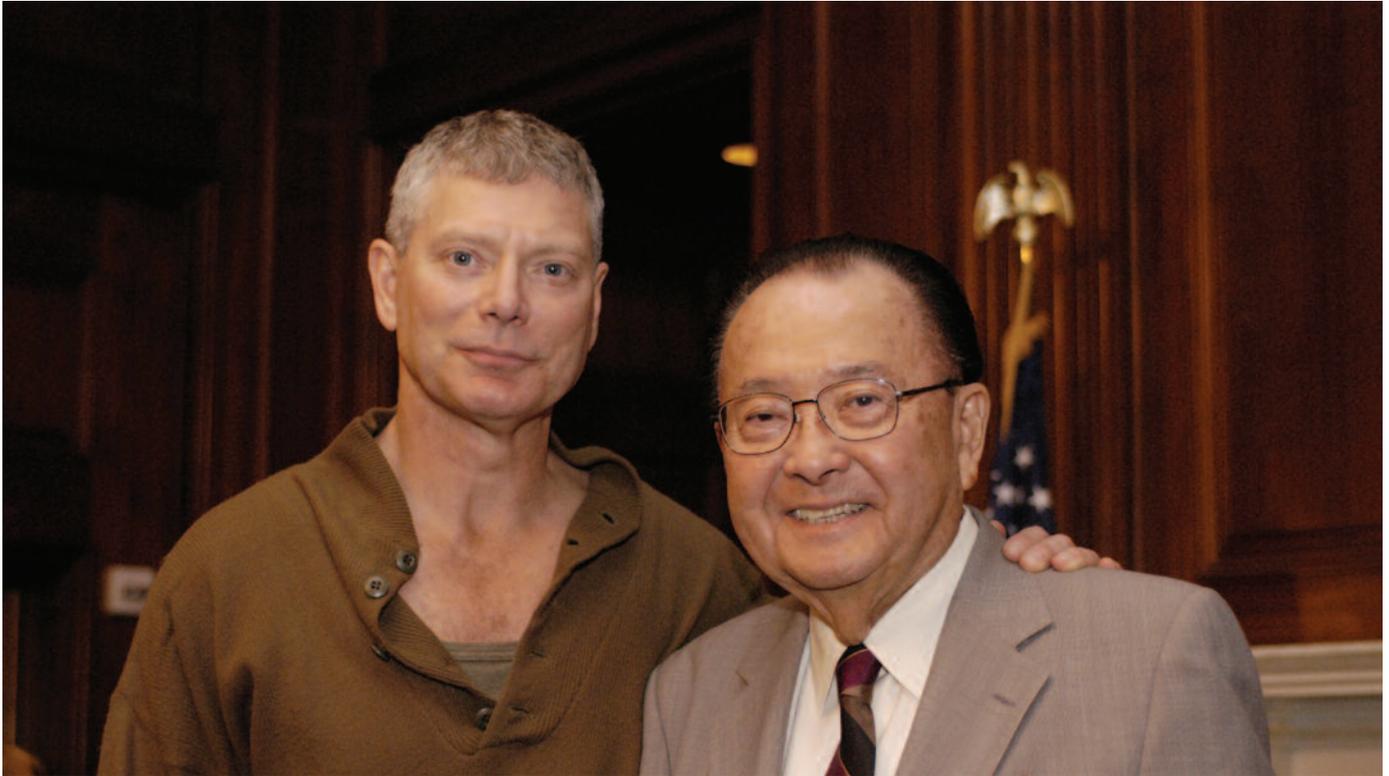
(**Illumination** continued from page 6)

**NEA:** Why do you believe it's necessary and important to publish war literature?

**CARROLL:** In any historic event, it's not the generals or the politicians, it's the individual men and women in the eye of the storm, it's those voices that most need to be preserved and that are the most fascinating. I think there's a feeling that we've heard everything about the conflicts, there's nothing we can be surprised by. Every piece [in the anthology] surprised me for one reason or the other. For all of us who think there's nothing left to see or learn about the war, these pieces illuminate extraordinary things.

# Giving Voice To Men of Honor

An Interview with Stephen Lang about *Beyond Glory*



Veteran actor Stephen Lang adapted his one-man show *Beyond Glory* from Larry Smith's book *Beyond Glory: Medal of Honor Heroes in Their Own Words*. As part of *Operation Homecoming*, Lang toured *Beyond Glory* to U.S. military installations abroad and also led *Operation Homecoming* writing workshops.

