

Left. Left. Left, Right, Left
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Porcelain (2012), Given to Families of Whose Fallen Soldiers Are Memorialized by These Boots and Dog Tags, Courtesy Giuseppe Pellicano

Description:

Left. Left. Left, Right, Left. was an installation created to commemorate the fallen soldiers of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation New Dawn. The title stems from a cadence call used in the military during marching or running formations to keep soldiers in step with each other and is sung out from one soldier, then repeated by others. This call and response interaction between soldiers provides camaraderie and unity. This type of communication was reflected between the soldiers' families and me during the process of creating the individual boots and throughout the project. I sent out the call to the families and friends of the fallen and asked them to respond with information so I could honor their loved ones.

Thirteen years ago I enlisted into the United States Military and was adopted into a “family” that consisted of other men and women who chose to serve. I use the term family because I care for my fellow soldiers as I do my own brothers and sisters. We experienced many happy and difficult times together during my short, almost five-year stay, and in this period we built connection, love, and respect



Courtesy of North Central College

that will last forever. My military family will always be in my heart and mind, and when I learn that a soldier has fallen, it affects me the same way it would if I had lost one of my own siblings.

I began this project with the idea to create porcelain boot to represent each fallen soldier. I made a mold of an actual combat boot, which consisted of five parts, each creating the design for all sides. My concept represented the reality that each soldier died with his or her boots on, meaning they died fighting or serving. Based upon an old tradition when parents bronzed their newborn's shoes to memorialize their first steps into this world, I created a porcelain boot to commemorate each soldier's final steps out.

I first banded the five parts of the mold together, mixed the porcelain slip, and poured it directly into the



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mold. After fifteen to twenty minutes I poured out the excess. I then waited up to five hours before releasing the boot from the mold. When the slip was dry enough to release, I removed the seams left by the mold and smoothed and cleansed the surface areas of the boot. I then placed a hole in the tongue of each boot before it was fired and fastened the dog tags for each soldier after the firing was completed. I realized that each boot represented a life and that this person was loved by others. As I delicately

cleaned each boot, I imagined each soldier's body being cleaned and how their wounds are prepared so that he or she could arrive home to family and friends, ready for a memorial or funeral service. While cleaning the boots, I was again preparing them for family and friends to view. I chose porcelain, as it is the most precious of the many clay bodies that are used, and this would illustrate the respect I wished to present. I feel they deserve no less than the best. After firing, the boot remained white; this is the porcelain's natural color after bisque, which I feel presents a feeling of stillness and silence.

When I started slip casting each boot, I became overwhelmed with the potential number of boots I would need to make. Thousands of soldiers have fallen and I obviously knew it would be impossible to create one for each. However, I felt that the many I could make would inevitably reflect them all.

It was important for me to make each boot from the same mold. In religions, as well as in scientific theories, it is thought that we are all essentially made from the same elements or from the same design. I wanted to mirror this view in that each soldier is made from the same flesh and blood as the next, regardless of race, religion, or sex. We are all consistent in our existence, as are the soldiers who wear the same uniform and serve in the same institution. A plaster mold's short lifespan inhibited my ability to produce a greater number of porcelain boots, which I could have done if I had made numerous molds. For this installation, I made 100 boots, representing 100 soldiers who died in the line of duty.

In addition to my efforts to illustrate this thought of similarity regardless of individuality, I also decided to use dog tags. When visiting the National Veterans Art Museum, I saw a 10-by-40-foot sculpture, entitled *Above & Beyond*, which was designed by Ned Broderick and Richard Steinbock. There were thousands of dog tags that represented soldiers lost in Vietnam. The tags, like mine, had only the soldier's name, date of death, and branch of service.

Dog tags are worn to identify soldiers. They are typically worn around the neck, but in times of combat or deployment into hostile areas, commanders may order that one of the two tags be placed on the right boot. This is one of the reasons I chose the right boot for display rather than the left boot. The thought



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process was that the right boot would remain with the viewer and with the family or friend, as the left has stepped forward to begin the journey from earth. This is reflective of the military process: when a soldier falls, one tag remains with the body and the other tag is collected by the leadership. Each tag would be placed on each boot to identify the soldier and the date the soldier died. Although each soldier was an individual, he or she worked together for a cause. I felt it was also important to identify each branch of the military: Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines, as doing so demonstrates the combination of the different forces and their unity.

Normally tags contain the soldier's name, Social Security number, blood type, and religion. I chose to leave out certain details as I felt they would distract or cause viewers to have other or distorted views of the soldier. The Social Security number, blood type, and religion were purposely excluded. I do not believe any of this information was central to the work and again thought that including this information would divert the viewer from the overall concept behind this memorial. The main objective of this work is to honor the fallen, not to unintentionally promote a certain religion or a political view. This is a difficult task, as Maya Lin stated, "People cannot resolve that war, nor can they separate the issues, the politics, from it." Maya Lin's work, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., memorializes the fallen in a beautiful simplicity and mentions only their names, but war is political, therefore the thought will always be present. Like Maya Lin, I wanted to create only a memory of the fallen. While the date

of birth of each soldier is and always will be imperative, the date the soldier died is the one I chose to represent. I wanted to keep the work simple and unclouded in communicating a message of remembrance.

The boots were stored safely in a room below the gallery. I retrieved and placed each boot individually onto the floor. While doing so I felt as though I was kneeling in front of each soldier, thanking them and remembering them as I read their name and gently placed the boot on the gallery floor.

