



Students, staff, faculty and community members from St. Cloud State prepare to “thank a Veteran” during a Veteran’s Day event held on Nov. 13, 2014.

A year of reelection on Service

By Zachary Mangas - Interim Director, St. Cloud State Veterans Resource Center

St. Cloud, Minn. - It was a busy fall/spring semester at St. Cloud State University. Just a week shy of students flooding back to campus in late August, the school nestled along the mighty Mississippi River welcomed its second Veterans Resource Center (VRC) director – Zac Mangas, a St. Cloud State alumnus and prior VRC intern. As the semester kicked off, he and a group of Veterans Affairs work-study students got to work on scheduling events to recognize the experiences and sacrifices that veterans go through. The first event honored all who perished on September 11, 2001 – known as Patriot Day. “

“Patriot Day is about remembering the nearly 3,000 deaths that occurred on 9/11,” said Michael Thompson, St. Cloud State student veteran. “We feel it is important to honor their sacrifice. For many, that tragic day was the reason for joining the service. Now I’m in school getting an education. Some of the children of the deceased are in college right now, it could have happened to anyone of us – we should never forget that.”

During the event, members of the VRC marched out in

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A Message From the Interim Director

Greetings to my fellow veterans, service members, families and alumni. I can’t tell you enough how honored I am to be serving as the interim director of the Veterans Resource Center here at St. Cloud State University. This campus certainly has amazing students who are making leaps and bounds toward achieving their degrees. Many of these students happen to be veterans, current service members and family members of veterans. During my time in graduate school here at St. Cloud State, I got to know some of these students firsthand through a VRC internship. It has been a privilege to hand several student veterans their service graduation cords and watch them walk down the stage during commencement. I continue to stay in touch with them following their departure from this institution because that is what veterans are, one large family, and St. Cloud State has some of the best student veterans around.

There is much support here at St. Cloud State. In 2014, the university was honored for the fifth time with the prestigious Top Military-Friendly School award by Military Advanced Education, a magazine dedicated to locating the best universities for veterans around the country based on the resources available on each campus. When I arrived back to this campus and took this position, I was greeted with open arms. Many staff and faculty wanted to know how they could partner on programming and assist in getting the veterans experience out on campus, as well as in the community. We are currently doing this and look forward to continuing this mission within the future.

Our main goal is to assist SCSU students in achieving academic success at our university and prepare them for their chosen career and life when they graduate. With that being said, we are doing the best we can to help more than 700 student veterans and dependents who are attending St. Cloud State. After 14 long years of war drawing to a close, we will continue to see a large student veteran presence increase here at our university and with that comes more challenges.

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Student veterans raise the flag to half mast during a Patriot Day observance at St. Cloud State on Sept. 11, 2014.



Student veterans at St. Cloud State discuss their experience in the military and life as a student during a panel discussion.

uniform, raised the flags up to the top of the flag poles in front of the administration building, and then lowered them to half staff while the military song “Taps” played in the background by a St. Cloud State trumpet player. Members of the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) program stood in formation and saluted in honor. A timeline of the attack was read by the interim Student Veterans Organization president and a moment of silence was observed. Following the program, the students, staff, faculty and community members were welcomed into the VRC for refreshments and reflection surrounding that disheartening day.

Each year, first-year students and others from the university participate in a program called the Common Reading Program. A book is selected by a committee and this past year it happened to be “Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War.” The novel features veterans and family members sharing their military experience through fictional stories of war and how it impacted them through their lens. A student veteran panel was held in late September to discuss the book and allow students and other faculty to ask questions to St. Cloud State veterans about their experience and transition to college.

“The fact that they were able to connect the book to a person was very educational for the students,” said Jesse Abel, second year student veteran at St. Cloud State. “We had individuals come to the VRC several days after to ask more about our experiences. You can read a book all day, but to be able to apply certain stories to the lives of real human beings makes it special.”

The month of October was marked with programming geared towards assisting in the efforts of bridging the gap between citizens and the experiences of veterans. Minnesota was the first state to pass legislation addressing this concern, which dedicates an entire month to telling the stories of veterans through their point of view. This past October, known as Veterans Voices Month (VVM), was the initial year of existence.

