

# Real to Reel: Veterans Impacting Cinema

Many veterans are entering the world of entertainment after service

By Annie Nelson and Karen Kraft

After World War II, a wave of combat veterans came to Hollywood. While some were resuming careers, others were seeking to forge one. Over the next few decades, the combined work of these veterans changed cinema forever, with many achieving legendary status, such as John Ford (*Battle for Midway*), Frank Capra (*It's a Wonderful Life*), and William Wyler (*Ben-Hur*).

Fast forward to today. A new generation of veterans returning from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are making their own marks on Hollywood. And they are finding mentorship and support from other military veterans already established in the business. Some of these veterans are Oscar nominated or Emmy winners, others are working in network television or inside studios, while still others are students or in transition—but all are part of a group called Veterans in Media & Entertainment (VME).

## VME Begins

VME began as a networking group in 2012, where veterans could meet and learn about the industry. VME has since evolved to serve as the premier alumni group for veterans working in all aspects of the business, and across all studios, networks, agencies, production companies, guilds, and unions.

While most of its 3,500 members are concentrated in Los Angeles, emerging chapters can be found across the country. Active duty members join to gain access to the closed web platforms, where they can learn about the industry and build relationships before transitioning out.

According to a LinkedIn report,



TIM YAO

Photo By: Tim Yao

Gary Sinise, Emmy & Golden Globe-winning actor, *Forrest Gump*, *Apollo 13*, *Criminal Minds: Beyond Borders*

more than 85 percent of jobs rely on personal connections. For veterans, when they leave service, they are behind their peer group in whatever second career they choose to follow. For veterans focused on media and entertainment, VME serves as an accelerator by providing education and event opportunities to connect veterans to each other and to Hollywood.

Over the years, seven distinct VME programs were formed: Guest Speaker Series, Jobs & Internships, Education, Casting Project, Screening Series, Networking Events, and Community Outreach. Because



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Stan Lee, co-creator, *Spider-Man*, *Thor*, *Avengers*, *X-Men*



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VME members on the red carpet at the Annual Grants Banquet at the Hollywood Foreign Press Association in 2017. VME was proud to be the first veterans group to receive a grant from HFPA.



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Franklin Leonard, founder, The Black List



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Jon Huertas, former Air Force parajumper, actor, *This Is Us*, *Castle*, *Generation Kill*

VME is almost entirely run by volunteers, each program is in a different stage of development, and the group relies on donations and key grants from generous supporters like the Hollywood Foreign Press Association, Got Your Six, and 21st Century Fox.

### Hollywood Responds

The great news is that Hollywood has enthusiastically stepped up to help VME with its Jobs & Internships and other programs.

Last year, through the work of our nearly 30 tireless volunteers, more than 100 veterans found jobs or internships, and more than 100 veterans were cast in roles from television commercials to feature films. Allies include: Lionsgate, HBO, 21st Century Fox, Endemol Shine North America, 44 Blue, A+E Networks, CBS, The Ebersol Lanigan Company, DreamWorks Animation, Live Nation Entertainment (including its House of Blues, Ticketmaster, Insomniac, and Roc Nation groups), NBC Universal, Paramount Pictures, Sony Pictures Entertainment, United Talent Agency, Valhalla Entertainment, A Really Good Home Pictures, and Viacom.

The American Legion is a core partner. Palisades Post 283 awarded a crucial grant for the growth of the Jobs & Internship Program, and Hollywood Post 43 provides regular meeting space and access to their new, world-class theater.

### Guest Speaker Series & Educational Events

VME has hosted more than 50 guest speakers, such as Jon Voight, Gary Sinise, Adam Goldberg, Gale Anne Hurd, Ron Meyer, Bruce Cohen, Dara Weintraub, Eric Heisserer, Mykelti Williamson, Graham Yost, and more.

Guest speakers are often VME members themselves, such as the late Marvel legend Stan Lee (Army, playwright), a WWII veteran; Jon Huertas (Air Force, pararescue jumper), an actor in *This Is Us* and *Castle*; and Ric Arthur (Navy, R&D liaison), a



