

Exhibit of daily life among troops draws military

By Travis Loller
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NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Ashley Danault had to compose herself before she entered the gallery housing Steve Mumford's "War Journals."

It was easy for the Iraq veteran to imagine what memories might be conjured up by the paintings and drawings of daily life among American troops that Mumford created during his eight trips to Iraq and Afghanistan.

"I wanted to come and by the same token I didn't want to come, because ... it's kind of difficult," she said, her voice cracking with emotion.

Yet once inside, it wasn't the more dramatic paintings — such as one of an amputated leg in a Baghdad emergency room, bones protruding and foot grotesquely swollen — that struck Danault as she strolled through the exhibit at Nashville's Frist Center for the Visual Arts. Instead, it was a simple black and white painting Mumford had created of a memorial service for a fallen soldier.

Danault immediately engaged with the painting, which portrays the dead soldier's boots on top of a stepped platform, the point of his rifle stuck into the boots and his helmet placed on the rifle's butt. It reminded Danault of a similar service she witnessed for a lost helicopter crew chief named D.J.

It is that kind of connection with images — as doorways into personal memories — that the veterans support group Soldiers and Families Embraced hopes will help veterans to open up about their own experiences in war zones.

It often proves too much for a soldier to just talk in general about what they have lived through, said Jodi McCullah, director of the group, whose acronym is SAFE.

"One particular image opens a door to conversation," McCullah said. "It doesn't seem so overwhelming."

The message is an important one for Danault, a volunteer for SAFE, which is encouraging the families it works with to see "War Journals" as a way to begin conversations, especially between veterans and their non-veteran spouses.

SAFE, located near Fort Campbell, a sprawling Army base on the Tennessee-Kentucky line, has helped train docents and volunteers at the Frist on how to cope with veterans who might have an emotional reaction to the



Veteran Aaron Voris and his wife, Stephanie, look over images from the "Steve Mumford's War Journals: 2003-2013" exhibit at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Nashville, Tenn., on April 10, 2014.
STEVEN S. HARMAN, THE TENNESSEAN/AP

exhibit.

Mumford's work, on display through June 8, is being juxtaposed with a collection of early 19th-century etchings by the Spanish master Francisco de Goya in an adjacent Frist exhibit titled "Goya: The Disasters of War."

When Danault steps closer to Mumford's painting of the memorial service, she notices that some of the artist's brush strokes "are so much heavier than others."

"It just makes me think, 'I wonder if those are (Mumford's) emotions that were coming through ... how difficult it was for him to put this image on paper in the midst of everything else that was going on.'"

Speaking of the painting during an earlier tour for veterans and the news media, Mumford explained that during the memorial service, someone played taps and there was a roll call that included the fallen soldier. His name was called three times, to silence.



"There was not a dry eye, and I was crying myself, while I was drawing," he said.

Veteran Aaron Voris said he was drawn to a pencil sketch of an exhausted soldier, eyelids drooping, eyes staring into space.

In Afghanistan, he said, "we were lucky if we got maybe 4 ½ hours' sleep from them trying to either overrun our base or mortar our base with God knows what they were shooting at us."

Voris, 25, walks with a cane and has memory problems as a result of three separate concussive blasts during his time as a heavy-machine gunner in the Paktika province.

Veteran Aaron Voris and his wife, Stephanie, view "Steve Mumford's War Journals: 2003-2013" exhibit at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Nashville, Tenn., on April 10, 2014.
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His wife, Stephanie Voris, said the exhibit has given the couple something to talk about.

Because most troops don't have photos of themselves out on patrol, the exhibit's images help family members to understand more about their experiences, said SAFE director McCullah.

But Danault said she wasn't ready to bring her family along yet.

"You can tell them all day long, but when they match up stories with a picture — I don't know if that's something I would want in their heads," she said.