The first VVM event featured a panel of student veterans discussing their deployments to Iraq, Afghanistan and Kuwait. Students and members of the community listened and asked questions about the deployments. Following Q&A, the audience viewed the documentary “*Restrepo*,” a film following a platoon of soldiers who struggled to hold onto an outpost in the Korangal Valley of Afghanistan for one year as members of the Taliban attacked their area of operations. It was not an easy film for the community to watch.

“*Restrepo*” highlighted the diversity of what each branch of the military accomplishes,” Abel said. “It told the story of what it’s like to be on a deployment, whether it’s in a combat zone or whether it’s being away from your family for a long period of time – most people don’t get to view a situation where they see a true version of war, losing fellow soldiers who you get to know during the movie. It’s a very powerful film.”

The second event, held one week after “*Restrepo*,” was a Q&A session with WWII veteran Larry Tillemans. Mr. Tillemans is the last living court-clerk who was in attendance at the Nuremberg trials. The trials prosecuted and convicted war criminals following WWII, including Hitler’s second in command – Hermann Göring.



Dr. Daniel Wildeson holds Q&A session with veteran Larry Tillemans after viewing “The Typist” Oct. 22, 2014.

The audience gathered into the Miller Center auditorium and filled it almost to capacity. It was a true tribute to how the community of St. Cloud and the surrounding area has a yearning to learn from the past and a curiosity to hear more about the atrocities that occurred during the Holocaust.

“Larry’s voice is helpful in giving us a sense of the magnitude of the Nazi’s crimes against humanity,” said Dr. Daniel Wildeson, director of the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Education. “He brings a perspective gained by his raw proximity to the perpetrators, the mountains of paper on which they documented their destruction and targeted killing, and the countless testimonies of those who witnessed it and were victimized by it. Larry is on a

mission driven by an understanding of the fundamental reality that to forget and fail to learn from this history is to find ourselves in a dangerous risk of seeing it happen again.”

The last week of October featured an event, Veteran Storytellers, on the stage of the Quarry in Atwood Memorial Center. The on-campus event was held during the lunch hour to give St. Cloud State students and employees a chance to hear from student veterans, as well as faculty, staff and community members who have served. Each participant shared what their military service meant to them through storytelling, poetry, art and music.



Dr. Martin Breaker discusses his experience in the service during Veteran Storytellers at St. Cloud State Oct. 29, 2014.

“It was interesting to hear from the students, as well as other faculty on campus who have served,” said Dr. Martin Breaker, St. Cloud State veteran faculty member. “For the generations of the past, war was something you were told to forget when you came back. Being able to discuss certain situations of the veteran experience helps in the healing process for many.”

Dr. Breaker shared a story of his service where he was in charge of putting the trial together that tried Saddam Hussein for crimes against the citizens of Iraq. All of the participants opened up to the audience to help them understand what service is like and to convey what they learned during their time away from loved ones.



A child plays a game during the 2nd annual Trunk- or- Treat event featuring student veteran support on Oct. 31, 2014.

Veterans’ Voices Month ended with a fun event that collaborated with the Student Parent Support Initiative and the Lindgren Child

Care Center in October. The second annual Trunk-or-Treat was held next to the Child Care Center allowing children to dress up in costumes and visit decorated trunks of vehicles in a safe environment. Nearly 150 children and parents participated in the event making it a great success. Prizes donated by the on-campus bookstore went to the best-decorated trunk, which this year was a fishing theme where children could fish for candy.

Acknowledgement of the veteran experience continued into a chilly November with a Veteran’s Day program honoring a local WWII veteran, Virgil Gruenke. Gruenke served on the USS Taylor throughout the pacific theater of operations. His naval destroyer fought in several battles and escorted the USS Missouri into Tokyo Bay where the ship hosted the surrender ceremonies of the Empire of Japan. It was a special program for many.



WWII veteran Virgil Gruenke displays photos of his time in the Navy during a Veteran’s Day event Nov. 13, 2014.

“Having a local WWII veteran come to St. Cloud State for Veteran’s Day was very important for many reasons,” said St. Cloud State student veteran Nate Baltés. “Hearing Virgil tell his story provided good reflection on our nations past. Due to people like him, we are allowed to have the rights and liberties that we enjoy in America today. The number of WWII veterans are decreasing each year, I’m glad we could have him on campus.”