**NEA:** How did you first become interested in adapting *Beyond Glory* for the stage?

**STEPHEN LANG:** Larry Smith is a friend of mine, and he told me about *Beyond Glory*. I didn't read it with the intention of adapting it for the stage, but at the time I was looking to find something for myself that I could write and perform. I read the whole book in one afternoon. The voices were so genuine, so unaffected, so ungussied up—I read it out loud. For the adaptation, I took 30-page chapters and condensed them to a bouillon cube of drama and information. I've taken dramatic license in some places, but never with the intention or spirit of the story.

**NEA:** What kind of preparation went into creating the roles in *Beyond Glory*?

**Stephen Lang and Senator Daniel Inouye (Hawaii) at a special performance of *Beyond Glory* at the U.S. Senate in May 2005. Photo: Steven Purcell.**

**LANG:** I play eight different Medal of Honor [recipients]. A lot of the preparing was just learning the words. As I did that, the voices emerged and the physical life. A lot of acting is patience, waiting, allowing the role itself to fill you. There's an element of impressionism in the piece—I play black men, Asian men, men who are older than me. I'm really asking—who is Daniel Inouye as played by me? The number of times people have said that it was close to the real guy, it's very gratifying.

**NEA:** How did you become involved with *Operation Homecoming*?

**LANG:** The NEA became aware of *Beyond Glory* due to its success at a theater in Arlington [Virginia]. Jon Peede [Director of *Operation Homecoming*] saw right away there was a synergistic possibility between *Beyond Glory* and *Operation Homecoming*. The first thing I did was perform at the press announcement for *Operation Homecoming*. The NEA asked if I would do a few pieces

because this was writing by soldiers. It started a very good relationship with the agency, and I found myself in front of people who might not have seen the show. People in government and the military started coming to the show. Then the NEA asked me what I wanted to do vis a vis *Beyond Glory* and Operation Homecoming, and I said I wanted to perform for the troops.

**NEA:** Why was performing for the troops important to you?

**LANG:** I feel like they are in a situation in which they'll have an immediate appreciation and apprehension of what the show will do. I wanted [*Beyond Glory*] to be useful, not just entertaining. The show directly gets at the fundamental reasons they got involved in the military in the first place. I wanted to do something to support our troops beyond saying it and giving to worthy organizations that supported them. I have a fascination, a respect for the whole military ethic. So many of the concepts—courage, leadership, loyalty—are themes really worth exploring.

**NEA:** What was it like to teach an Operation Homecoming writing workshop?

**LANG:** I had a unique perspective I could share with most of the people in the workshops. I'm not a writer by trade. But if there's something I want to write, I write it. These folks were in the workshop because something was on their mind. In the workshop, I would take the participants through my own logic of how and why I wrote my show. Then I'd tell them, "We're going to write and write for 10 minutes" and give them a prompt like 'boots.' I'd pick something that was mundane but common to everyone there and as fraught with meaning as you want it to be. Then everyone would share their work. I'd do a shaping or an examination, not a critique. I'd talk about where the piece was going, what it could lead to. I did a lot of workshops, at least 15 to 20, with groups from six to 150 participants.

**NEA:** You've performed *Beyond Glory* at U.S. military bases around the world—what was that experience like?

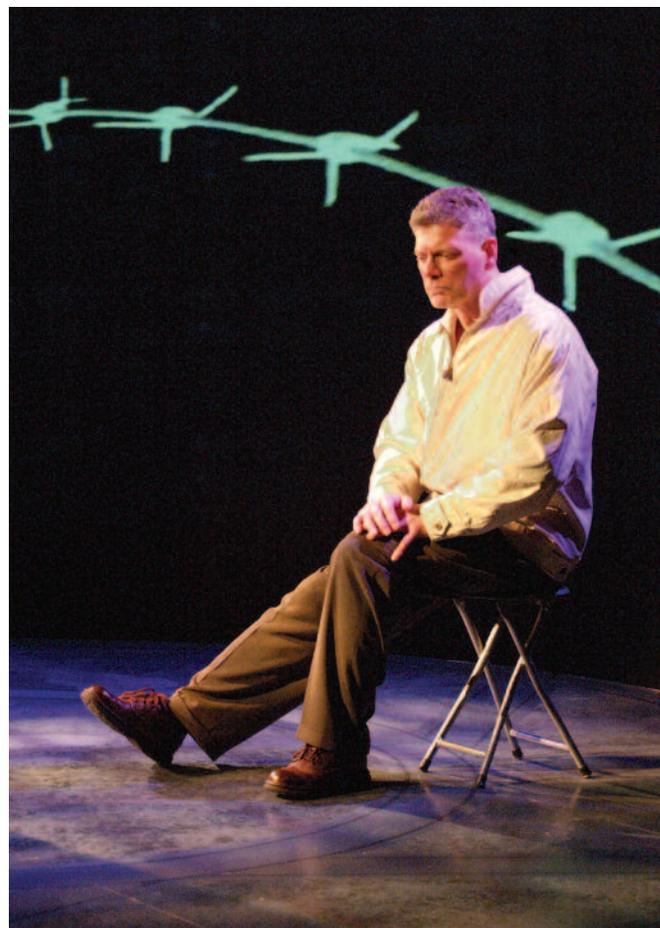
**LANG:** It was pretty exciting. You get a real sense of the vastness of our military network and how longstanding

