Anna Reich: The grass outside our homes

November 11, 2017 – February 4, 2018
As we approach all the transitions in our lives, we inevitably begin to imagine what life will be like when things change. From the first day of school to the last day of school, from the beginning of adulthood and first jobs to relationships, from illnesses and losses to planning for retirement and beyond, we plan for, we dream of, and we pretend what the next shift will bring to us.

While everyone faces momentous decisions and great challenges in life, few things can compare to the moment when, voluntarily or not, someone enters the military during a time when large numbers of personnel are heading into combat. However, it is an especially important moment when someone makes the decision to enlist knowing that the result of that decision will be a trip into a war zone.

It was a group of such decisions that drew the attention of Anna Reich in 2008. While in college, she knew a group of young men from her hometown who had just made the decision to enlist; they made the decision knowing that either Iraq or Afghanistan would be their likely destination. Though operations in Afghanistan had begun seven years earlier, the numbers of U.S. military personnel had been continually increasing. In 2009, the number would double from 34,000 at the beginning of the year to 67,000 at the end. The number would increase to 100,000 by the end of 2010. Troop levels in Iraq remained constant in 2008, and then began decreasing over the next two years.

Concerned for the safety of the enlistees and trying to understand as fully as possible their expectations, Anna began working on a photography series she later titled *Everything was Beautiful and Nothing Hurt*. This series documented them enacting scenes born both from their experience of war through films, photographs, and history and from their realistic understanding of what lay ahead for them. After fitting them with authentic World War II fatigues, Anna worked with the young men to create images representing their thoughts—both their hopes and their fears.

The work on *Everything was Beautiful and Nothing Hurt* deeply impacted Anna. She writes, “The experience of making this work motivated me to volunteer at VA hospitals in Boston and Chicago, specifically at the Psycho-social Recreation and Rehabilitation Centers, where I spent 18 months (20+ hrs/week) teaching coping strategies and reassimilation skills to veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injuries, and combat-related psychological disorders.”

Anna’s most recently completed project is an outgrowth of this continuing concern with war veterans. She received the support of a U.S. Fulbright Research Grant and a Robert Rauschenberg Artist As Activist Grant. The resulting photographic project, *Lithuanian Afghanai*, examines the lives of Lithuanian Veterans during the Soviet War in Afghanistan from 1979-1989 and through their reintegration into
understood the lyrics on a very personal level because of their lengthy deployments. In addition to US veterans empathizing with Lithuanian vets missing home while on deployments, the title also connects to the project *Everything was Beautiful and Nothing Hurt* because the enactments were staged in the fields and hills around my home community and participants went on to serve in the military."

Anna Reich’s ability to conceive a photographic project and then to work intimately with her subjects produces powerful results. We know that Anna’s primary concern is for the physical and psychological well-being of those who fight on foreign soil for their countries. But she uses her camera to maintain as strong a sense of objectivity and authenticity as possible, as she explores the emotional, even vulnerable stories told by soldiers. Photographs from battlefields have been common since the Civil War. Through these carefully composed photographs, Anna Reich brings us closer to the too often untold personal stories before and after conflicts.

Anna Reich is Assistant Professor of Photography at Augustana University in Sioux Falls, SD.
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cover
Dalius, 2015 (printed in 2017), archival pigment print, 16 x 22 inches
From the series Lithuanian Afghanai

Bevi, 2009 (printed in 2017), archival pigment print, 24 x 32 inches
From the series Everything was Beautiful and Nothing Hurt

Jonas, 2015 (printed in 2017), archival pigment print, 16 x 22 inches
From the series Lithuanian Afghanai