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Combat Papermakers Drew Cameron and Drew Matott: An Interview in Two Voices

by Barbara Gates, Nov 30, -1

Papermaking is an art of transformation. Papermakers recycle local plants, old clothes, and rags—break them down and reconstitute the fiber as paper. In a radical new version of “swords into ploughshares,” papermakers Drew Cameron, an Iraq veteran, and Drew Matott, an activist artist, have taught 100s of war veterans to slice up their combat uniforms and to transform them into paper. Cameron and Matott call their process “liberating rag” and the fiber that results “combat paper.”

Invented in 105 AD in the court of the Chinese emperor, the art of papermaking gradually spread west along the Silk Road, traveling with merchants, explorers and warriors, through the Chinese Empire to the Arab world, spreading through Europe and the Americas. Since founding the Combat Paper Project in 2007, Cameron and Matott have traveled countless miles across the United States from Seattle to Key West, from Boston to Los Angeles, with a portable studio and offered papermaking workshops at universities, museums, and army bases throughout the U.S. and abroad.

The Combat Paper Project reverses the mentality of *combat* to that of *collaboration.* Veterans find their stories in the fiber itself and, through the papermaking process, exchange those stories with each other. They activate their paper with poetry and images, thus adding layers of content. Opening the workshops to all, Cameron and Matott invite not only veterans, but their family members, as well as families of soldiers who have been killed in war and other civilians to collaborate, further enriching the dialogue.

The idea was born of the synergy between these two men—a veteran and a civilian—who became friends and colleagues. In 2004, 22-year-old Cameron took a hand papermaking workshop from 27-year-old Matott at Community College of Vermont in Burlington. The contrasting histories and skills of the two were essential to the collaboration. Cameron brought his passion for plants and trees, his skill at making things from scratch, and his history as a soldier fresh from active duty in Iraq. Matott brought a visionary propensity to think outside the box; his study of etching, lithography, and book arts; and a charismatic playfulness he’d honed doing street theater.

By its very nature, hand papermaking involves collaboration, even with the fiber itself. The fiber chosen by a papermaker has its own history. A papermaker engages in transformative conversations with the fiber, particularly when she has profound connections with the articles being pulped, such as her combat uniforms.

In September 201l, I participated in a three-day Combat Paper workshop sponsored by the ceramics department at UC Berkeley. Veterans from the wars in Iraq, Desert Storm, and Vietnam,

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along with UC Berkeley art students and a few civilians like myself, gathered in a relaxed studio space. From the start we were swept up in collaborating energy, “cutting rag” together. The two Drews circulated—Cameron in his Iraq war hat, a sky-blue T-shirt with images of pine trees, his gaze disarmingly direct; Matott with his rolled up jeans and crooked smile. We workshop mates helped each other out by slicing up each others “rag” or teaching each other to “pull sheets” while swapping our stories.

At my worktable, an Iraq vet and a Vietnam War medic cut up their uniforms side-by-side and exchanged tales of combat and the veteran movements against war. The Iraq vet took some dark green pulp made from the Vietnam vet’s uniform and sculpted it into a star which he worked into a tender wet sheet of beige paper made from his own Desert Cammies. In Combat Paper workshops, generations of veterans from wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Desert Storm, Bosnia, Haiti, Vietnam, Korea, and World War II have collaborated with each other.

Unexpected alchemy can come of collaboration. At UC Berkeley, each participant brought his or her own fiber, saturated with personal story—uniforms from Iraq and Vietnam, someone’s T-shirts, someone else’s pajamas. I brought copies of World War II letters: love letters to my mom written by my dad, a naval officer in North Africa and the Pacific, and letters from my step dad to his parents when he was a foot soldier in Germany. When the Drews mixed the pulp from my two dads’ letters with pulp from the Vietnam and Iraq uniforms, the resulting paper revealed flecks of Vietnam green and Iraq beige. Little did I know when I arrived as a journalist to the workshop that I would emerge three days later not only having turned family letters into art but having taken apart and realigned something inside my own heart—about my dads, about love, and about war.

At Combat Paper workshops, vets who come to destroy their uniforms, who are ashamed or enraged by their service, exchange views with those who are honoring their uniforms, making paper to commemorate their service or grieve fellow soldiers who were slain. Turning combat inside out, there are combat paper collaborations between ex-combatants and families of combatants in Northern Ireland and in Israel between Israelis and Palestinians.

Combat Paper has received grants and institutional support from universities, museums, libraries, and activist groups from Harvard University to the Beat Museum in San Francisco to the United Kingdom Art Council in London. It has been exhibited in shows throughout the United States, Australia, Japan, and England and been archived in special collections from Princeton University to the Library of Congress to the Bavarian State Library in Munich, Germany.

In June 2011, I interviewed Drew Cameron in Berkeley, CA, when he passed through the Bay Area doing workshops, and again in April 2012 once he settled in San Francisco. I interviewed Drew Matott in September 2011 during the Combat Paper workshop at UC Berkeley. The interview in two voices presented here explores the synergy in the friendship and the creative collaboration between these two activist papermakers and the collaborative power of transforming combat uniforms into paper.
Barbara Gates
May 2012

DREW CAMERON

Gates: The potency of pulping a military uniform comes in part from the history and symbolism held in the fiber. What does the uniform mean to you?