it is in some places. The tour was me and a trunk—theater at its most elemental. It was the kind of tour I'd always wanted to do. I was doing three performances in one day in some places. It was taxing and gratifying. It's always gratifying to bring theater to people who don't always see it. And for me, it was an exposure to a whole way of life different from mine. I performed in the hangar bay of the USS *Carl Vinson*. There were two F-18 hornets with their noses pointed right at the stage and a 40-foot U.S. flag behind me. As I stood in between the F-18s, I was on the most expensive set ever in the history of theater!

**NEA:** What's next for you?

**LANG:** I'm going to bring *Beyond Glory* to New York this coming season. I feel like it's played successfully everywhere from Washington, DC to Bahrain, so it's time it came to New York.

Lang portrays Medal of Honor recipient James Stockdale in a performance of *Beyond Glory*. Photo: Diane Williams.

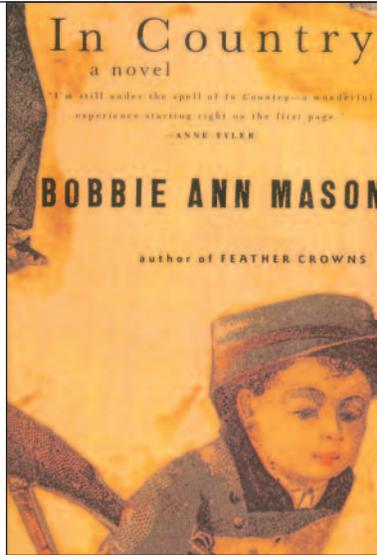


From the Archives

# Honoring Vietnam Veterans

**Although Operation Homecoming, Great American Voices,** and the Shakespeare in American Communities military tour are the Arts Endowment's first forays into bringing the arts directly to military bases, the NEA has in the past supported projects that affect military personnel and their families. The best known is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC. The Arts Endowment helped fund a site study and assisted with the design competition that drew 1,421 entries. Eight internationally recognized artists and designers judged the submissions. The competition was won by Maya Lin, then an undergraduate student at Yale University. A long slash of polished black granite set below ground level, the design, Lin said, is intended to evoke a sense of loss and provide a cathartic healing experience. Robert Doubek, an Air Force intelligence officer in Vietnam in 1969 and co-founder of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, said "The memorial was designed to stimulate emotion and reflection. Visitors find themselves swept up in it, surrounded by it." Dedicated in 1982, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial has become one of the most visited sites in the nation's capital.

Sometimes the artists supported by the Arts Endowment produce work that unexpectedly touches military families. In 1983, Southern writer Bobbie Ann Mason received an NEA Literature Fellowship. With the grant money, Mason wrote over the following two years her first novel, *In Country*. The novel follows a high school girl's quest for knowledge about her father, who died in Vietnam just before she was born. Mason said of her book, "Because of the moment in our history, the subject struck a chord in many readers—especially high school and college students, and Vietnam veterans and their families. However, its appeal has not been limited to readers who would specifically identify with the story. In the 1980s, Vietnam emerged in our culture as a legitimate and compelling topic for discussion, rather than something to be hidden in shame. I am proud to say that my



