

THE TENNESSEAN

MUSIC

How these military veterans turned battlefield trauma into song

Erin Enderlin co-wrote "When You Look at Me," to be released July 4



Marcus K. Dowling

Nashville Tennessean

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Key Points

The song was created through SongwritingWith:Soldiers, a non-profit that connects veterans with songwriters to express their experiences through music.

The Fogelmans found the songwriting process therapeutic and hope the song helps other veterans struggling with similar experiences.

The song is one of SongwritingWith:Soldiers' first commercial releases, featuring Enderlin and Randy Houser.

Retired Army Lt. Col. Brent Fogleman served two tours of duty in Afghanistan during his 25-year career.

His wife, Tanja Struyck-Fogleman, is a retired Royal Netherlands Army major who served 24 years and was involved in seven combat deployments.

Moments of grief followed them both home.

"A lot of people do not see what goes on behind what we, as first responders who are veterans, are hiding with our smiles," Struyck-Fogleman said.

The couple worked with singer-songwriter Erin Enderlin to pour their difficult memories into verse. Enderlin performed their collaborative result, "When You Look at Me," on June 28 at the Grand Ole Opry House in Nashville. Enderlin paired with singer-songwriter Randy Houser to create a commercial release of the song. It's due out July 4.

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The song was created through SongwritingWith:Soldiers. Since 2012, the nonprofit has connected more than 6,000 veterans and military families with songwriters.

"Erin helped us write a song that became part of our healing," Brent Fogelman said in an interview with The Tennessean. "It didn't take away the pain, but it helped us carry it with more strength, more pride and a little less silence."

Enderlin, who co-wrote Alan Jackson's "Monday Morning Church" and "Last Call" by Lee Ann Womack, performed the song on the Opry stage.

"Sometimes I'm not OK and I need that to be OK," one verse goes. "Know that I'm finding my own way, when you look at me."

"A song lives up to its fullest, most magical potential as embodying a language with global reach when a listener can feel parts of their experience in the lyrics," Enderlin said. "'When You Look at Me' reminds me that ... it's best to be a little kinder and smile a bit more at each other."

How SongwritingWith:Soldiers works

SongwritingWith:Soldiers offers music-based initiatives meant to ease post-traumatic stress and depression. Music director Jay Clementi said that the group collaborates with Nashville songwriters and veterans to produce approximately 200 songs per year.

"It's a privilege that we have the opportunity to help these stories help people and reach the world," he said.

The Department of Veterans Affairs' National Center for PTSD notes that "PTSD is slightly more common among veterans than civilians."

Maj. Tanja Struyck-Fogleman on the power of the lyric

Struyck-Fogleman, who was involved with numerous NATO missions during her career with the Royal Netherlands Army, wore a red T-shirt to the Opry performance emblazoned with the phrase "Struggle Well." It matched her red leather cowboy boots.

"Presenting to the world as if you're a strong person who is mentally fine protects others from the impact of unexplainable memories of things you've done and seen," she said. "To me, the line 'Sometimes I'm not OK and I need that to be OK' means that, yes, I might be smiling, but there's a lot of pain and struggle behind that, which I'm working through."

"Everyone who suffers through a traumatic experience will deal with day-to-day struggles related to that trauma. But this T-shirt is a reminder that there are things you can do to ensure that you still enjoy life, thrive and grow as a person (despite those struggles). 'Struggling Well' means that you learn how to be more present for life's joy, especially in things like writing 'When You Look at Me.'"

Fogelman talks about not leaving 'a dry eye in the room'

There were few dry eyes in the room, Fogleman said. The performance felt therapeutic.

"It was good to get over my anxieties and open up to getting my stories out there in a safe and trusted environment that allowed me to let my guard down a little, he said.

His wife, struck by the power of the silence that followed her husband's statement, finally let tears stream down her face.

"Because you were struggling so hard," she said, "I think it's fair to say that writing this song is one of the reasons you're still around."