Cameron: I was born into the military, and my father was a career officer in the Air Force. So I grew up seeing uniforms. The first uniform I saw was my father’s when we were living at the Plattsburgh Air Force Base in Plattsburgh, New York. For part of his career, he was a navigator. So he would come home in a flight suit, an Odie green onesie.

I began training in August 2000 and was issued my first uniform, the Woodland Camouflage Uniform (WCU). Over my heart it said, “U.S. Army.” In American culture, you’re taught to believe that you’re this beautiful individual snowflake; you can do anything you want. Then you get in the military, and it’s taken away from you. You’re stripped—literally stripped naked—shaved, and then given a number. You’re told how to walk, how to talk, how to tie your boots, how to wear your pants right. A lot of the military gear doesn’t fit well because it’s built really crudely, in three body types, small, medium, and large, and you’re either one of those or you’re not. So you have to adjust to the uniform instead of

it adjusting to you. Mainly, the uniform symbolizes a homogenization of identity.

When I was on base stateside, I would show up to first formation in my uniform for the day, spit-shined boots, my pants with a tight crease. Starching was expensive, but if you didn't starch your uniform and it looked wrinkly, you got in trouble. Even though the tag on the uniform says "Do not starch" because it clogs the breathability, you still had to starch it. It was like being in cardboard. You would literally have to break your way through the sleeve, ripping apart the stickiness of the starch. You'd have nothing in your pockets, because then it would show.

I also had a field uniform that didn't starch. It was wrinkly … and I could fill all my pockets; I used it. Of course, I never starched my uniform overseas because I wanted to do what needed to be done.

Oftentimes, how a soldier will be judged depends on the appearance of the uniform—how well their boots are shined, how tight the creases are on their pants and along their shoulders, if it's pressed and looks clean and the patches are sewn on correctly. Going through the ritual to look "soldierly" and making sure you appear like everybody else is part of a methodical re-socialization—removing individualism.

Gates: With all of the insignia and medals, the uniform is imbued with the complex hierarchy of the military. Could you talk about that?

Cameron: Your position in the hierarchy is prominently displayed. As a sergeant, mine was three chevrons—on the collar, on the helmet, and in the dress uniform, on the sleeves. The patch on the right, on the opposite pocket from the one over your heart, says your name, in my case: "Cameron." If you were another soldier, you'd look at my rank, you'd look at my name, and you'd address me accordingly. Of course, there's always a chain of command. I was what's called a low-level NCO (non-commissioned officer), or junior NCO, so really low on the totem pole. In the army, you're referred to most often by just your last name, like, "Cameron, do this or do that." But when you get to a certain rank, then they have to call you by that rank. "Sergeant Cameron."

On your left shoulder is your unit patch, the insignia of the battalion or the brigade that you're a part of. Mine was the 75th Field Artillery Brigade. On your right shoulder is the American flag. After 9/11, a ridiculous amount of nationalism was coming down and the flag became mandatory. The flag is oriented in reverse, the blue with the stars in the upper right corner to symbolize that the American military is never retreating; we're always advancing.

If you've been deployed within the war zone, then also on the right, you wear the combat patch. I had what they call a sandwich, the same patch on both sides.

When we were about to be sent to Iraq in April of 2003, our Woodland Camouflage (WCU), tricolor camouflage in dark greens, was replaced by a different uniform, the Desert Camouflage (DCU), representing our new status. It's not that I exactly wanted to go to Iraq. I just thought I had to go. When I enlisted, I took an oath, and I took it seriously. In fact, I took being a soldier really seriously. I would do what I was asked because that was my place. I'd trained for war for almost three years and I did want to know what war was like. This change to the desert uniform symbolized we were about to be sent to war, and getting that uniform was real exciting.

Because the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have continued on so long, the military has shifted the uniform. Since 2006 you wear the same uniform stateside and overseas side, the Army Combat Uniform (ACU), which is a blue-gray kind of digital camouflage. As soon as you're back from your deployment, you're training for your next one. Even when you're back in the States, you're still in the war mindset, the mission-first mindset.

Gates: You've talked a lot about the symbolism of the uniform—enforcement of the hierarchy, homogenization of identity, reinforcement of the war mindset, of extreme nationalism. From what I understand, you see those symbols in a negative way, as destructive of individualism. Do you see positive value in some of the symbolism of the uniform? When soldiers cherish their uniforms?

Cameron: There are certainly positive associations for me too. The uniform is a symbolized manifestation of accomplishment, first off, the accomplishment just to have served your nation. "Yes, I served." Especially if you've accomplished specific training or received certain awards or recognition,

you can look to your uniform and your accomplishments are represented symbolically..

