

Jerry Zabel's Heavy Awards Vest

by Kathy Kendrick, RFSPE



We in ISPE know very well the awe and beauty of Thousander Jerry Zabel's artwork, because many of his masterpieces have graced the pages of *Telicom* throughout the past several years. Therefore, it's always a delight to share the great news when Jerry has earned an award from the Department of Veterans Affairs for one of his excellent creations.

The photograph above, taken in May 2025, shows Jerry at the National Veterans Creative Arts Festival in Indianapolis, IN, proudly sitting in front of his gold-medal-winning oil painting, titled, "What Are You Looking At?" (which can be seen more clearly on page 134 of this *Telicom* issue).

As always, Jerry's painting is so magnificent, onlookers can hardly tell if it is a painting or a photograph—and I can tell you we're all also "looking at" that vest full of medals! Jerry's vest now includes 11 national art medals and 8 US Army decorations. As you can imagine, and as Jerry told me, "That vest is heavy."

The American Legion Auxiliary published the following article about Jerry Zabel and his spectacular artwork on July 25, 2024, when Jerry won first place for his painting. The article includes a short QA with Jerry and is reprinted here with permission. The original can be found online at <https://www.legion-aux.org/blog/voices-of-veterans-jerry-zabel>.

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Voices of Veterans: Jerry Zabel (Posted on: Thursday, 25 July 2024)

During the summer months, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs facilities hold local Veterans Creative Arts Festival competitions. Categories include visual arts, writing, dance, drama, and music. Most VA facilities conduct their local competitions between May and August—right now, they're in full swing! The VA uses the creative arts as a form of rehabilitative treatment to help veterans cope with PTSD, military

sexual trauma, and more. Winning entries at the local level advance to the national judging process. First-place winners are invited to attend the National Veterans Creative Arts Festival, an annual event co-presented by the VA and American Legion Auxiliary.

U.S. Army veteran Jerry Zabel from the North Chicago VA facility won first place in acrylic painting and military combat experience and second place in oil painting. For the military combat experience category, the veteran must have experienced combat duty during World War II, Korean War, Vietnam, Gulf War, Grenada, Panama, Kosovo, Somalia, and other recognized combats or current combat operations. Zabel served in Vietnam.

When did you start painting?

I was insulted by my art teacher in grammar school, and I didn't paint for a long time again. Then with the GI Bill, I did a bachelor's and MBA at night while I worked. My wife and I got married months after I got out of the service. Doing my bachelor's at night was when I started painting. And now I've been painting for 50 years.

Do you feel like art initially helped you heal?

Not initially. It took a long time for me to put together my own therapy. In order for me to get one of my medications from the VA, I have to see a mental health doctor. He asks his patients about PTSD, and they all say they can't explain it. When he asked me about it, I gave him the same answer, but I elaborated and said, "I know what it *looks* like; I painted it. If you want to know what PTSD looks like inside my head, this is what it looks like." I don't see it that way anymore—I'm past that point. It's been a healing journey since then. That's why I'm not afraid of it anymore.

Have you been to the National Veterans Creative Arts Festival before?

I won first place in 2019, and then I had a second and third place win two other years. I've only

competed in the last four contests. I never wanted to compete because I thought it wasn't fair for other veterans to compete against me because I have developed my painting skills so well.

What is your favorite part of the National Veterans Creative Arts Festival?

I love the exposure it gives to people who are just blind to what happens to soldiers after they stop being a soldier. It has nothing to do with economic background or education. It's just ignorance. It is very well hidden.

The public doesn't like bad messages. People would much rather hide the soldier who is completely burnt up or scarred up than look at him/her. People don't really want to see a woman walk around on a fake leg or two fake legs. But they need to because every one of these people could be the next person to find a cure for cancer. They could be the next person to find a cure for air pollution. They could be the next person to feed the world for free—all these phenomenal resources are wasted because they are pushed aside.



War Horrors: Faces from my Nightmares
(20" x 24", oil on canvas) by Jerry Zabel



Self-Portrait of PTSD
(30" x 30", oil on canvas) by Jerry Zabel

Can you talk about your “military combat experience” artwork?

That particular painting came from a panoramic photo. They were playing the National Anthem at the beginning, and I had started to think about all the people I had trained and how many of them were casualties to Vietnam—because we didn’t train them right. We trained them for open land war, and it was a jungle war, and it didn’t apply well enough to where they were going.

I didn’t know how scrunched up my face was until I looked at that photo, and then I realized that because all of us who are still alive feel that way, maybe it would help other people to know they aren’t alone. That was the basis of my trying to paint that.

The photo was taken in 2019, and I started painting it in 2020. I didn’t finish it until the end of 2023. The reason that one took so long: It’s oil on canvas, and I had to let each layer dry so I could deepen the wrinkles on my face, my throat, my forehead, to show the anguish on my face. I had to really get the depth and the curvature, and it takes a lot of shading to fake the human mind to think

this flat piece of canvas is round. The highlights on the nose and just above the eyebrows and at the top of the ear and where the light hits the lip had to be done well. I wanted to capture everyone’s focus on my face, which is why it has a very plain background and a very plain frame. I didn’t want to distract from the painting. I got through it. I made my peace with God. And I moved on.

Do you feel like there is a healing power to the arts?

It’s the equivalent of cutting open an infection and draining it. Some reactions will never go away. I will always not want to see a Fourth of July fireworks event. It’s not fun for any of us. The nightmares diminish. If you do this therapy long enough for yourself, they will go away. You are still going to be jumpy, but you are going to be able to sleep. That’s a big value. The most important value is it’s helping other people. It helped me.

What advice would you give to fellow Vietnam veterans who have not found the healing power of the arts yet?

You have to keep talking out loud to people. You can’t withdraw. It’s like an infection that seals up. You have to drain that. If you don’t, it will kill you. One way or the other, it will kill you. It will give you a heart attack, it will give you a stroke, you will commit suicide, you will ruin your marriage, nobody in your family will talk to you because you are crazy—you’ve got to keep talking to people occasionally. You have to find a compatriot who has been through what you have been through. You’ve got to just get as many Band-Aids off the wound as possible. Get it to air-dry.

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On behalf of ISPE, congratulations, Jerry! We’re proud of your artwork, of your accomplishments, and of you. Thank you for giving of yourself to help others. I think we can all understand why that vest is so “heavy.” Ω