VET INK
MILITARY-INSPIRED TATTOOS

The men and women who have safeguarded our country and our freedoms through military service share a strong and unbreakable bond, regardless of when, where, or in which branch they served.

Their tattoos and the stories behind them are as diverse as their military experience, but themes of honor, respect, and pride resonate throughout each and every one.

The Clark County Veterans featured here represent seven decades of service to our country. For some, the stories come easily. For others, the telling is more difficult, the tattoo an outward symbol of emotions normally kept hidden from view.

Join us as we honor these Veterans who had the courage to serve and to share their stories. Like their military bonds, Vet Ink runs deep.

SPECIAL THANKS TO
OUR FEATURED VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES:

ROBERT 'BOB' ARPIN
GERALD 'JERRY' BARBER
DAVID HANCOCK
ROBERT 'BOB' FRY
RICHARD A. ALVAREZ
ROXANNE 'ROXIE' BOOSE'
ALLEN BENNETT RUSSELL
JEREMY S. HUBBARD
KYLE OLSEN
VICTORIA PARKER
CHRISTIAN C. NIPPOLT-VETTER
WHAT IS A TATTOO?

Tattoos are formed when skin is pierced and pigment (like ink or soot) is forced below the surface. Tracing their roots to prehistoric times, the oldest tattoos appear on Ötzi the Iceman, whose frozen body was discovered in the Alps. He is thought to have died around 3300 BC. The earliest tattoos may have been used for healing or to identify the bearer’s role or status within a group. While technology has changed the methods and materials somewhat, receiving a tattoo remains a lengthy and painful process.

Ötzi the Iceman - Courtesy of the South Tyrol Museum of Archaeology

TATTOOS AND THE MILITARY

Military-related tattoos were mentioned as early as 50 BC, when Julius Caesar noted the ‘blue and horrific’ Britons, thought by some to have been tattooed. Captain James Cook’s journals report encounters with tattooed warriors throughout his travels in the 18th century. These military tattoos were thought to both identify the bearer and to cause fear among the enemy.

In modern times, there are four major categories for tattoos requested by servicemen and women.

- **Patriotic tattoos** reflect a love of country, and include symbols like flags and eagles.
- **Memorial tattoos** pay tribute and respect to lost comrades.
- **Identity tattoos** show pride and belonging to a group, such as a branch of service or particular unit.
- **Spiritual tattoos** are used for protection or as a reminder of the bearer’s faith.
Name: Kate Singh (Kathy Gates)
Home: Vancouver, Washington
Branch: United States Army (Retired)
Dates of Service: 1973-1993
Tattoo Category: "Virgin"

Today I almost wish I had a tattoo with a story. But I’m in the "tattoo virgin" category. I served 20 years as a U.S. Army enlisted nurse. I joined the Women’s Army Corps during the Vietnam War and retired after participating in Desert Storm. At 18 I was working at a food cannery and thought, "10 years from now...25 kids, a dog, cat and a station wagon...or...join the Army and see the world?" My brother was going to Germany. I joined with the attitude of doing my part on the healing side of the war. I wanted to be someone who could help put the pieces back together physically and emotionally. Years later I realized it was to be able to give a sense of "You are valuable in this world and I honor you." This feeling and attitude carried me through 35 years in the nursing field. The human touch was and is healing....the human voice can calm fears and inspire courage. Yet today...we text and send emails...and we are losing some of the value of our own humanity.

The VET Ink project excited me when I was asked to be the photographer. I have always been a storyteller; as a nurse, as a mom and as a photographer. The opportunity to tell Veteran's stories about their tattoos was an amazing opportunity to give value, honor and respect to every generation that would come in. We have a common bond, a sense of family in the military that extends to all who have served...the homeless, the moms and dads, the politician, and the business owner; crossing all lines of gender, race and social status you are respected.