On your uniform you might be wearing an award named after a brave soldier who threw himself on a grenade thrown in his tent and died to save all his buddies or someone who killed a bunch of people and died heroically. Through the symbol of awards, you're measuring yourself against these soldiers. So the uniform is not just a fabric symbolizing your experience, and the army culture, but also this forever war lineage that dates back to the beginning of this country. It symbolizes all those who picked up a rifle and marched off into the frozen fields to get shot in the face.

Gates: With all the symbolism of the uniform, the weight of personal associations and memories, how do soldiers and veterans respond to the invitation to pulp their uniforms?

Cameron: We come across a lot of veterans who don't have their uniforms anymore because they've burned them as a cleansing ritual. Some have simply sold them to military supply stores for gas money to get back home. Some have thrown them away. But for those who still have the uniform, to be able to destroy it … transform it … is very powerful. I mean, for some people, it's definitely destroying the symbol in a very aggressive way. That's totally fine with me.

The vast majority of people have some positive associations with their uniforms. Some want to commemorate it with amazing reverence and diligence. I'm fine with that too. A lot of veterans at workshops come from the perspective of "I'm proud to be whatever, let's say, proud retired Air Force. Maybe they print their unit patch on the paper they make. The paper could become another plaque or award.

But to transform the uniform into paper, to remake it, to change all previous relationships to it into your own, and to change your relationship to the memories brought up by it—how you were treated, the things that you've done or seen or done to others—that's what Combat Paper is interested in.

Gates: You pulped your own uniform in May 2007. Can you remember the last time you wore it before you took it out to make it into paper? What do you remember about your own blouse and pants, the smell, the feel?

Cameron: My last time in that uniform was when I flew from Kuwait to Cyprus to Ireland, then to Maine and on to Fort Hood, Texas. It was December 2, 2003, and I was returning from an eight-month deployment in Iraq. My uniform was mostly a dirty mess, full of oil, dirt, a lot of sand and soil. I had to wash all my clothes by hand in a bucket. So as soon as I would dip it, the water would turn murky brown. It probably smelled like tobacco and had tobacco-spit stains. And my rank would start to be bleached out, and all the patches were losing some of their colors.

I came back on a plane with another unit, and only a few from my own. When we arrived in Texas, children and families filled the bleachers, "Welcome home, whatever unit it was." It felt really uncomfortable and fake. Then, when we finally got into Fort Sill in Oklahoma, it was really late, like 2:30 in the morning. There was a skeleton crew who were forced to rouse themselves and come to greet us when we arrived. Everything about war could be pulled into that moment. It was unfulfilling. It was anticlimactic. It was nothing of what I expected. There was this shroud of fakeness and song and dance to it all. It felt perfectly fitting. The whole deployment was like that.

Gates: When you got back from Iraq what was your frame of mind?

Cameron: I boozed a lot; I was super aggravated and anxious. I felt like I had to get the hell out of somewhere, but I didn't know where that was and I didn't know where to go. We'd gone back to training in the field, which seemed like a waste of time, because we were training on the weapons system that we never did use in the war. It seemed meaningless. Most all of us didn't have our heart in it anymore.

A transition officer I met with suggested I join the National Guard. It would be with a unit that was non-deployable and I'd only have to go once a month. He suggested Vermont where the education benefits for my service would be really good.

By the middle of August in 2004, I moved to Vermont and started going to classes at the

Community College of Vermont in Burlington, where Drew Mattot was the audiovisual tech person. One day, I saw a little printout sign on the door of Drew's studio that said, "Papermaking Workshop, Saturday, $10." As a teen, I'd learned papermaking basics from my father, who'd taken up making paper after retiring from the Air Force. I thought, Hell, yeah! I'll make some paper. I haven't done that in forever.

Within no time, I was at the studio hanging out with Drew. We'd meet once a week, and we'd make paper. My dad had taught me Japanese-style papermaking he'd studied at the University of Iowa with Tim Barrett, and now I was learning Western style from Drew. When I came back from Iraq, I had needed something, but I just hadn't known what I needed. So I found paper again and became obsessed with it.

DREW MATOTT

Gates: The idea of making paper from combat uniforms evolved through your collaboration with Drew Cameron. Your meeting was certainly consequential for both of you, and now for a lot of other veterans. I have a sense you each provided something essential to the other.

Matott: When Drew took my $10 papermaking workshop, we hit it off. We worked together every Wednesday night, usually over a six-pack of beer, very casually telling stories.

Back in 1997 when I was about 20 and a student at Buffalo State, I'd been activated politically. The US sold arms to an army that began to commit genocide and then we were sending soldiers to fight that army. I'd woken up to militarism. I did a big art installation at the student union, including a statement on capitalism and war. By 2003, when the war in Iraq started, it felt like we were all living in a fascist regime where the democratic voice had no place. So, to be honest, I stuck my head in the sand. But when Drew and I started to work together, he'd say, "Ask me any questions. I would love to talk about my experiences." It was through that conversation that I became activated again politically: Oh yeah, we do have soldiers over there, and as a civilian I do have a responsibility to reach out to them.