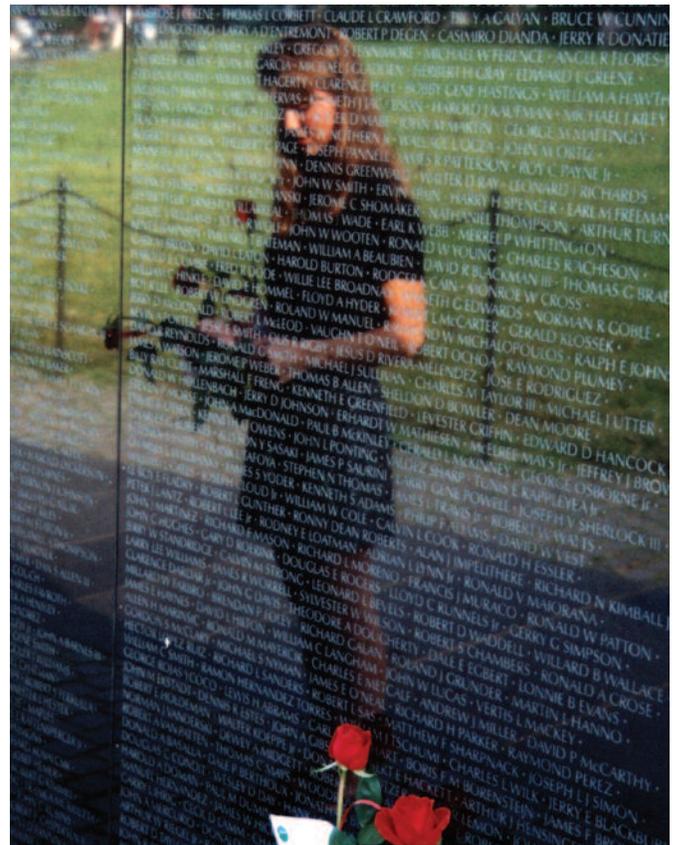
novel became part of that national discussion."

In 1988, the book was made into a movie, and director Norman Jewison used the Western Kentucky chapter of the Vietnam Veterans of America as advisors and participants in the film. "Because of this cooperation," said Mason, "many Vietnam vets who had not yet been able to speak up about their experiences found an outlet for their voices, something that told their story and helped to give them pride

and dignity."

Mason later participated in the Operation Homecoming initiative, leading a workshop at Camp Lejeune in Jacksonville, North Carolina, in July 2004. The most recent edition of *In Country* includes an afterword by Mason about her Operation Homecoming experience.

**Above: Courtesy of Viking Penguin; Below: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Photo: Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund.**



## In the News

# Chairman Gioia Visits Connecticut

**On May 30, NEA Chairman Dana Gioia** toured arts facilities in southwestern Connecticut after speaking at a press conference that kicked off an Arts Endowment grants workshop for local arts organizations. U.S. Representative Christopher Shays of Connecticut's 4th District hosted the event at Silvermine Guild Arts Center, an historic gallery, artists' guild, performance venue, and school in New Canaan. More than 40 representatives from the local arts community attended the press event and workshop, led by the NEA's Director of State and Regional Programs, John Ostrout.

At the press conference Chairman Gioia explained the purpose of the workshop. "The National Endowment for the Arts is committed to supporting the arts in communities throughout the country," said Chairman Gioia. "I am delighted to be here in New Canaan today to encourage local arts organizations to apply for federal grants."

In addition to remarks from Chairman Gioia and



**Chairman Gioia tours the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum with Harry Philbrick, the museum's director, and U.S. Representative Christopher Shays.**

**Photo: Terri Garneau.**

Congressman Shays, Elaine Carroll of the Stamford Symphony Orchestra, Dr. Donald Rainone of the Music and Arts Center for Humanity in Bridgeport (a 2005 Coming Up Taller award recipient), and Jennifer Aniskovich, Executive Director of the Connecticut Commission on the

Arts each offered their perspectives on the value of the NEA's work and the importance of the arts to the individual spirit and well-being of a community.

Following a docent-led tour of Silvermine, Chairman Gioia, Congressman Shays, and Aniskovich visited the Westport Country Playhouse, which had been transformed from a leather factory into a theater in 1931. The group's next stop was Ridgefield's Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, where they viewed Anselm Kiefer's *Velimir Chlebnikov*, a series of 30 large-scale paintings housed in a Kiefer-designed steel pavilion.

Congressman Shays and Chairman Gioia rejoined the workshop attendees for lunch and shared poems, bringing the day full circle.

## NEA Grants Workshops in New York and Illinois

On May 15, U.S. Representative Randy Kuhl of New York's 29th District hosted an NEA grants workshop in Elmira, New York. Held at Elmira College, approximately 60 representatives from local arts organizations participated in the workshop, led by NEA Senior Deputy Chairman Eileen Mason.

Congressman Kuhl also announced that the Corning Museum of Glass was awarded an NEA Challenge America grant of \$10,000 to support the translation of the museum's audio guides into Spanish and Mandarin.

Mason also traveled to Peoria, Illinois, for a July 7 grants workshop in Illinois's 18th District, hosted by

U.S. Representative Ray LaHood. More than 150 participants from local arts agencies convened at the Lakeview Museum of Arts and Sciences for the workshop, led by Mason and Patrice Walker Powell, NEA Director of Local Arts Agencies and Challenge America.