Photography has been a passion my entire life. An artist at heart, taking a photo meant I captured a memory. When I tell the story behind the photo I have a legacy to pass on to my children. Coming from the nurturing nurse/mom arena into professional photography I questioned how I could 'give value' in a seemingly vain profession. It didn't take long to realize the photos I took boosted the shy teenager's esteem, helped the business person be comfortable for any photo op and gave families their own legacies. This is my gift and I honor you and me with it.
Robert ‘Bob’ Arpin
United States Air Force

Name: Robert ‘Bob’ Arpin
Home: Vancouver, Washington
Branch: United States Air Force
Dates of Service: January 1957 to January 1961
Tattoo Category: Identity
Tattoo Origin: 1953, Eugene, Oregon

Bob’s Story: I was 17 when I enlisted in January of 1957 in the Air Force. I was trained as an Air Policeman and assigned to a radar outpost on the Moroccan-Algerian border. In the 1950s, our air defense system included radar installations all around the world. These units varied in size, but the one I was on was about a hundred men: primarily radio/radar operators, and a contingent of Air Police who mainly did perimeter security. It was about 90 miles from the nearest town. A 1958 Air Force Times article described the 734th Aircraft Control and Warning Squadron as a top candidate for “the loneliest spot in the Air Force.”

Nuclear war was the big threat. The most significant event was on October 4th, 1957 when Sputnik went up in the air. Every military installation was on high alert. We had every weapon in the armory posted around the perimeter, we had people on the roof looking up for God knows what. For all we knew, the world was under attack. This was a first. There was something circling the Earth and it was the Cold War and space was being contested. Years later, I saw a replica of Sputnik at Cape Canaveral. It’s like a big beach ball! But then it was this thing that just scared the hell out of everybody. It seems pretty simple now, but then it was quite a phenomenon.

After a year tour of duty, I was selected for the Air Force Presidential Honor Guard in Washington, DC. I was discharged in January of 1961.

The tattoo came about from my first posting overseas in Morocco. There wasn’t a tree in sight, it was pretty barren, and scorpions were indigenous to the area. One of the duties of the Operations Officer was to collect scorpions for shipment to testing labs in the United States, for testing venom and God knows what. So, the scorpion was our squadron’s symbol. The meaning to me of the tattoo is sentimental, a reminder of the past.
GERALD ‘JERRY’ BARBER
UNITED STATES NAVY

Name: Gerald 'Jerry' Barber
Home: Camas, Washington
Branch: United States Navy
Dates of Service: July 1957 to July 1961
Tattoo Category: Identity
Tattoo Origin: 1958, Hotel Street, Honolulu, Hawaii

Jerry's story: I went into the service July of '57. Got out July of '61. My recruiter gave me a test to be a Naval Aviation Cadet. And I passed. I found out in boot camp that I couldn't be a Nav. Cad. because I didn't have any college. So they said, what do you want to do, and I said, "submarines" so that's what I got. I went from the Carp to the Robert E. Lee, which is a nuclear-powered sub.

I received my tattoo in 1958. I had just gotten back from a West Pac trip to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. At that time, I had just been promoted and was qualified as a submainer. Some of my buddies, they took me into the Dolphin Club and they put my dolphins (the dolphin pin) in a large glass and filled it up with different types of liquor and said, "OK, Jerry, get your dolphins." So I started to get them, but they said, "No, no, you gotta get 'em with your teeth." So I had to drink that whole glass of mixed liquor to get my dolphins. I was only nineteen years old and the drinking age was twenty at the time. They didn't look at your ID that close back in those days as long as you had your uniform on. That was before Hawaii became a state.

One of my shipmates had tattoos and I had said, "Well, that's something I'll never do." Well, he made sure I did! They ended up taking me down to a tattoo parlor on Hotel Street and said, "Now you're gonna wear your dolphins forever." And that's what happened.

When I see it, I think about that time. I'm not gung ho. I would never have it removed. When submariners get together, we all talk about different things. We had a lot of fun on those subs. Submariners always said there were only two types of ships, submarines and targets. I was on a submarine for three years, and on targets for forty-two years as a merchant seaman.
Name: David Hancock
Home: Yakolt, Washington
Branch: United States Army and United States Marines
Dates of Service: 1961 to 1967 (Regular Army), 1968 to 1972 (Marine Reserves), 1972 to 2004 (Army Reserves)
Tattoo Category: Identity

David’s Story: I went into the military for financial reasons. We didn’t have any money and I was tired of having nothing to eat. I went in on my seventeenth birthday. I served in the Army and the Marines; six years in the Regulars and thirty-seven in the Reserves. My first hitch was in a unit at Fort Sam in Texas (except when we went to Opa Locka, Florida to invade Cuba, but that was called off).