Gates: So when you and Drew Cameron started hanging out on Wednesday nights, he rekindled your interest in soldiers and war. And you rekindled his interest in papermaking. What is it about papermaking, not just the technique but also the spirit of it, that you transmitted to him and that galvanizes you?

Matott: When I first learned to make paper, I really fell in love with all the transformative processes. I went into my closet and I pulled out my old shirts and started cutting them up. Then I started printing on them and using them to create a layer of personal content. My father had passed away. So I took his clothing and I pulped it, and I printed text that he had written and made a book of his poetry integrated with some of the images of him. Then I took blue jeans and pulped them, and I made pieces about blue-collar workers and militarism.

Instead of starting a piece with an idea, a piece started more with the rag or the source of the fiber. Literally, I remember walking around and seeing what people were wearing and realizing that their clothing had a story in it. They were wearing their stories.

Papermaking is an organic process. Sometimes you start with the material: you've got an idea of where a piece is going to go, and then it completely takes a left turn because something comes to you. The process is all about bringing the fiber into the studio, cutting it up, putting it in the beater. So you've got plenty of time to keep thinking it through as you go. Then once you've made the paper, you let it dry and maybe something evolves, another layer of content you want to add, images, words. . . . Instead of having something planned, you just let it happen.

With paper I allowed the transformative qualities of the process to give me room to explore and express myself, to dictate what was going to be said.

Gates: That's clearly essential in your veteran workshops, making space for the process. The approach seems to suit you temperamentally.

Matott: Actually, before I started making paper, I'd always been the type of person who had an idea then executed it. I thought the piece out first. Right before I decided to go to Buffalo, I'd toured classes at Goddard College. I'd gone to a philosophy class in the common room of one of the dorms. It must have been an hour that I sat there with the professor while students wandered in, making cereal, cooking eggs, chatting, and finally gathering around the table. The professor was just quiet and contemplative. I looked at him, wondering, What the hell is this? Finally I said, "So when does class begin?" He said, "Oh, but the class has already begun." That really took me by surprise. And had a big impact.

At that time the John Dewey style of education at Goddard didn't feel like it was a fit for me. The undergrad experience I chose involved very technical training: idea, concept, technique, execution, meet the deadline, go through a critique. It's much easier to dot your *i*'s and cross your *t*'s than to invent a new language. That's what the Goddard people were doing.

After my BFA, when I began teaching in Burlington and started the Green Door Studio, I definitely took from that Goddard experience. I wanted to create an environment of *it's already begun*. At the Green Door Studio, like the Combat Paper workshops, people show up, we cut rag, and we tell stories. Then we make paper, and everyone is getting to know each other. Through the collaborative process, there is bonding and relationships are formed.

DREW CAMERON

Gates: After you and Drew Matott started hanging out at the studio making paper together, something shifted for you. What was it?

Cameron: Once I found paper again, I couldn't stop. Late hours by myself in the winter, I was making paper … making books … and journals and giving them away. They were always blank, like I didn't have anything to say. That's all I did. I was just making paper, making paper, making paper.

Gates: So papermaking was healing for you even before you were consciously grappling with the traumas of war?

Cameron: Papermaking makes me happy. I enjoy the process. I was actually doing something constructive, making a physical object. I come from a family that believes in doing it yourself. We built the house, I built my own car, made furniture. The craft of papermaking is do it yourself, too. Also, I was interested in forestry and ecology and the outdoors. I could use the plants that were around me, forage them based on their different fibers, and manipulate them in such a way to use them as paper. I loved using salvaged things—or what is perceived as refuse—and remaking it into something that was usable. And, certainly, when I came back from Iraq and started making paper, it was good for me. The repetition is meditative. It's nice. It's really nice.

DREW MATOTT

Gates: Your life experiences and Drew Cameron's converged in an uncanny way, leading you to meet in the papermaking workshop and eventually to the idea of pulping a uniform. What else led up to that idea for you?

Mattot: Doing street interventions, for one thing. After a year of working with Drew in Vermont, I gave Drew the keys to the Green Door Studio and asked him to manage the space in my absence while I went to study in Chicago at Columbia College. I began by doing street performance.

First, I got out on the street dressed up like an army recruiter, and I'd say to people, "There's all this money going into the war. You may well lose your jobs, but you could get jobs from the military." So I tried to recruit people to join the army as a means to draw attention to the fact that the money was going to the Pentagon, not to the individuals. Then I did a street intervention called People's Portraits of Bush, where I was on the street with a portable pulping vat. What excited me was that everybody had polarized viewpoints, and this got them into conversations.

Meanwhile, Drew and I talked every week. I told him about my street interventions, and he

kept me up on school and running the studio.

At some point, one of my friends and I very fortuitously came up with an idea to deep fry books as a public service, making books "more palatable" for the American. So if somebody had a negative association with their book, like they failed English 101 because they hated *Moby Dick,* then they could bring it in and we would deep-fry it. That's actually where I came up with the idea to take something negative and turn it into a positive.