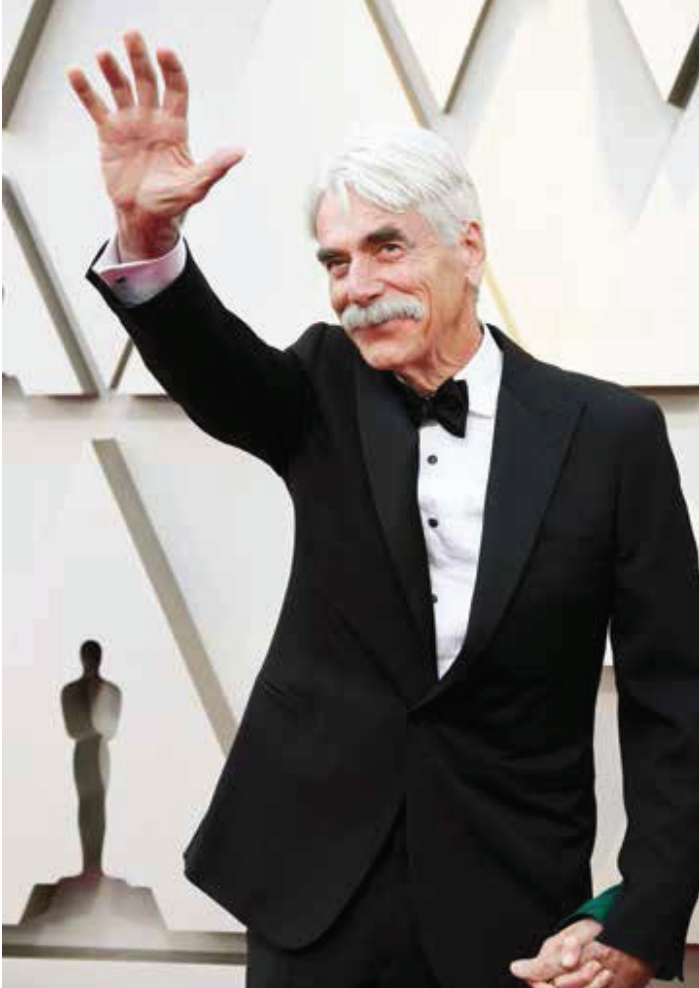
Jon Voight, a VME guest speaker, pinned rank on VME Director of Career Placement (volunteer) LTC Scotty Autin, with his wife Barbara (former Army and VME Volunteer Director of Jobs & Internships) and their children. Both LTC Autin and Barbara are West Point graduates.

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More than 300 VME members host guest speakers Athena Wickham (executive producer, *Westworld*) and Meher Tatna (president, Hollywood Foreign Press Association) in November 2018. The event took place at The American Legion Hollywood Post 43 in their new world-class theater.

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Sam Elliott is narrating *Honor Guard*, a film by VME members Ethan Morse and Neal Schrodetzki of Time to Kill Productions.



former writer on *NCIS* and *The Last Ship*. TJ Brady (Army, armor) is a writer/producer with credits on *Narcos*, *Animal Kingdom*, and *Shooter*. He's been a guest speaker and taught such classes as *How a Writer's Room Works* and brought industry guests to help out, like producer Rob Hanning (*Frasier* and *Hawaii Five-O*).

Marc Porterfield (Army, air defense artillery) is an Emmy-nominated producer of *Fear the Dead: Passage* who also gives back to his fellow veterans by teaching entry-level line producing classes.

### Industry Partners Join In

The Hollywood Foreign Press Association gave VME a key grant for \$30,000 toward its internship program, as well as 100 Film Independent passes valuing \$10,000. VME's industry partners offer a variety of classes, from Resume Workshop & Mock Interviews with Lionsgate Human Resource representatives to a Comparative Camera Technology Workshop at the Camera Division.

Kelly Bayett's Barking Owl and VO Cares' Jill Kershaw offer a voice-over class, with top casting directors mentoring veterans. The recorded demos are cleaned up and given to the veteran for their reels. The class has a value of more than \$1,500 per person, and members have landed national commercial campaigns as a direct result.

Civilian Ryan Black, VP of Acquisitions and Development, at Grindstone Entertainment Group holds an annual Pitchfest for a dozen veteran screenwriters.

National Alliance of Latino Independent Producers (NALIP) provides over a dozen scholarships throughout the year. The Southwestern Law School's Entertainment and Arts Legal Clinic provides legal support to emerging veteran filmmakers for free, while providing experience to law students under the supervision of attorneys.

### Forging Ahead

Rebecca Murga is currently leading the creation of a VME Connect Online Platform, which

will host a job and internship board, casting notices, and serve as a resource for veterans to learn from each other. In the meantime, the VME success stories are on the march.

Enrique Rico Diaz (USMC, Ret) is a producer of *DeKalb Elementary*, which was nominated for a 2018 Oscar for Best Live-Action Short. As a result of networking at VME, he has two features in development, including the adaptation of his award-winning military drama short, *Jeremy*.

Members Ethan Morse and Neal Schrodetzki founded Time to Kill Productions, which is currently developing *Honor Guard*, featuring Academy Award® nominated Sam Elliott as narrator.

Writer-director Henry "Hank" Hughes is a twice-deployed former Army Captain. His American Film Institute (AFI) thesis *Day One*, based largely on his experiences as a cavalry scout leader in Afghanistan, received critical acclaim and was nominated for a 2016 Academy Award® for Best Live Action Short Film.

Member Ryan Binse, a Navy veteran and producing student at AFI, landed an internship at HBO in current TV programming says, "Two years ago, I was fixing electrical boxes on ships. Now, thanks to VME, I'm reading screenplays for the most award-winning distributor in television."

Rashaan Dozier-Escalante completed an internship at HBO, where she worked on the hit show *Westworld*, followed by an internship with TNT's development program. Rashaan was recently selected to be in the Writers Mentoring Program at CBS and credits her internship experience with helping her gain the experience she needed to make the leap. Rashaan also continues to give back to VME, moderating a panel with guest speaker Athena Wickham last November and even making donations as she can.

"Hollywood is a hard place," says Barbara Autin, Volunteer Director of Jobs & Internships. "Anything we can do to help each other makes a difference."