My second hitch was in Izmir, Turkey. It was an oddball assignment. I didn’t get orders to go, I got an invitation. I had to get permission from my C.O. and a passport because I didn’t go over as an ordinary G.I. We were assigned to headquarters Allied Land Forces Southeastern Europe, but were attached to the Turkish Third Army as an aviation unit. This was in the Cold War days. When the Soviets attacked, we were to fight them embedded with the Turks. I spent 19 months over there, got to see Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Jerusalem, Greece, and Germany. It was my first time overseas, a great experience. It angers me when I hear people bad-mouth the Muslims. They were kind, good-hearted people.

I spent my time in the Marines flying up and down the coast in H-34 helicopters. The most excitement I had in the military was being in the Army’s Special Forces for nine years because it’s a group with a can do attitude about everything and they give you a sense of family. We trained with the SEALs, the Canadian Commandos and other elite units.

The picture of Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck comes from my favorite needles. I always wanted to use it as a tattoo, but Special Forces discouraged them because it would be difficult to pretend you’re a foreign native with an American tattoo. I added the U.S. Army and the U.S. Marines to reflect my military service. I put the U.S. Army across the top because I spent more time in the Army than I did the Marines. I liked the idea of having the cartoon characters linked with the seriousness of the military; I felt it showed a kind of bravado.
Name: Robert ‘Bob’ Fry
Home: Vancouver, Washington
Branch: United States Navy
Duties of Service: January 1963 to May 1966
Tattoo Category: Identity
Tattoo Origin: June 1965, Hotel Street, Honolulu, Hawaii

Bob's Story: I served three and a half years in the Navy. I went in on what was called a Kiddie Cruise, which was if you go in before your 18th birthday, you get out the day before you turn 21. I went in when I was 17, but because of the Vietnam War, I was extended for four months.

I first served Special Services at the Naval Air Station in Norfolk, Virginia and then was transferred to the Commissary Store in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. I spent two years there cutting meat, baking and cooking. I got my tattoo when I was 19 years old. A friend and I had been 'tippin' a few and decided, what the heck, let's go. We went to a shop down on Hotel Street in Honolulu, Hawaii. My tattoo wasn't something I'd planned on for a long time or anything. I was proud of the Navy so I wanted something with a Navy insignia or something, and I saw that skull with the sailor uniform on and thought, "that looks kind of cool." You know, it's just one of those things that caught my eye. The other guy got a tattoo of the devil.

When I left the Commissary Store, I went aboard the USS Pickerel SS524 at Ford Island, where the naval base was, and spent the rest of my time there as the submarine's cook. It was an old conventional diesel submarine, out of commission now. They have one on display at OMSI similar to the type I was on.

There were three cooks on board and we won the award for Best Galley Afloat for the 14th Naval District, which is Hawaii. We cooked for the fleet wide contest and I was discharged right after that so I never found out how we placed in the fleet wide program.

I was in during a tough time. When I was sent to Treasure Island for discharge, my ship was headed for Vietnam, so that's how close I came to going to Vietnam.
Name: Richard A. Alvarez  
Home: Vancouver, Washington  
Branch: United States Army  
Dates of Service: 1968 to 1971  
Tattoo Category: Identity  
Tattoo Origin: September 11, 2008, TigerLily Tattoo in Portland, Oregon

Richard's Story: My whole family had always been in the military: my dad, all my uncles, all my cousins, everybody. I wasn’t doing a whole lot after I got out of high school, and when the Tet Offensive hit in January of ’68, I joined up. I served with the 50th Military Police Battalion in San Francisco from 1968 to 1970, then served in Vietnam from May 1970 to February 1971 with A Company, 50th Military Police Battalion, 18th Military Brigade. The 50th Military Police Battalion is the most decorated Military Police unit in the history of the Army. It has served in World War II, Vietnam, Panama, Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan.

I was in Phu Bai base, south of the city of Hue. We had a real good unit in Vietnam, and I have good thoughts about the unit as a whole. And we did a good job. It was a shifty place. It was a loser cause. By the time I got there the war was almost over. We knew it was a losing hand and I had a hard time dealing with that later. It took a long time to make friends with Vietnam, a lot of years.