Gates: That's really another basic principle in Combat Paper-making: *turning something negative into a positive.* Put that together with *provoking conversations* and *it's already begun* and you're on a roll.

Matott: Then in January 2006, I saw an art show at Columbia College, "Politics on Paper: Global Tragedies/Personal Perils" featuring Eric Avery and John Risseeuw. Eric Avery is a doctor who made paper from the shirts of his AIDS patients. John Risseeuw made paper from clothing from landmine survivors, plant fibers from the locale where landmines had been planted, and currencies from countries that produced the landmines.

Seeing that show really blew my mind in many ways. First off, it brought home to me the power of actual paper content; the story of the content carries a lot of weight. Also, I'd never been impressed with how people interact with a piece on a gallery wall. When I saw these two artists, it spoke to what actually mattered to me—the process, the interaction, the collaboration. Eric and John both worked with people's live situations as AIDS or landmine survivors and activated them through papermaking; the whole process of documenting their stories in the fiber involved dialogue, exchange with people.

Finally, I realized I had to do something serious. Deep-frying books was fun and popular but very cotton candy and almost cheap. I felt like I was coated in chocolate like a big old Snickers bar. Both Eric Avery and John Risseeuw were taking 100 percent of the proceeds of the sales of the work and putting it back into landmine relief projects and AIDS relief and awareness programs. That inspired me.

DREW CAMERON

Gates: In the months you and Drew Matott were back and forth on the phone telling each other about your projects and building creative momentum, you joined Iraq Veteran's Against the War. When you came back from Iraq, you weren't about to come out against the war. What led up to that change?

Cameron: Once I was in community college, I started taking classes in history and I was exposed to a lot of other conflicts in the 20th century. I was introduced to many new ways of looking at things and I was bouncing those into my own experience. As I began following the news in the paper, I saw things getting progressively worse in the war. And as I followed the independent media rags, I saw editorials, as well as in depth reporting, that was even more revealing and validating to uncertainties I was having. Then I went to a protest and I met **a**nother Iraq vet who was speaking out. I thought "Cool, I agree with those things." And I began to speak out too.

Gates: When did you bring papermaking into your antiwar work?

Cameron: In April 2007, Warrior Writers, an IVAW program we'd started, put on an event. Some of us including Lovella Calica, the founder, had an exhibit of our artwork, did a reading, and gave a creative writing workshop for the vets. I thought, hey, why not show my friends how to make paper? So the next day, I prepared a bunch of fiber and paper pulp—not uniform pulp, but abaca and cotton—and we made paper together. It was really fun. Most folks got super into the whole rhythm of that process in and of itself. I thought, Why not take that paper and use it to make the covers of the limited edition of *Remaking Sense*, the second Warrior Writers book? I couldn't wait to call Drew Matott and tell him about it.

DREW MATOTT

Matott: Drew called a week after I had seen the "Politics on Paper" show with the landmine and the AIDS pieces. He told me how he'd make paper with the veterans and how he was going to use the paper for the covers of books. I was thinking, How are you going to layer more content into that book cover? Well, pulp a *uniform* and that becomes the content. That was the "aha moment." I asked Drew, "Would you ever consider pulping your uniform?"

Then I started thinking about my street interventions, and I got an idea. A veteran in uniform could stand at full attention on a street corner, and we'd encourage passersby to cut that uniform off his body. We'd pulp the uniform and have the people pulp print signs that said, "Support the veterans. Bring the troops home." I invited Drew to come to Chicago to be that soldier.

DREW CAMERON

Cameron: "Count me in," I told him. "I'm ready." Just when I was preparing to go to Chicago, the city refused to give us a permit. At that point, I was super charged. Nothing could stop me. So one day, I just went ahead and did it. I invited my photographer friend Hannah Pitkin to come down to the studio with a camera. I put on my uniform I hadn't worn since I got off that plane when I returned from Iraq. While Hannah took images, I stood at full attention and then cut the uniform from my body.

Gates: When you put the uniform on, how did it feel?

Cameron: I really didn't expect it would be a big deal. I was thinking artistically about where I'd stand, what angle would be best for the shots, since I knew I wanted to use the images for other things. But, in fact, when I got all did up, it was more of a big deal for me than I expected. Wearing it was like revisiting all that I told you about: the American flag on the shoulder, my rank on my collar, "U.S. Army" over my heart. There were all those associations. Who was I when I wore that uniform? What was I trying to be now?

So when I started to cut it, I tore my nameplate off first. Like, I'm not owned by the army. I cut my rank off from my collar. I cut my sleeves off. I went through and got rid of it all, just completely cut it off and threw it on the floor. It was awesome. I recommend it.

As I was doing it, I was talking up a storm, telling stories about the uniform and what I had done in it. I remembered the last time I wore the uniform, heading for Fort Sill, being packed in that big old diesel bus with our legs squeezed up against the back of the seat in front of us. And I remembered Iraq, the smell of the desert and my driver next to me—the feeling of all that dangerous stuff and that I never had to be there again. Putting on the uniform just brings up memories for people who do it: This one time, Sgt. Such-and-Such, oh, it was the funniest, craziest thing. There are all those different, weird little memories that are encapsulated or triggered from the uniform. Then, deconstructing with scissors and blades and cutting it into pieces while you're talking, you are normalizing these things; something is definitely changing.

