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## The Things Paper Carries: The Combat Paper Project

by [Jared Ash](#), from [Volume 6, Number 5](#)

*Why can't our veterans see themselves as we see them—luminous in their service and lucky to have the rest of their lives ahead of them? Why can't they leave the war behind? The truth, of course, is that warriors bring their war home with them, not like a tan acquired on holiday but like a secret they wish they hadn't been told.*

—Robert Emmet Meagher<sup>1</sup>

For nearly ten years, the Combat Paper Project has worked with veterans to lift the burden of that secret through the process of making paper—in most cases, paper made from the cut-up and pulverized uniforms they once wore. The brainchild of two young men, one coming out of the Army and the other coming out of art school, it is part catharsis, part community and part conceptually compelling art endeavor. More than one participant has said it was life-saving; at the same time, it has offered a window into an experience that remains, for most Americans, fundamentally unknown.

In 2004, Drew Cameron was a 22-year-old Iraq war veteran who had left his home in Iowa for Vermont. “Like a lot of people who survive traumatic experiences,” he has explained, “I moved to a place where I didn't have any friends or family, and started going to college. I tried to bury and distance myself from any experiences I had.”<sup>2</sup> In Burlington he served with the National Guard and took classes at a community college, where an ad led him serendipitously to a papermaking workshop taught by a recent college graduate named Drew Matott. Cameron had learned basic papermaking as a teenager from his father and was excited to take it up anew—slicing and macerating fibers with a beater to make the pulp, dipping the mould and deckle into the slurry to form the sheet, draining and “couching” the sheet onto felt, then hanging it to dry and beginning again. Cameron found a “meditative” calm in the repetition and began working with Matott on a weekly basis. “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.”<sup>3</sup>



Drew Cameron and Drew Matott, *Breaking Rank* (2007), pulp stencil print on handmade paper from military uniforms, 29 x 51 inches. Courtesy Drew Cameron.

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1. Robert Emmet Meagher, "Just Killers, Moral Injuries," *Cicero Magazine*, 17 June 2014. <http://www.ciceromagazine.com.php56-15.dfw3-1.websitetestlink.com/features/moral-injury-and-just-war/> [D]
2. "Tearing Up the Uniform," interview with Drew Cameron, *The State We're In*, Radio Netherlands Worldwide. RNW, 10 Nov 2009. <http://archieff.wereldomroep.nl/english/article/tearing-uniform>. [D]
3. Drew Cameron in "Combat Papermakers Drew Cameron and Drew Matott: An Interview in Two Voices," by Barbara Gates, *Works & Conversation*, 30 Nov 2012, <http://www.conversations.org/story.php?sid=331>. Much of the information about the formative moments, development, and growth of Combat Paper presented in this article is derived from this interview and from *Iraq, Paper, Scissors*, a 43-minute documentary on Combat Paper that appears as a special feature on the DVD *Poster Girl*, directed and filmed by Sara Nesson (Brooklyn, NY: Portrayal Films, 2012). [D]

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