When I was nearing 60, I wanted a tattoo, but it had to have meaning. I decided I wanted the unit crest to commemorate my tour in Vietnam. I always liked our crest, the dragon and hand, evil and good. The dragon is the wyvern, that’s evil. The hand clutching it represents justice, the good, and I always liked the “Duty, Justice, Honor” motto. I had the artist make the face more evil and add horns that weren’t on the original. I’ve loved it ever since.

People think it’s just a dragon and a hand. They don’t know the meaning. I see it every morning and I am reminded of my tours, the buddies I made, and the buddies we lost. Everybody from our unit recognizes it because that dragon and hand are on everything. The battalion guys see the tattoo and know exactly what it is. It’s this tie between everyone.
ROXANNE ‘ROXIE’ BOOSÉ
UNITED STATES ARMY

Name: Roxanne 'Roxie' Boosé
Home: Vancouver, Washington
Branch: United States Army
Duties of Service: 1975 to 1976 (Reserves), 1977 to 1999 (Active)
Tattoo Category: Identity
Tattoo Origin: Fellow soldier in Germany

Roxanne’s Story: I came into the Army Reserves in 1975 as a combat medic. After two years, I couldn’t find a position that I felt I could start a career on. I was disappointed in the lack of women’s rights. At that point, it was still very iffy and I decided I’d go back into the active Army. I thought I could get a better shake. I went into television production, then club management, and I did that for five years. I became an instructor in club management. My last ten years were spent working in public affairs. I retired in 1999.

When I first came back into regular Army from the Reserves, I had to go to an Air Force base, so it was an Army detachment on an Air Force base. There was a group of us girls that happened to go there at that time and none of us had uniforms because they were supposed to reissue all of our uniforms, and the Air Force base didn’t have any Army uniforms. We hung together because we were all the Army detachment, all in civilian clothes. At one point we were all going to get a black rose tattoo, but we had some African American girls in our group and they weren’t gonna show up on them, so we tossed the idea out.

When I got to Germany, I figured I would get a rose tattoo in remembrance of all my friends, that group of girls that came in Regular Army, ‘cuz that was kind of an unusual event to have that many girls come into an Air Force base without uniforms. One of the guys in our unit was learning how to be a tattoo artist. I don’t think any of the others ever got a tattoo. I mean, we kicked it around for a long time. The black rose was what we really wanted. You know, when you’ve got a group of girls, it’s hard to get a consensus, so I just got my red rose in remembrance of them. To just remember those friends.

Field training to cross a large crevasse on a single wire
Okinawa, Japan in 1992

PR interview of Special Forces soldier during field exercise
Name: Allen Bennett Russell  
Home: Vancouver, Washington  
Branch: United States Army  
Dates of Service: February 1987 to March 1991  
Tattoo Category: Identity  
Tattoo Origin: 1989, Augusta, Georgia  

Allen's Story: I'm a Gulf War veteran. I served from February 1987 through March of 1991 in the Army Signal Corps. I saw no action when I was in the service. I was a switchboard instructor at Fort Gordon, Georgia.

My last rank was E4P (promotable). I had just done my sergeant's board and even though I scored a perfect 300, they had frozen all the promotions, which was actually a good thing because a promotion was the only thing that would have mented me doing more than four years.

James Dean represented the individual in me. You do not want to be an individual in the military, I found out! They want team players. I get it now. I got it then. I still chose to be the loner. The words, "a rebel... because" were a take on the movie, Rebel Without a Cause.

I had just posed for the Army's "Be All You Can Be" ad campaign. I was 23 when they took it in 1989. The ad ran in 17 national magazines, billboards and posters for four years. I was really amazed to see myself in Rolling Stone, billboards, TV Guide, crap like that. They had people line up and wanted somebody who looked kind of apple pie, but who also had an exemplary record. I was young and a maverick soldier—never the team player. But I was very good at soldiering, having won a few distinctions while serving... Post Soldier of the Month, and Post Soldier of the Quarter at two separate army bases.

I was a loner in the military and still am. If I could erase all my tattoos on both of my arms I would. Just to start fresh. I don't want to be reminded of my past all the time. I'm a political activist now. I have no choice. I see corruption everywhere now. It's a sad thing. I take it personally when I see guys getting shipped off for needless wars, when it's clearly for interests way beyond anything like mom, apple pie, and the American dream.