Gates: As you were cutting off the uniform, were you angry? Grieving?

Cameron: I felt relieved. Completely comfortable. This whole experience behind the uniform is not bigger than I am anymore. I can look at it in any way I want. I can live with it any way that I want. I can control it. It doesn't have to control me anymore. I stood there in my underwear and a pair of boots, with my cut up uniform on the floor. I felt empowered.

Then I took that rag, my former uniform, and pulped it. I turned it into paper pulp, and I documented all the steps. Here's the recipe: Step 1: Cut the uniform into small pieces. Step 2: Cook in an alkalized solution to remove additional detergents. Step 3: Beat it. That means pulp 1½ pounds of uniform with 10 gallons of water for 1½ hours. Step 4: Pull 12"x18" sheets of paper. Step 5: Couch them on a pillow. Step 6: Press them. Step 7: Hang them up to dry.

It took two full days. Then I had 30 sheets of blank paper that used to be my uniform.

Gates: Did you have any second thoughts during the process?

Cameron: I guess part of me was a little wary. "Am I stepping out of line a little, maybe, too far?" But

because I had already been active in the peace movement, I had done a bunch of things that pushed the envelope for me already. I'd gone publicly on record in front of people explaining why I thought the broader war in Iraq was wrong. So I felt more comfortable; I felt more wiggle room to do something outside of what was typically expected of me as a soldier. Or as a veteran. You know, veterans have a long history of being quiet about the things that they've done and been part of. That's a tragic thing.

So there was some wariness. But mostly I felt affirmed. I took my stack of blank sheets of paper and hit the road. That was the summer of '07. As I traveled, I gave most of it away. I went to a couple of veteran events, and I told people what I was doing and showed them the paper. Some would say, "I have a uniform in my trunk. Would you make it into paper?"

DREW MATOTT

MATOTT: When Drew told me that other veterans wanted to pulp their uniforms, I realized we were onto something. Something important. No more Johnnies in the basement. … Let's get this project into a university setting; then we can go on record. I called Mills College professor Kathleen Walkup, who was working with the Mutanabbi Project. Mutanabbi Street was a printer's row in Baghdad that had been destroyed as a result of the war. Kathleen was pairing letterpress printers in the U.S. with poets from Iraq. I asked her, "Hey, we've got paper made from military uniforms that we've been pulping. If we donate ten sheets of paper to you, could you find Iraqi poets who would like to print their poems on those sheets?" She was totally into it. Drew and I were planning to meet out in San Francisco at the end of the summer so we could catch up and he could show me the paper. I told Kathleen, "We're coming to the Bay Area and we'll bring you some sheets." So before Drew had even shown me the paper, I'd already started to realize that we had hit some kind of vein.

DREW CAMERON

Cameron: Come summer, I sat down with Drew at a café in North Beach. I showed him the paper and the pictures of me cutting off my uniform. I told him what it was like to actually do it. Drew was like, Whoa! He selected six images he wanted to work with when he returned to Chicago. He asked me, "So what do you call this?" I told him I called it "Combat Paper,'" which is the first thing that came to my mind. Boom! It all came together.

And so we collaborated. In Drew's studio in Chicago, he took the six images of me cutting off my uniform and put them onto a polymer plate and then used it like an old Vandercook letterpress to print on paper. We used two of the images in what became one of the project's iconic pieces, "Breaking Rank." Then we used the entire six-image set for the "Not My Enemy" portfolio, a series of images of a soldier—standing at attention and cutting his uniform off until he is nearly naked, looking down at the shredded fabric at his feet. Back in Vermont, I was meeting more veterans, making more activist friends, and getting more people involved; we were doing workshops, making batches and batches of paper. Meanwhile, in Chicago, in his MFA program, Drew was learning new techniques, trying them out and sending me test prints. Then he'd sneak away from school and come to Vermont to train us. "Here's a new technique," making a really big sheet or doing something special with pigment. We'd meet up for a week or two to get more work done together, using the tools he was learning to create more paper art. He was training all these other veterans like Eli Wright, Jon Turner and Nathan Lewis; they caught the bug and are still rocking with it, which is really exciting.

In October 2007, Drew was invited to give a lecture on his work at a conference sponsored by the Friends of Dard Hunter, an organization for hand papermakers that honors the life and work of Dard Hunter, an authority on hand papermaking. But Drew had no interest in describing the other work he was doing. He only wanted to talk about Combat Paper. So he invited me to join him in presenting. It was there that academics and practitioners from across the country heard about what we were doing. After that, we had all these invitations from school and universities where there were papermakers—St. Lawrence University, Mills College, UC Santa Barbara, Arizona State. They all offered: "How can we support you? Will you come do workshops?"