After the program, Mr. Gruenke was invited to cut the Veteran’s Day cake and share in coffee and conversation with those in attendance. After eating, Gruenke said he was very happy to have been invited to campus to share his story and to meet today’s generation of veterans and service members.

“It’s important they (veterans) connect with one another and with the outside community,” said Gruenke. “Life really does go by quick, it’s important we don’t forget what all our sacrifice is about.” The sacrifice given by those who have/are putting the uniform on does not go unnoticed at St. Cloud State. The VRC plays an integral role in connecting veterans with resources available, getting education benefits initiated, and helping veterans transition into the campus life.

“I don’t think I would be alive today if it wasn’t for the Veterans Resource Center,” said a St. Cloud State student veteran during a panel discussion. “When I came back I went through some struggles, I still do. There is a good chance I would never be here if it wasn’t for the VRC.”

Staff, faculty and administrators understand the need to have a Veterans Resource Center on campus and are fully supportive



Operation Iraqi Freedom 2005 north of Al Qiam, Iraq near the Iraq/Syrian border (Syrian Desert).

of offering an environment where they can transition smoothly to campus life. They also understand the need to partner with outside groups and offer programs that will continue to assist in efforts of bringing service members home, completely. One nearby program is making strides in doing just that.

Equine therapy has been found to make great improvements in the lives of veterans struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, addiction and other mental health related illnesses. Toward the end of November, the VRC partnered with True Strides, an equine therapy center located in Maple Lake, MN, to pilot a veteran therapeutic riding program.

“It’s a bonding experience,” said St. Cloud State student veteran Brian Dean. “You learn to create trust while riding the horse in a non-judgmental arena. They feel your head move, arms, legs – everything. You learn to work with them to get to where you want to go. Emotionally, spiritually and physically it is what I need to help clear my head – it’s great.”

The program was a success and now the group has reached out to another program from Malibu, CA – Save-a-Warrior. Save-a-Warrior, known as the acronym SAW, allows veterans to experience transition in their ongoing struggles through meditation, equine therapy, experiential therapy to include a high-level ropes course, addiction counseling and other forms of therapy. Because of the partnership between True Strides and the St. Cloud State’s VRC, SAW has now expanded their program to an area near St. Cloud this summer and will be offering assistance to veterans at no charge, funds raised by kind-hearted donors.

“The greatest measure of Save-a-Warrior’s success is tracking the stability of past program participants,” said Shari Mangas, director of True Strides. “Although most participants either attempted or had thoughts of suicide, none of the 180 warriors who have completed the program have resorted to carrying it out. Right now there is an estimated 22 veteran suicides per day. Having this program located in Central Minnesota will help assist in lowering that number immensely within our region.”

One other project the VRC is working on is constructing an on-campus memorial dedicated to veterans.

“We want to honor those who have sacrificed for their country, this is a great way to do it,” said Zac Mangas, interim director, St. Cloud State Veterans Resource Center. “Donors who contribute to our student veteran scholarship fund will be listed on this memorial. Many of our students have assistance, such as the G.I. Bill, however many of our student veterans have families and it can be a great struggle when benefits don’t cover additional costs of living during their mission of obtaining a degree.”

The St. Cloud State Veterans Resource Center is looking forward to serving the student veteran population in 2015-16 and will be playing a vital role in helping make the transition back to civilian life a little easier for it’s nations heroes. To learn more about the construction of the St. Cloud State veteran memorial and how to donate, or for further information on resources for veterans at SCSU, please call 320-308-2958.



A First-year student visits with student veterans to gain insight on their experience in the VRC Oct. 30, 2014.



Student veterans work on clearing trails at True Strides in preparation of SAW program.



Members of the Student Veterans Organization participate in the Trunk-or-Treat at St. Cloud State Oct. 31, 2014.



Trunk-or-Treat event at St. Cloud State.



Larry Tillemans event at St. Cloud State.



The Veterans Resource Center attended the St. Cloud Stand Down to discuss benefits with veterans.



Photos tell the stories of homeless veterans and their struggles during the Veteran Storyteller event at St. Cloud State Oct. 29, 2014.



Students play music for the audience of the Veteran Storyteller event held at St. Cloud State Oct. 29, 2014.



Members of the St. Cloud State ROTC program participate in a military appreciation day during a football game in early fall.



