

Note: You can find the original story in the 07 18 2021 issue of the Barton Chronicle, or online [behind a paywall here](#). Thank you to Luke Vidic and the Barton Chronicle for making this piece available outside of the paywall.

Veterans share stories, pain, and camaraderie

by Luke Vidic

NEWPORT — Soldiers like Newport veteran John Wilson are ingrained with stoic principles. A U.S. Army veteran, Mr. Wilson was trained to view pain as a fact of life and to never speak of it. For a soldier, speaking about one's experiences can be challenging.

"Why didn't [I] bring it out? I'm an infantryman. That shows weakness. There's no weakness in my body," he told an audience of civilians and veterans gathered at Prouty Beach Sunday.

The event was a part of the Vets Town Hall series. Created by Sebastian Junger, the author of *War and Tribe*, the series offers veterans a chance to speak openly about their experiences. A crowd of 20 to 30 people — veterans and civilians — gathered under a pavilion near Prouty Beach as a light rain fell. They listened as service members expressed their emotions, ranging from pride to anger, nostalgia to sorrow.

There were four scheduled speakers; Heather Morris, Douglas Auclair, his father, Rod Auclair, and Thomas Farrow.

Ms. Morris, who served in the U.S. Navy for four years and worked for the Department of the Navy as a civilian, graduated from Northern Vermont University (NVU) in Lyndon last year.

While at school, she said, her professor Tom Anderson asked his class, "Is anyone in here a veteran?"

Ms. Morris did not raise her hand.

"I didn't apply to a combat zone. I was a woman. I was in the Navy. It was just in my head [that] I wasn't a veteran," she said.

Mr. Anderson then asked, "Has anyone here served in the military?"

Ms. Morris said she eagerly raised her hand.

And so, she said, "[Mr. Anderson's] like, 'Heather, that means you're a veteran.'"

Ms. Morris found the revelation life-altering. Within six months she became the president of the veterans club on campus. She now works with Vermont Veterans Outreach.

She credited her change in perspective and career trajectory to Mr. Anderson, veterans summits, and NVU Lyndon.

Thomas Farrow began his talk slowly.

“Because of my injuries I have days with a lot of brain fog,” he said.

“I never saw regular combat,” he added. “I was in during peacetime.”

He recounted the story of his injury. One day, while based in San Diego, he rode his motorcycle to the Navy base. It was raining and he was a new driver. It was a “perfect storm of factors,” he said.

As he came up the off-ramp, elevated 50 feet from the ground, he lost control. The ramp curved like a spiral, and he realized he was headed for the barrier. In a split-second decision, he jumped the barrier, falling to the ground below without a helmet.

He said he couldn’t remember hitting the ground, but recalled regaining consciousness while face down in the dirt.

“And I got up and I looked myself over and I didn't seem hurt at all,” he said. “Except for the grass stains on my pants.”

The bike only suffered a cracked speedometer lens.

With no perceivable harm, he carried on to work.

But with time, chronic pains emerged, including headaches.

“This is like, all day long every day pain and brain fog and cognitive problems and social problems,” Mr. Farrow said.

He claimed it took 40 years to convince people, including the Navy, the accident happened. Only after convincing the Navy was he able to receive benefits and compensation for his injuries.

“But dealing with the civilians was a nightmare,” he said. “I'd be called a drug-seeker and treated like crap.”

Mr. Farrow expressed a low opinion of doctors and authorities, and said he felt discredited and ignored. He considered his experiences emblematic of receiving pain care in the aftermath of the opiate crisis.

He concluded, saying, "I didn't have to waste 40 years in limbo and I could have been a productive citizen."

Douglas Auclair, from Springfield, Virginia, said he was in the region for personal reasons, and the town hall happened to coincide with his travels.

Before heading north, he attended two funerals in Arlington cemetery. One of those who died was a close friend, the other a more distant acquaintance. Both deaths left an emotional mark on Mr. Auclair.

"By your life, you're an example to this nation," he said. "By your death you are as well and how you are remembered is important."

He said felt a personal connection to both burials, and they partially inspired the intended topic of his speech: military as family.

Before he rose to speak, he told the Chronicle a personal anecdote about a lieutenant commander who drove 40 miles to the airport to pick up a young Douglas Auclair. Together, they drove 40 miles to Mr. Auclair's new home base, and alone, the lieutenant commander drove another 40 miles home.

He stressed an "ineffable" connection between service members.

When Douglas Auclair addressed the crowd, he strayed from his original topic and paused multiple times while holding back tears.

He described the example that service members could set for their country, and the youth in particular.

"I didn't know Jim personally — Captain Jim — but the way that he was honored and respected and the way I saw young people seeing that military funeral, gave me hope for the young people in this country who are looking for answers and not finding them elsewhere."

Before taking the microphone Rod Auclair, who lives in Moodus, Connecticut, said he is a very comfortable public speaker. In his hand was a three-page speech he had scratched onto a notice he'd received from the Veterans Administration.

"I just kept writing," he said. "I think I have a story to tell."

He started by reciting lines from "In Flanders Fields" by John McCrae, a poem commemorating those who died in the First World War. He then began recounting experiences, adventures, and misadventures he had while in the service from 1962 to 1966.

At officer training school, a sergeant made Rod Auclair “captain of the latrine.” He was tasked with making “the latrines sparkling, fresh, shining, and buttoned up before the Saturday morning inspection.”

When the time for inspection came around, the sergeant approached Mr. Auclair’s footlocker and said, “This man’s okay, sir.”

Mr. Auclair learned then, leadership was about giving orders, but also having your soldiers’ backs.

He told other stories — having abandoned his written notes — describing time in Virginia, receiving congratulations from a Korean War veteran, and a story about a missile defense warning.

While stationed in Greenland, he worked with a senior space surveillance officer. Together they watched for hostile missiles. One day, an alarm went off.

“Alarms started going off everywhere in our hops and all the way to Colorado Springs,” he said. “Our system was ramping up to DEFCON three.”

He went to the console, panicked, and saw the simplest of errors: the lunar cancellation switch had not been turned on. The missile they were tracking was the moon.

He hit the switch, and the alarms turned off.

“The whole room was quiet except for the sound of dripping sweat,” Mr. Auclair said.

After the four scheduled speakers finished the microphone was opened to anyone who wished to address the audience.

Wayne Wheeler and John Wilson used the time to recount events from their lives. The conversation evolved and popcorned around multiple attendees. Topics included discussion of hearing loss from explosions, the transformation of the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) into a tourist destination, PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) and shell shock, and poetry.

Marty McMahon, one of the event’s organizers and a senior instructor at Norwich University, said the event had a two-sided importance. One, it provided veterans, especially those who’ve been “on the edge with their toes hanging over,” a chance to be honest and expressive. Two, it provided civilians an opportunity to learn more about soldiers’ service.

A flier at the event described service members as “more connected to each other than to the very families and communities they fought for.” It stressed the importance of reincorporating service members into the whole community.

[Kristen] Eaton was a key organizer of the event. She has no military background, but read Mr. Junger's Tribe and was inspired to host Vets Town Halls in Vermont. Mr. Junger, a war journalist, founded the event.

The Newport VFW and Scott St. Onge helped put on the event. Mr. St. Onge said Ms. Eaton did most of the work.

This is Mr. McMahon's second Vets Town Hall. His first was in St. Johnsbury, and brought together a crowd of 50 people. The two organizers thought the rainy weather might have lowered the turnout.

Mr. Wilson, who was not involved in organizing the event, said the bingo game at the American Legion might have also been a factor.

The Newport VFW's 300 were told of the event, Mr. St. Onge said.