

# Real Men Write

Screenwriters Jayson Floyd, Josh Kelly, and Tyler Grey are all veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom. They have chosen to share their stories as a way of healing and, in doing so, hope to increase civilian understanding of the plight and difficulties all vets face when they return from war.

“We are the war,” says Jayson Floyd, a 27-year-old former Army Ranger sergeant recently back from Iraq. “We’re the modern Vietnam.”

To be in the presence of combat vets is to feel the importance of their stories. They’ll tell you how they convinced themselves they wouldn’t die in combat. Or how it feels to discover who you are at war. Some will tell you how it is to lose your identity as able-bodied. They’ll say that they are not owed anything, they just want people to take an interest and ask them how they’re doing.

Some veterans will also tell you about their screenplays. Writing and producing films

about their wartime experiences allow the vets to cue the public as to how personal this war has become.

While combat vets may not seem likely screenwriters—or cinematographers or post-production sound and image editors—their resourcefulness in navigating the battlefield lends itself to the film industry. Many vets joined the military and went to war because they wanted to be part of something bigger, to collaborate on a greater goal. And, often-times, their war experiences solidified their love of movies.

“We’d watch reruns of TV shows or movies when we were in Afghanistan,” Floyd

says. “It really helped us cope. Then a mortar attack would hit and we’d be slammed back into reality.”

Veterans of the Iraq War are primarily Gen-Xers and Gen-Yers, two generations that are hyper-aware of the film industry and know that many films will be made about Iraq. Many of these vets want those stories to be told in their own voices. They want the story told right—truthfully and wholly, without a political agenda—to allow people to decide for themselves. Who better to bring the Iraq War experience to the screen than a combat vet?

Josh Kelly, an earnest, contemplative former special operations sergeant, grew up all over the world thanks to his Navy father, and spent his 21st birthday in Kuwait. He served three tours in Afghanistan and parachuted into Iraq. Floyd, whose eloquence, *GQ* looks, and charisma defy the one-dimensional soldier stereotype, searched for Osama bin Laden with elite special operations soldiers before he got injured in combat and was medically discharged.

After Kelly and Floyd served a combined three years in Iraq and Afghanistan, the two met at an acting audition in Los Angeles. Floyd keyed in on Kelly’s black KIA (Killed in Action) bracelet memorializing a fallen comrade. A bond was forged.

## Soldiers Scripting

Kelly and Floyd began sharing their combat experiences. They skirted the subject of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) although each alluded to his struggle with it. What started as tentative revelations and cathartic writing experiences inspired them to write and act in their short film *Cope*.



Jayson Floyd and fellow Rangers at their Ranger Indoctrination Program graduation

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"*Cope* is about how every soldier is going to have levels of post-traumatic stress, but pride and shame keep them from addressing it, or even admitting it to themselves and their friends," Kelly explains. "The story is very personal. It's a testament of how Jayson and I helped each other while we struggled to deal with civilian life and the loss of our comrades."

"One-hundred twenty soldiers per week come back from the war and commit suicide," Floyd adds, citing CBS News research based on the Freedom of Information Act. "After five years in Iraq, there have been over 4,000 U.S. military deaths. In that same time period, there have been over 15,000 U.S. military suicides. *Cope* drives home the point that vets aren't going to ask for your help. Instead of throwing them a party or buying them a drink, ask how they're doing."

**"A lot of these veterans are going to need people to let them know it's okay, they're not alone."**

— JOSH KELLY

"I say throw them a party and then ask how they're doing," Kelly jokes.

He says they didn't want to take a military or political stance in the film, they wanted to focus on the soldiers. It's not pro or anti-war, it's just war. "Wars are going to happen long after I'm dead, but the way that we deal with the men and women who fight can change, and it should as we are becoming a more sensitive society."

"There are different ways soldiers handle war," Floyd says. "You can either be indifferent and numb, or you can fight 'in the name of'—in the name of your country, in the name of God. In our film, we each take a different stance. It's a cautionary tale, a tragedy. The character doesn't overcome his flaw. Hopefully, we leave the audience impacted."

Kelly admits it's enough for him if 50 people see the film and it helps them. Floyd agrees. He says it was enough to simply make the film, though he'd like for it to be a springboard. The filmmaking process turned out to be more than the two ever expected, and they know they're fortunate to have an outlet that many other veterans do not. Most of their soldier friends are struggling with civilian life and post-traumatic stress. Floyd was able to put all his pain into the film, and the day they wrapped *Cope*, the guilt and pressure he was feeling dissipated. Filmmaking was his tunnel through PTSD.

"A lot of these veterans are going to need people to let them know it's okay, they're not alone," Kelly says.

And having a relatable film is a good start.

### Another Comrade's Story

Floyd met Tyler Grey, a fellow special operations soldier, in Afghanistan. They developed a camaraderie that only war can help forge. Grey, reserved but affable, was shot twice and an explosion ripped into his arm. "Write me taller," he jokes. "With python biceps. Big pythons." Grey was supposed to be an amputee, but was instead pieced painfully back together over months in the hospital. He lost 65 pounds. So, for the story, Grey gets his wish—he is 6'5." And the pythons are epic.

Grey has started a security firm in Las Vegas and is writing about his war experiences, as well. One page a day, as an industry pro advised him. His screenplay is based on hospitalized combat vets who are forced to go to group counseling and deal with the anger and other

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