Caleb Cage: Always Lost: A Meditation on War

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Last year on Veterans Day, I was proud to participate in a national roll call sponsored by the University of Nevada at the parade in Reno. At this event, a group of us volunteered to take turns reading the names of all of America’s fallen since the attacks on 9/11, pausing at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month for a moment of silence. There were over 6,000 casualties at that time and it took an entire day for our group to pay a proper tribute to our nation’s fallen.

A year later, the confirmed casualty count has grown to 6,600 patriots, and thanks to the continuing efforts of groups like “Always Lost” at Western Nevada College, none of our fallen has been forgotten.

“Always Lost: A Meditation on War” began in the fall of 2008 when Western Nevada College Professor Don Carlson was shocked by the annual New York Times publication of pictures of America’s casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan.

For him, the pages in the newspaper were not just a reminder of the cost of the war, but also the realization that the current wars were perhaps the “most impersonal wars ever fought.”

His comment was an accurate description of what many call the civilian-military divide, especially with fewer than two percent of the population serving in uniform during the nation’s all-volunteer forces during its longest wars.

Carlson took his realization to his colleague Marilee Świrczek, then an English professor at the college, to find a way to bring the combat experiences of so few of our fellow country men and women home to the broader public.

Since they first developed the idea, the project has grown far beyond their already noble initial vision into a remarkable and powerful presentation on the cost of war. At the center of the “Always Lost” exhibit is a collection of individual pictures of the over 6,500 casualties on the Wall of the Dead, which is constantly under review and in the process of being updated.

They have also received permission to include Pulitzer Prize-winning combat photographs by Dallas Morning News photographers David Leeson and Cheryl Diaz Meyer taken in their display.

Finally, because the idea grew out of Professor Świrczek’s writing class, the exhibit also includes interviews, poetry, and stories from student veterans studying at Western Nevada College at the time.

“Always Lost” was officially installed in 2009 and has received an incredible response ever since.

They have received grants from the Nevada Arts Council, the National Endowment for the Arts and the Carson Nugget, allowing them to create a traveling version of the exhibit, further refine their work, and to support the work of volunteers and staff dedicated to this project like Amy Roby and Kevin Burns.

These generous grants have been reinforced by national attention, as the traveling exhibit has been all over the
country, and even invited to Washington, D.C. by U.S. Sens. Harry Reid and Dean Heller.

I have had the extraordinary honor of introducing the exhibit and speaking to its value on several occasions.

On a stage in Carson City last September, shortly after Sen. Heller appropriately called the project a “national treasure,” I echoed his remarks, adding that I believe “Always Lost: A Meditation on War” to be a fitting memorial for this generation’s wars. National memorials for the wars of previous generations are fitting for their time in history, their place in the broader culture and their meaning to those who survived, and “Always Lost” does the same for this generation. It is multi-media; it is a tangible representation of online memorials developed at the grassroots level around the world; and in accomplishing Professor Carlson’s vision, it bridges the experiential gap between those who have served in the current wars and the broader civilian society. I believe that it is historic and authentic, and that all of us in Nevada should do everything we can to embrace it and support it.

Having worked with and experienced the heartfelt dedication of the group of volunteers and staff behind the “Always Lost” project for some time now, I have to say that this is one of the greatest tributes to our fallen I have ever seen. Equally important, it gives us all an opportunity to recognize what the war has cost our all-volunteer military and their families with this poignant collection of photographs, poems and prose. Because of their work we can know that the tremendous sacrifices of our fallen will never be forgotten, on Veterans Day and every day.

- Caleb S. Cage is the Executive Director of the Nevada Office of Veterans Services, appointed by Gov. Brian Sandoval. You can read his blog at http://veterans.nv.gov/blog.