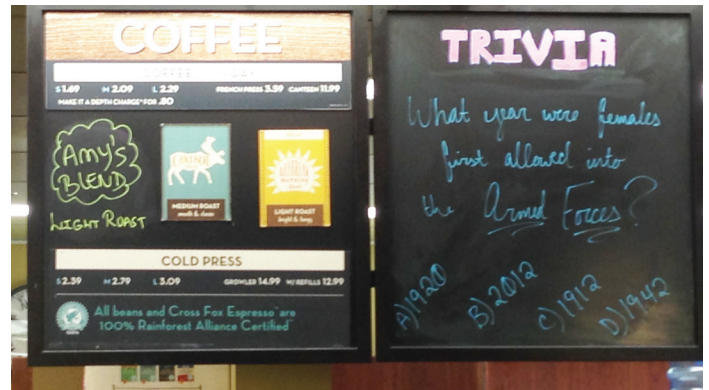
Huan Nguyen shows attendees his travels as he took his family out of Vietnam.



WWII Navy veteran Virgil Groenke shows St. Cloud State students photos of his service during the Veteran's Day program.



As part of Veterans' Voices Month, the VRC showed the award-winning documentary Restrepo to the campus community.



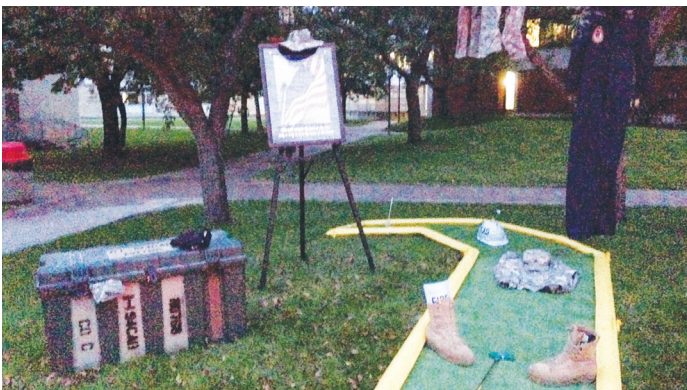
The on-campus Caribou Coffee asked veteran/military questions all month long during Veterans' Voices Month.



The Veterans Resource Center tables to discuss resources available during advising and registration.



Students fill out thank you cards to be sent to the VA for Veteran's Day.



The Veterans Resource Center sponsored a miniature golf hole during the Blizzardshack event at St. Cloud State.



The St. Cloud State ROTC program and student veterans observe Patriot Day at St. Cloud State.



Members of the St. Cloud State Student Veterans Organization walk in the Veteran's Day parade.



St. Cloud State students, staff, faculty, and members of the community take time observe Patriot Day Sept. 11, 2014.



St. Cloud State ROTC members salute during the Patriot Day observance event held Sept. 11, 2014.



Jonathan Ellig "Reality Exchange" Solo Art Show at SCSU Gallery Vault, Downtown St. Cloud, MN



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A Message From the Interim Director

I have personally seen quite a few student veterans struggle at various points throughout the semester financially. The amount of time it takes to graduate from a four-year institution is no longer four years, it is closer to six. This extended amount of time becomes an issue with college benefits, which generally cover only four years. Many of our heroes of freedom have families and are at a challenge each month to make ends meet. We can assist these student veterans by offering scholarships to those who are in need, that is why we ask for your assistance if you can help. Please consider making a donation to our scholarship fund at the Veterans Resource Center. Your donation, however big or small, will go to good use and help a veteran and family in need.

Thank you,
Zachary Mangas
Interim Director
Veterans Resource Center
St. Cloud State University

To make a donation to the SCSU Student Veterans Scholarship Fund, call 320-308-3984.



(The following four photos - John Thell, Studying Abroad 2013-2014.)
Above: Before Japanese Festival.



Kinkakuji in Kyoto.



Tokugawa Castle in Kyoto.



Yakiniku at Kyooske.



VETERANS RESOURCE CENTER ST. CLOUD STATE UNIVERSITY

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The Veterans Resource Center wants to hear from you, through newsletters like this and emails. If you would like to receive information or you wish to contribute a story or update, contact us at **(320) 308-2185** or **zmangas@stcloudstate.edu**.

 Find us on Facebook
<https://www.facebook.com/scsvvrc>

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