Congressman LaHood cited the importance of the arts as a way of drawing people to a community and creating more opportunities within that community.

At each workshop, participants learned the process of applying for an Arts Endowment grant, including eligibility requirements and deadlines, and opportunities for future participation in NEA initiatives.

## Operation Homecoming

### An Excerpt from “Purple-Hearted”

U.S. Army Reserve Staff Sergeant Jack Lewis

He’s young enough to be my son.  
Annoying enough, too.

When I beat on his hooch door to wake him up, he was his typical floppy-jointed, addle-headed, eye-rolling self—but he had known what the mission was since the night before.

Yuse was headed downtown to broadcast pro-election messages over our “Long Range Acoustical Device.”

“Be at the office no later than zero-seven-thirty,” I told him before throwing on a uniform to go there myself.

I was closing in on a peak experience of blood pressure when he slouched through the door at 0729.

“I took the trailer off.”

“Oh,” I said, surprised at his initiative. “How we doin’ on fuel?”

“I filled it last night.”

“Damn, Yuse. I hardly know you!”

I dropped him down at Apache’s hangar, and off he went into Tall’Afar, but I never went out on my mission. After briefing the squadron commander, I ran into the battle captain.

He said, “It’s good you’re here. Yuse’s your guy, right? We got a report he was shot in the neck—”

“WHAT?”

“—but apparently he was wounded in the hand. A fragment hit him in the chin, and they thought he had a neck wound.”

I went to the aid station to wait. Yuse couldn’t be evac’d immediately because Apache’s combat power needed to stay and fight. Then, after Apache’s CO rolled his own vehicle out to the castle to pick up my soldier, they hit an IED on the return trip. When A66 finally rolled in and dropped ramp, my kid soldier was sitting inside,

holding up a bloody bulb of gauze the size of his head.

The first words out of his mouth were, “I’m alright, sergeant.”

Yuse was running the LRAD when the castle came under fire. He put down his MP3, picked up his rifle, and took up a security position along the battlements. When the sniper found him, the neck-aimed bullet hit him in his forward hand, bounced off his rifle and dug into his armored vest with a heavyweight punch. A fragment of the bullet jacket flew up and cut his chin to the bone. Infantry and commo soldiers gave him buddy aid. He wheezed pretty hard, but he stayed alert — and he never complained.

What Yuse did do, after he was shot: He trained up a commo sergeant to run the LRAD and sustain his mission until evac. He secured his sensitive items and PSYOP equipment. He told everybody not to worry.

At the aid station, he only said this: “These elections better work. They better get democracy, and freedom, and their rights, and hot chicks in tight jeans. I hope I didn’t take this bullet for nothing.”

Specialist Josh Yuse was bandaged, given a bit of morphine, and then evac’d to the 67th Combat Support Hospital by a Black Hawk helo.

I made sure he had his IBA with the souvenir slug in one pocket, helmet, coat and the bloody shirt with his name on it. They can wash it out at the hospital. They do it all the time.

I’ll miss Yuse here, and not just for the work he does, which is plenty if I remind him often enough. I’ll miss his pulling dumb stunts, working so hard at not working that it exhausts him just to think about it, dropping to do pushups just because I gave him a hard look.

He’s a near-total dingbat with no sense of planning who still gets things done. A lazy sloth who works like a sled dog. A good kid with bad manners. A graceful athlete who trips over his own size twelves.

Mostly, he’s just too much of a goofy kid for me to have expected him to take this like a man.

Yuse didn’t want to deploy to Iraq. He wanted to chase women around Seattle, and go to college and find out what he wanted to be. He wanted to play video games, drink beer, and buy a Mustang.

Guys my age are supposed to gripe about how kids today are going to Hell in a hand basket, how there aren’t any standards anymore. After all, we’ve taken such good care of things.

Maybe it’s because guys my age usually work with guys my age. Guys Yuse’s age are just parts for the big machine in civilian life: laborers, clerks, apprentices. Yuse went from busboy to combat soldier.

I don’t want to hear any more about the passing of “The Greatest Generation.” Ain’t no generation better than his. Specialist Yuse didn’t just take it like a man. He took it like his brothers across the generations, and earned his flagon of mead at Valhalla or at least his pint of Bud at the local VFW. He took it like a soldier.

*After surgery in Landstuhl, Germany, Yuse was treated at Fort Bragg, NC. Lewis returned from Iraq to Washington State in 2005. He and Yuse still keep in touch.*

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1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW

Washington, DC 20506

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