DREW MATOTT

Gates: Combat Paper clearly revolves around collaboration. I'm guessing that neither you nor Drew Cameron would have come up with the idea to pulp uniforms by yourself. The very differences in your experiences and perspectives have enriched your exchange. In your workshops, do you like to bring together folks with diverging backgrounds and points of view?

Mattot: A mix is essential. Combat Paper is all about the conversation. It's a good example of a healthy democracy. A democracy is about people with different viewpoints coming together and sharing an experience, and then modifying their viewpoints to basically be together.

To me the approach in our workshops is a sophisticated form of activism. Instead of beating someone over the head, telling them how to feel or think, it's intervention, educating through the process.

As in the People's Portraits of Bush, the thing that really kept me going was the exchange, people with opposing views actually engaged in conversation. So in Combat Paper workshops, someone might say, "I love my uniform, I love my buddies, my family that I served with. The military has done a lot of good things for me." Then somebody else might cut in, "I suffer PTSD. I am messed up and I hate the military." For me, a workshop isn't really successful unless I see that exchange.

Gates: Your initial intent for the Combat Paper workshop focused on opening up such exchanges about war. As the workshops evolved, you found that the act of pulping one's uniform could often lead to catharsis and healing. Please tell one of the stories of transformation.

Matott: At Texas State we were pulping uniforms in front of the student union. A guy who'd been in the Marines biked by and slammed on his brakes. "What are you doing to those uniforms?" he asked. We told him about our project and let him know, "We're not pushing an anti-war sentiment. This is just about providing space for veterans to come in and discuss issues surrounding the veterans." An hour later, he came back with his Desert Cammies and started cutting them up. He used his own pocketknife. He didn't say much, but it was clear he came in pretty angry, basically cursing the military. The next day he came back with a duffel bag of uniforms, along with his mother, his father, and his wife. His family spent the whole day sitting at the table all together cutting up his uniforms while he pulled paper. He was there all week just pulling paper, pulling paper, pulling paper, maybe 600 or 700 sheets.

By the end of the third day, he looked up at me and said, "This is just so relaxing, really peaceful, cathartic. I feel like I'm washing my experiences." He was in love with the sound of the water, the rinsing. He told me, "I thought that the military brought me nothing but misery and angst. But actually, you know what? There were some good experiences there. It wasn't all bad."

Gates: Some of the spin-offs from Combat Paper involve widening healing beyond the individual to the relations between ex-combatants, bringing more understanding or empathy between those who have considered each other enemies. These are collaborations between survivors on opposing sides of a conflict. How did this evolve?

Matott: In the Spring of 2009, I worked with Nicholas DuBois, a graduate student in art history at the Courtauld Institute in London, to set up a paper arts tour through England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. We were indeed broadening the model of using papermaking as cathartic artmaking to work with families of those fallen as well as civilians caught in the crossfire between Protestants and Catholics around the British Isles. Drew Cameron, Christopher Arendt, Nicolas DuBois, and I did workshops throughout England. These workshops, directed by Nic, were called Conflict Paper and were funded by the Arts Council of England.

We did a workshop in Portadown, which is on the border of Northern Ireland and Ireland, just south of Belfast. There we brought Catholics and Protestants together, resulting in the pulping of both Union and Irish flags, as well as U.S. and English currency. The final piece, "Victoria Square, Belfast 2009," was constructed from a base of four flags sewn together and embedded in the base pulp. It was held together by all of this shredded pulp money. Then we splashed it with red paint to disrupt it. The piece attempts to recognize the still festering wounds experienced by those involved in the Irish

conflict, which can't be healed by throwing a lot of money at it—trying to get rid of hatred through bringing in a lot of American and European corporations.

Also, at the Warrington Peace Foundation, I worked with ex-combatants from the IRA and the English Army and survivors who were caught in the crossfire, the 7/7 bombings and the Warrington bombings and the Brighton bombings. At Warrington, I was facilitating alone, and it was really difficult for me working with all of these men and women who would come to me with their trauma stories. That's when I really realized that for me, in order to continue this kind of work, I needed to travel with a team of people including an art therapist. Even if they didn't help us during a workshop, they could work afterwards with those of us who had been facilitating. Because psychologically and physiologically, we absorb that trauma. When I came back to U.S., I started doing outreach to art therapy communities to build our team.

In an independent project inspired by Combat Paper, Nic Dubois did a papermaking workshop in Israel with Palestinian and Israeli women. Both Palestinian and Israeli survivors took the clothing from their husbands, sons, or daughters who had been killed, and pulped it. Because transporting the Palestinians to and from every day was so difficult, the Israeli women opened their doors to the Palestinian women. These relatives of ex-combatants basically lived together.

Since August 2011, I have been facilitating a new project, Peace Paper. Peace Paper is different from Combat Paper, as it focuses on bring together survivors of trauma and art therapists to establish papermaking as a form of trauma therapy. Peace Paper sets up permanent papermaking facilities, outlines sustainable practices, trains art therapists, and in this way has a prolonged positive effect on communities, both stateside and internationally. We're offering workshops to a range of communities from Basque youth to the Tibetan refugees in Dharamsala in the Dalai Lama's papermaking studio.