For the final display I decided to place them in a formation of 10 boots in 10 ranks. This formation was meant to be in an open order, which in military terms means that there would be enough space between ranks to allow an inspecting officer or leader to pass through. However, due to a lack of space in the area provided for display, I was able to place them only in a close order; this unfortunately inhibited family, friends, and viewers to walk through and look at each individual boot as I had intended with my original concept. There is strangeness about the boots that affected me while creating them and setting them up for display. This eeriness was the knowledge of a lack of presence, but the oddness of them somehow being there with me. When looking at the boots, I envisioned the soldier who died wearing his or her boots. How did they die, what was their last thought, did they suffer? In Eleanor Antin's *100 Boots*, she set rain boots purchased from a surplus store and positioned them engaging in everyday activities: "By following 100 boots, we each become an extra pair. In essence, by simply having people look at the series, Antin has

helped foster a unity among us” (Salimi). I felt as though the fallen were standing in front of me. When I stored them, I was storing lives on a shelf that were waiting to be seen. When on display they were in formation, standing proud and with honor.

As I worked in a call and response fashion with military families to create this memorial, they did respond and often wrote something about their loved one that provided me with insight about that soldier. We worked together and formed close bonds. During the process of collecting the fallen soldier’s information from their family members or friends, I corresponded with many and learned a great deal about each individual soldier. They were loved and greatly admired. It was an emotional three months and with every email I received, my heart ached more. One evening before going to bed, I was emailed a request to include a soldier lost in Afghanistan. On many occasions a family member or friend would write a great deal about their soldier, but with this one, there was only one phrase. It simply said, “Rest in Peace, Brother.” My heart sank. I could not help but feel the pain this person was going through. I was touched deeply by all the words expressed by their family and friends, but this particular phrase overwhelmed me. I recalled the times I had with my fellow brothers and sisters in arms, and I relived the pain I had felt when I received word that some of the soldiers I had known had been killed or injured. I knew this work was meant to be seen and felt by others, so that they may understand the loss and the sacrifice so many have made.

During the installation, I wanted the viewer to be able to interact with the families as I had done throughout the project. In front of the formation of 100 boots was a pedestal with pamphlets containing the names of the soldiers each boot represented.

I created an accompanying booklet containing the letters I received from families and friends. The viewer was able to read about some of the soldiers and learn about the love and admiration the families had for each of them. I also included a hardbound black notebook to which I adhered a dog tag stating, "Letters to the families and friends of the fallen." In the notebook, viewers would be able to write to the families and to create a connection between them. I hoped that this interaction would render an understanding and bring honor and remembrance to the fallen and their loved ones. This practice allows the viewer to be touched by the individual stories as I have been during the creation of the work and, thus, brings a participatory aspect to the installation.

On the day of the opening reception, I was able to meet face to face with some of the families who provided me with the honor of commemorating their soldier. Again, it was very emotional. I was thanked for all my hard work and the time I spent on the project. This thanks perplexed me. These people had a loved one who gave his or her life serving this country. Regardless of the many thoughts and beliefs Americans have about war, politics, and the reason our country decided to deploy, our soldiers did something that so many other people would not do. They had the courage to stand and offer their lives, so others would not have to.

This same selfless service was exhibited by their families and friends, some of whom traveled many hours and from other states just to view their loved one's boot in the installation. Their thankfulness was humbling and caused me some confusion. I chose to create this memorial as a way to thank the soldiers and their loved ones for their service and their sacrifice. Instead, families thanked me for memorializing their loved one.

This project became something more than I had ever intended or imagined. I am thankful to these families for allowing me to learn more about myself and to understand even more greatly the strength they and their loved ones possess. During the installation, we spent two hours together talking about their lives and how they tremendously missed their heroes. They told me about the memorials they have at home in their gardens and of the rooms they have dedicated to their memory.

My intentions were to mail each boot, but for these families and friends who made their way to the gallery, I offered them their boot to take home. I wrapped their boots carefully and handed them to each person with respect and gratitude. I know that I will probably never speak to them again, but they, like their soldiers, will always be in my mind and I will be forever grateful.

The leadership, ethics, and values involved in my research for this project stem from my training in the U.S. Military. As part of this training I learned the seven core values associated with being a soldier in the Army. These values are Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Honor, Integrity, Selfless Service, and Personal Courage—all of which I carry into my civilian life, try to live by, and often create

works which invoke these characteristics and beliefs. This work exemplifies these values. It acknowledges and commemorates soldiers who fell during the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars and asks others to become aware of the courage and strength they, their families, and their friends display during such hardships.

Martin Chemers notes that leadership is the “process of social influence in which one person can enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task.” As a Non-Commissioned Officer in the Army, I learned the many attributes one must possess in order to become a successful leader. Of the many, one fixed itself above the rest. This is the belief that a leader should lead by example. I wanted to not only memorialize the fallen, but to show others that the selfless service these men and women demonstrated should be celebrated. I am not suggesting that others should follow suit and join the military, but only recognize these soldiers’ bravery in hopes that it may influence us in a manner that we can all follow. These men and women placed the welfare of the nation, the Army, and their subordinates before their own and by doing so, provided us with safety and modeled appropriate manner. Consideration of others fuels the common good and they lead by such an example.

The boots were shipped out to the family members and friends who I have reached all across America. I hope that when they received the boot, they will know that many other people have seen their loved one’s name and that their hero will be remembered. I am honored to be able to create a memorial for my brothers and sisters, and although it was a brief presentation, their

families and friends will be able to look at the boot they are presented and recall their loved one's bravery, service, love, and their time with us.

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