

Brushstrokes of Healing

Using art & history as a trauma-informed doorway into veteran mental health engagement

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The Engagement Problem

Veterans face layered barriers to mental health engagement — barriers that are personal, cultural, and structural. Help-seeking can feel like a threat to military identity. Civilian systems are often distrusted to understand combat experience or moral injury; and standard clinical entry points — intake forms, diagnostic language, symptom screening — can overwhelm before care even begins.

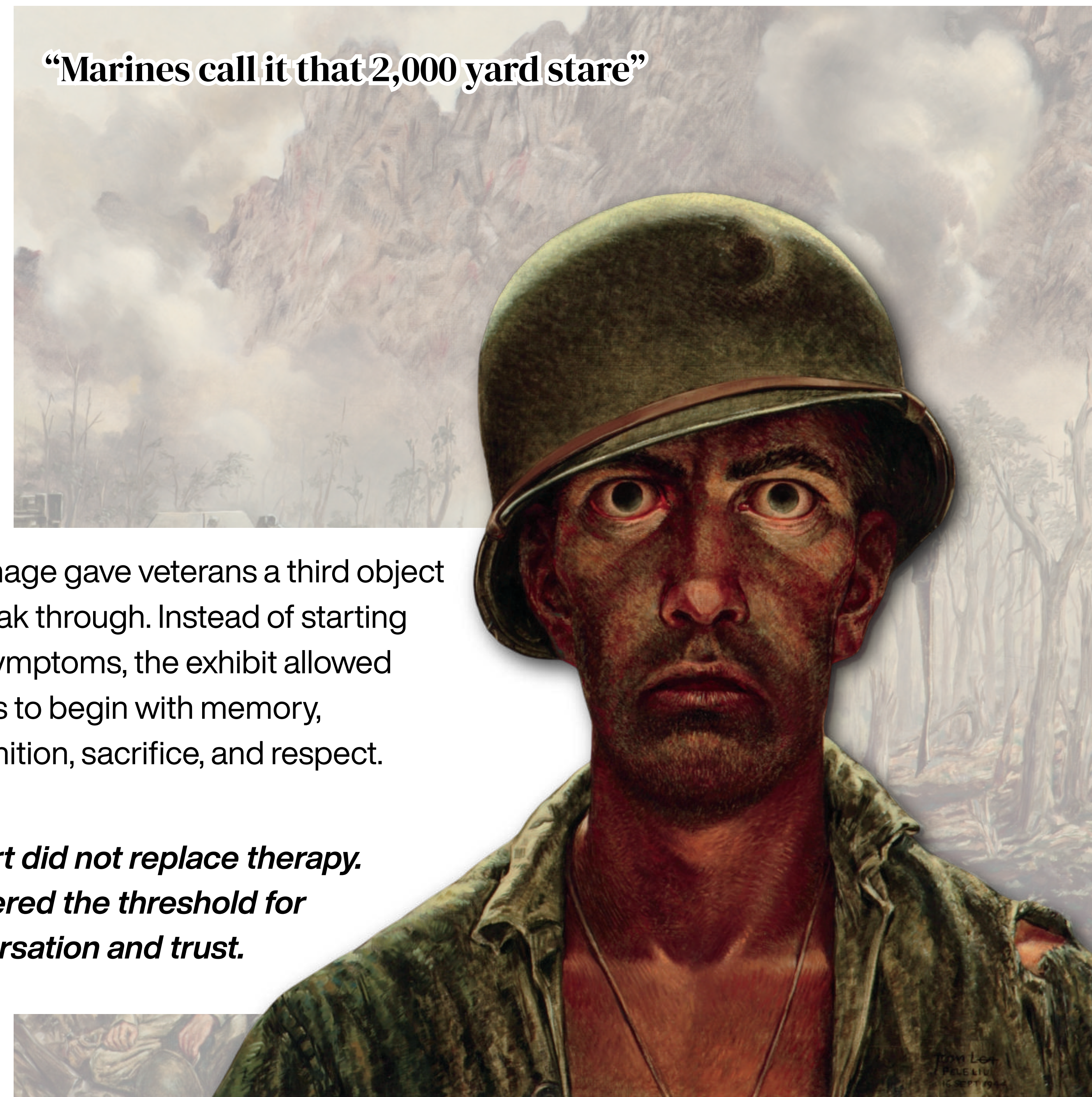
Emergence Health Network's partnership with the Tom Lea Institute for *Brushstrokes from the Frontlines of WWII* offered an alternative first doorway: one rooted in shared military heritage, narrative, and art rather than clinical protocol.



Trauma-informed Safeguards

- Choice
 - Visitors controlled whether to enter, pause, speak, or leave
- Context
 - Staff framed difficult images through history and meaning, not shock value
- No forced disclosure
 - Conversation was invited, never required
- Supported exits
 - Clinicians and peers were available if affective distress or acute need emerged
- Warm handoffs
 - Visitors could move from reflection to services only when ready

“Marines call it that 2,000 yard stare”



The image gave veterans a third object to speak through. Instead of starting with symptoms, the exhibit allowed visitors to begin with memory, recognition, sacrifice, and respect.

The art did not replace therapy. It lowered the threshold for conversation and trust.

Our Model: From Art to Access

- **Neutral entry point**
 - A gallery space reduced the immediate pressure of treatment.
- **Shared military language**
 - Historical imagery gave visitors culturally familiar material to discuss.
- **Supported conversation**
 - Clinicians and peers listened first and assessed only when clinically indicated.
- **Connection pathway**
 - Visitors could receive information, referrals, or warm handoffs without coercion.

311 veterans & their families visited the gallery



Replicating the Framework

You don't need a museum. You need a meaningful space, the right partners, and a plan.

- Find a trusted cultural anchor:** A veterans org, historical society, or community institution with existing credibility.
- Design for comfort, not intake:** Remove clinical cues. Let people move at their own pace.
- Brief your team to listen first:** Clinicians step in only when safety or clinical need surfaces.
- Prepare warm-handoff pathways before day one.**
- Plan for hard moments:** Designate support staff and establish crisis escalation in advance.
- Track what happens:** Document attendance, conversations, and referrals

Clinical Interpretation

Trauma-informed care does not require avoiding difficult material. It requires choice, control, context, pacing, and support around difficult material. **Why it worked:** the exhibit was not presented as an assessment, but as an invitation.

Practical Interpretation

Veteran behavioral health systems can improve access by placing support inside culturally meaningful spaces before asking people to enter formal care - creating a scalable, repeatable engagement model, not just an exhibit.

What changed in practice?

This partnership revealed something difficult to achieve through traditional outreach alone: **organic engagement**.

Veterans moved from observation to conversation on their own terms — without being prompted or screened.

The power dynamic that so often defines clinical entry softened, as visitors initiated contact rather than responding to it.

Families, too, found a voice. Art offered relatives a gentler entry point for asking questions, listening, and validating experiences that are often hard to name.

Most significantly, this collaboration demonstrated that cultural engagement can function as a legitimate access strategy — not as decoration, but as infrastructure for care.

For more information on Emergence Health Network or the Veterans One-Stop Center, visit emergencehealthnetwork.org