Russell in Army advertisement  
Jeremy's Story: Jeremy Christensen was my best friend, we were inseparable. His mom practically raised me. He joined the Army, came back from Basic and AIT and said, “you gotta go.” So I did. I served from 1996 to 2002. When I got out, I was a corporal in the Field Artillery.

I got tattooed after losing both Jeremy and my cousin Jared in Iraq in November 2004. I wanted to honor them and make sure they were never forgotten. After my cousin Nathan (Jared’s brother) passed, I put him on my back as well. They were the ones killed in action. I thought, who better to have my back than three heroes? I added a tattoo to thank all who gave the ultimate sacrifice; to cover the last spot on my back before another family member was killed.

Nathan was a special funeral. Because he was the second Hubbard that passed, everybody in the small town of Clovis held signs and flags, thanking our family. When Nathan was killed, the third brother, Jason, was still over there. It was all over People magazine, “Saving Private Hubbard.” They pulled him out of combat. Later, they cancelled his health benefits and said he had to return his bonus because he didn’t finish. Total outrage. It went up to Schwarzenegger, who brought it to Bush. George Bush signed the Hubbard Act into law shortly after, which says if you’re the sole surviving sibling and you get an honorable discharge, you get your benefits for life.

I have a Purple Heart on my chest in honor of another cousin, Justin Crabbe, a Marine. He stepped on an IED and lost both legs and three fingers in Afghanistan in August 2011, but he’s still kickin’ and in good spirits.

I don’t talk about my service. I didn’t get the opportunity to serve overseas during combat. I’m proud of what I did, but it was nothing compared to what they did and what they went through. It makes me want to do better in my everyday life, just to try to be half the men they were.
Kyle Olsen  
United States Army

Name: Kyle Olsen  
Home: Vancouver, Washington  
Branch: United States Army  
Dates of Service: 1998 to 2006  
Tattoo Category: Memorial  

Kyle’s Story: I enlisted when I was 20. Both my grandfathers had been in the Army, which probably influenced my decision, but mostly I enlisted to try something new. I enlisted as a cavalry scout. The Army sent my whole cav troop to infantry school and completely reclassified us.

On June 4, 2004, three soldiers of D Company, 2nd Battalion, 162nd Infantry Regiment were killed in action in Baghdad, Iraq. They died in a baited ambush, coming to the aid of another element which had been struck by an IED. As SGT Everly and SPC Linden, both Army Combat Lifesavers, ran to provide aid to the wounded, insurgents detonated a second IED, killing both instantly and mortally wounding LT McGee.

I was on the quick-reaction force that responded when the platoon sergeant called in the attack. When we left, we only knew we had wounded; we had no idea we had already lost two soldiers and would soon lose a third. That call came before we arrived, and it was devastating. Our rescue mission had become a casualty collection mission. We later learned that the IED was the first in a deadly chain of IEDs that failed to detonate properly. Had the attack gone as planned, we would have lost many more soldiers.

I served with these men for years, and knew them well. Linden was one of my closest friends. To this day, I struggle with the fallout of that terrible afternoon. The memory of these three men will never leave me, nor will my guilt over not being there, over living when others did not. The tattoo is an original piece of art that I did, based off a photograph from the battlefield memorial service. It is a reminder to myself of what I once had and what I lost, who I was then and who I am now, and three faces I will never see again. The motivating part is, assuming I get into medical school, I can help somebody else. I know I can never help the fallen, I can never make that right. But I refuse to fail again.
Name: Victoria Parker  
Home: Vancouver, Washington  
Branch: United States Army  
Dates of Service: March 2004 to March 2009 (Active) 2009 to Current (Reserves)  
Tattoo Category: Memorial  
Tattoo Origin: August 2008, Ed Lott at Slave to the Needle in Wallingford, Washington

Victoria's Story: I was Active Duty from March 2004 to 2009, then directly transferred to the Reserves. I graduated (OSUT) in August 2004 and went straight to Ft. Lewis. I'd waived home town recruiting and was in Iraq within three weeks of graduation. I in-processed at the Reception Battalion my first week, met my battalion and company, and qualified on my weapons the second week. I out-processed by the third week and headed down range.