DREW CAMERON

Gates: As Drew Matott is traveling abroad teaching papermaking to other bereaved communities, you continue to deepen and broaden the work of Combat Paper, offering workshops to veterans and further exploring and healing your own relationship to the military and to war. What are ways you've witnessed the richness of such exchanges between veterans of different wars, or experienced this richness yourself?

Cameron: The first collaborations that come to mind are with Jan Berry, a Vietnam vet. He and I have collaborated on broadsides together and a poetry book. He's also collaborated with Jen Pacanowski and Eli Wright; they've done other art together. It's a really cool exchange because some of the things that my generation of vets are on the cusp of discovering they already have. It's not the kind of thing that they exactly can tell you; it just comes through experience and understanding. So there's a gentle patience within them. And they're eager to help it along in us.

Gates: In the early years of the project, you'd take a piece of fabric from each workshop participant and mix that into what you called the "lineage fiber." A tiny bit of lineage fiber was then mixed in with the batch of pulp made from each new uniform. So a little fiber from every vet's uniform throughout the project was in every new piece of paper made. Lineage fiber is another expression of collaboration—carrying an exchange of stories from generations of wars—Iraq, Afghanistan, Desert Storm, Vietnam, Korea, WWII. What does lineage fiber mean to you?

Cameron: Lineage fiber represents collective voices from all the previous generations. As I've come to see it, there's a commonality of experience, regardless of branch of service, time, and place. War is war is war is war. Also lineage fiber fits into what I described to you about military culture, consistently paying homage to these previous war fighters, balancing yourself against them. Knowing that the paper you make from your uniform includes fiber from all these generations gives you support. Someone may express discomfort with what he or she did; someone else might say that it was actually wrong; a third might express pride. With lineage fiber, your paper includes all of these people, so it's stronger. It's not just the expression of a sole individual; it's much more universal.

Gates: But isn't that a contradiction? Do you feel "supported" when making paper from fiber from pulped uniforms of soldiers who have the exact opposite point of view from yours—on the uniform, or on war itself?

Cameron: In a way, that's the point. There are many voices, a real spectrum. And many complexities. I'd be very hard pressed to find someone who carries the exact perspective I do. You're assuming there's a polarity— anti-war versus pro-war. It's easy to make such an assumption, but that's not how it is. Combat paper includes fiber from all these uniforms, all of these experiences, from all of these perspectives. That is encouraged and honored. It's not like there's the peace batch and then the pro-war batch.

If I was trying to divide people into two camps—Are you here because you want to stick it to "the Man," or because you want a "I'm-proud-of-my-service" piece of art?—it would be impossible. For one thing, in some way, everybody's proud. Everyone has a sense of commemoration in them, even if they're commemorating the day they got out, like "Woo hoo!" When people come to a workshop, they come in and they bring their uniform, they're like, "Here's mine." That's a sense of pride.

For me, making combat paper has transcended the polarity of peace and war, and it's become more and more about a landscape of portraits—like 100,000 voices; sometimes they're saying the same thing at the same time, but other times, they're not, so it sounds like a sea of crickets, and you're just trying to find your way through it. It becomes so much bigger than any one person. But all together, it's deafening.

Endnote:
Drew Cameron has settled in the San Francisco Bay Area and is practicing and teaching papermaking, and encouraging others to do the same. He continues as director of Combat Paper(). Drew Matott teaches papermaking at colleges, does art residencies, and is, as ever, committed to radical start-ups, to working on the fringe. He has moved on from Combat Paper and is now facilitating a new project, Peace Paper.

About the Author

Barbara Gates is the editor of Inquiring Mind

Share Your Comments and Reflections on this Conversation:

What do you think?

Your Name: **Email:**

On Oct 14, 2013 Lucy Holtsnider wrote:

Thank you for this wonderful, in depth interview! I used this source extensively to write a blog post about the project. Wonderful questions and fascinating answers!
(see link)

On Mar 24, 2013 Pamela Foster wrote:

Wow, what a wonderful rendition of pounding swords into plowshares.

On Mar 15, 2013 Peter Gradjansky wrote:

Very cool project! So many layers of meaning and healing.

On Mar 12, 2013 Kristin Pedemonti wrote:

Thank you! What a phenomenal project of transformation & healing through art & story. I will share this with vets. This would have helped my dad; he was a Vietnam Vet, special forces, who was completely damaged by his service. Not allowed to speak of his Service because of special ops, he unraveled into deep depression, trying to kill himself several times. Your project will save lives and allow for much needed healing. Thank you. HUG.

On Dec 17, 2012 Tom Lascell wrote:

Peace Paper's web address has changed to www.peacepaperproject.org

ABOUT US

Conversations.org is a collection of in-depth inteviews with artists from all walks of life. It's a project of ServiceSpace, a fully volunteer-run effort that aims to empower gift-economy efforts. Carrying no advertising, making the entire interviews available on-line without charge, ours is a humble effort to "be the change we wish to see in the world."

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