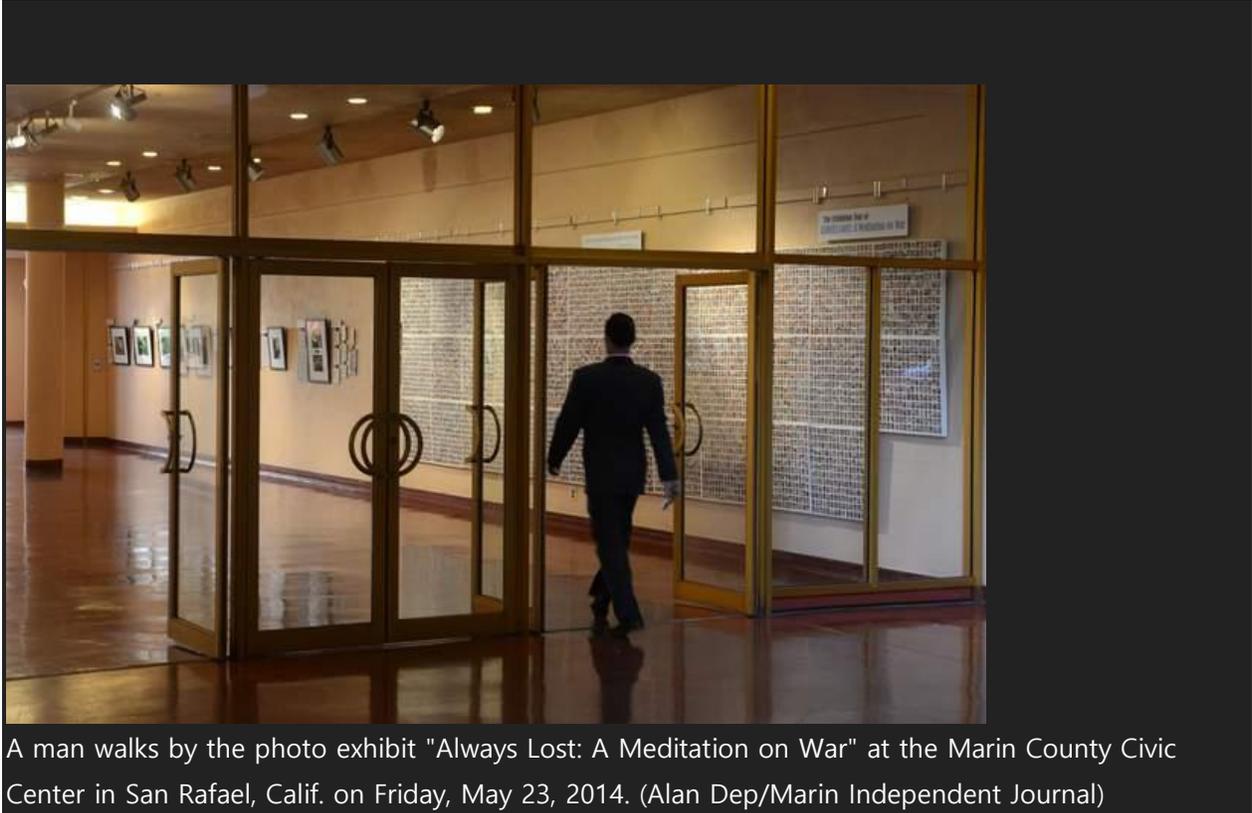


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Civic Center's 'Wall of Dead' memorial exhibit a powerful spectacle



A man walks by the photo exhibit "Always Lost: A Meditation on War" at the Marin County Civic Center in San Rafael, Calif. on Friday, May 23, 2014. (Alan Dep/Marin Independent Journal)

By Nels Johnson, Marin Independent Journal

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AN ELDERLY MAN with a shock of white hair stood in silence, his hands clasped, head slightly bowed, as the riveting exhibit at Marin County Civic Center loomed before him.

The photos of 6,700 U.S. war dead since Sept. 11, 2001 stared back, with the faces and names of those who died in Iraq and Afghanistan boxed in a grid on 35 panels called the "Wall of the Dead."

The old man, who appeared deeply touched by the heartbreaking spectacle, did not respond to a reporter's inquiry but might well have agreed that the first floor Administration Building exhibit echoed philosopher George Santayana's observation, emblazoned on the wall, that "only the dead have seen the end of war."

Among those on the wall are two Marin County men, Army specialists Jake Velloza of Inverness and Nicholas Olson of Novato, both killed in 2008.

"Always Lost: A Meditation on War," a powerful, poignant tribute to the nation's most recent war dead, was triggered by a creative writing class assignment at Western Nevada College in 2009. The acclaimed exhibit, now on tour across the country, includes eloquent Pulitzer Prize photographs by David Leeson

and Cheryl Diaz Meyer of the Dallas Morning News depicting the war in Iraq. The display includes interviews with veterans, observations and literary work by students, family members and others.

The exhibit, which takes its name from Gertrude Stein's reflection that "war is never fatal but always lost. Always lost," will be on display through June 13 under a program sponsored by the county library.

"It has graphic photographs and poignant pieces of literary expression of the human cost of war," Librarian Sara Jones said. "The library also wanted to bring attention to the newest generation of veterans and highlight the assistance available to them."

Marin Veterans Services Officer Sean Stephens, who served four tours in Afghanistan, noted the exhibit stirs strong emotions.

"It will affect every veteran differently," Stephens said. "Although some will be emotionally strong enough to handle viewing it, not all will be."

Visitors may pick up information about veterans' services and sign a guest book.

"An honest, poignant remembrance and honor for those willing to fight for ideals and freedom and for me," reflected visitor Cathleen Guerrtime in a note. "Thank you Marin Civic Center for hosting this important and under-publicized exhibit."

"Superb. Overwhelming," one man wrote. "Astounding," another said. "Reminds me of the graphic news reporting of the Vietnam War, which helped bring that horror to an end."

But the old man who stood in silence at the exhibit the other day was speechless. When he finally turned to leave, his eyes seemed to glisten with tears. He walked slowly down the hall, without stopping to sign the guest book, and it was clear that for him there was nothing to say.

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A photo taken during the war in Iraq by Dallas Morning News photojournalist David Leeson hangs in the Marin Civic Center in San Rafael, CA on Friday, May 23, 2014. It is among the Pulitzer Prize-winning images by Leeson and Dallas Morning News colleague Cheryl Diaz Meyer in the exhibit "Always Lost: A Meditation on War."

(Alan Dep/Marin Independent Journal)



A photo of Nicholas Olson of Novato is among the more than 6,500 American military war casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan since Sept. 11, 2001 included in a photo exhibit at the Marin County Civic Center in San Rafael, Calif., photographed on Friday, May 23, 2014. (Alan Dep/Marin Independent Journal)



Jack Basinger of Novato pauses before a wall photos on exhibit in the Marin County Civic Center in San Rafael, Calif. on Friday, May 23, 2014. "Always Lost: A Meditation on War" includes photos of more than 6,500 American military war casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan since Sept. 11, 2001. (Alan Dep/Marin Independent Journal)