It was a shock, very surreal. I still remember the bus ride to the airport. I called my dad and cried the whole way. I was 18 and going to war. At 17, I barely realized we were in a war. I knew what happened with 9/11, but the concept of war hadn't sunk in. Once I got boots on ground there was no time to think about it. I just did my job.

As a unit, we were tight. I lost five brothers on my second deployment. I decided to get their names tattooed on my arm as a way to honor them, and remind others the price our young people paid for their freedoms. I took a photo of Sgt Emery's Memorial and sent it to a couple artists.

When I found an artist that could draw it in pen (without looking like a cartoon), I knew it was time. At the bottom is Tony Sanchez, my grandfather and World War II Veteran. I lost him right after completing OSUT. When I get old, maybe too old to remember my own name, I will at least know them, they will always be remembered.

When another vet sees it, there's an automatic understanding. It's a unifying symbol. We can read each other's service history off our tattoos. It lets people know who you've served with, where you came from, and if you lost somebody. Not everyone fights on the front lines in combat, and women even less so. When somebody sees that on my arm, they know where I'm coming from. I'm never without family. Veterans are all related by our service. We all unify under one flag and oath.
Christian's Story: I enlisted January 2012. I got promoted in basic to combat medic. So I went down to San Antonio, they get you to be a nationally certified EMT and then move you on to combat medicine. I have about three weeks left in the field before I move on to more training.

I've always been patriotic and politically active and interested. My political views may be a little more progressive than the common denominator in the Army. If you want to change something, you have to understand it. If you want to understand it, you have to engage it. I also believe in service, that if you want to benefit from it, you should be able to lay down some service to government and country. Also, this is my home. My friends, family and history come out of this country and if you want to make it better and be proud of it, you should be able to serve it. The Army is how I chose to do it.

I got tattooed pretty quick, young and dumb. I've got this old glory stuff, you know having girls on you is just good luck, and the eagle tearing away to show red, white and blue underneath. I've always been patriotic. I got these before I joined the Army.

These are what I just had done; a medic/nurse kind of homage that I had my artist draw up for me. My mom's a nurse and I'm a medic. A little seal that says Love It Or Leave It. I'm not particularly religious, but thought this was bad ass, it says God's Country with an eagle.

When other guys in the service see my tattoos, they love 'em. It's cool to be in the service and have tattoos that remind you of your service and your country. You can tell these guys believe what they're doing and are proud of what they're doing. A tattoo's a good way to show it. I like being able to look down and I like being able to carry them with me. I think of them as my totem.
HIDDEN MEANINGS

Many popular military tattoos have their roots in superstition and symbolism. The list below includes some common examples, although there are varied accounts of each tattoo's original meaning. How many of these can you find on the tattoo board cutouts in the exhibit?

- **SPARROW OR SWALLOW**
  A bird signified 5000 thousand miles traveled; other accounts claim they're lucky because they always find their way home or to dry land.

- **ROOSTER AND PIG**
  The stories abound on this pairing. A rooster and a pig on the calves, ankles, or tops of the feet were believed to prevent drowning. The reasoning was that these animals were normally kept in wooden crates. If a ship sank, the crates would float and wash ashore, allowing these animals to enjoy a higher survival rate than their shipmates.

Alternate stories included the ditty, "Pig on the knee, safety at sea. A cock on the right, never lose a fight." Others believe that tattoos of pigs and chickens ensured the bearer always had ham and eggs and would never go hungry.

- **CROSSES**
  Crosses on the tops of both feet were thought to prevent drowning and shark attacks.

- **HOLD FAST**
  HOLD and FAST across the knuckles reminded sailors to hold the line tightly, keeping them from falling overboard or dropping a line.

- **ROPE**
  Rope around the wrist symbolized being a dockhand.

- **STARS**
  Two stars, a nautical star, or a compass rose were thought to ensure always knowing the way home.

- **ANCHORS**
  An anchor signified both sailing the Atlantic and the merchant marines. Crossed anchors on the web between the thumb and index finger indicated a bosn's mate.

NOTE: TATTOOS ON STANDS BASED ON STENCIL DESIGNS BY NORMAN KEITH "SAILOR JERRY" COLLINS, ©2002 KATE HELLENBRAND.