The path he traveled to reach this better place was yet another challenging journey. Schmiedeler returned from his second combat tour in spring 2008. He spent a year stateside, and by the time he left the Marines, in May 2009, he was wearing three sergeant's chevrons. He returned to his native Kansas City, Kan., and promptly enrolled at Johnson County Community College, where he floundered.

He discovered that mixing with crowds in confined spaces rattled him, as did class bells and other loud noises. He felt profoundly isolated and made no friends. Although he was studying illustration, his passion, he found no academic footing. He was drinking and partying, not to celebrate but to escape. Schmiedeler explains that his father, who left the family for good when he was 13, was a military man whose service severely changed his personality. More than any battlefield wound, Schmiedeler’s greatest fear was “to come back a different person. That was the scariest possible outcome.”

Anthony Schmiedeler is in a good place now. He will walk down the Hill this spring with a degree in visual communication. He plans to make a career as a visual communicator, and he fervently hopes it will be in what he calls public-interest design, or design for social change, “basically any kind of design where you’re trying to effect positive change in the world.”

The U.S. Marine Corps’ armored assault vehicle weighs 27 tons, yet was designed to drop into the ocean off the back of a ship. It was intended to power through shoreline waves and deposit its payload of 20 infantry riflemen onto a beach, yet hit 45 mph on paved roads. It rides on two tank tracks, but is controlled with a steering wheel.

This is the vehicle of contradictions that Anthony Schmiedeler drove as a Marine, but his missions were never amphibious. The only sand his AAV encountered was in Fallujah, Iraq. He arrived for his first combat tour in winter 2006. The Battle of Fallujah, the bloodiest combat of the Iraq war, raged two years earlier, but the Fallujah that Schmiedeler encountered was perhaps even scarier. The enemy no longer stood its ground and engaged in conventional combat; instead, the elusive terrorists furiously hid roadside bombs—so-called “improvised explosive devices”—attempting to destroy American lives, equipment and morale.

“I’m the No. 1 IED spotter because I’m the driver,” Schmiedeler explains. “Now, the other guys are looking out as well, but they’re also watching the flanks and watching the rear. So all the pressure was on me.”

The job of keeping Fallujah’s supply roads clear and safe fell to Schmiedeler and his brother Marines. Patrol shifts lasted eight hours, during which a driver’s concentration could not waver for even a second.

“It... uhh...” Schmiedeler pauses briefly, as he does often, clearly intending to convey his message precisely, before continuing: “It got old pretty quick.”

One day during the first of two seven-month combat tours, Schmiedeler’s unit was on standby as a quick reaction force. His vehicle encountered enemy assaults. But it was the moments when others were in peril, the unknown fate of close comrades, that stuck with him.

“It’s kind of surreal when you’re actually there,” Schmiedeler says, his soft voice calm, without inflection. “You know getting hurt or killed is a possibility, but that’s not really what’s on your mind. You’re more concerned with everyone else.”

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His twin brother, Ehren, joined the Marines with Anthony, and also served two tours in Fallujah, as a tank crewman. They returned to Kansas City together and enrolled at JCCC together. But while Ehren confidently worked toward his goal of becoming an engineer, Anthony had not yet figured out how to make a career of his artistic skills. More important, he had yet to face the fact that combat had wounded him. His private fears were in danger of being realized.

“\[I was definitely concerned,\]” recalls Ehren Schmiedeler, e’14, a December civil engineering graduate who has launched his career in the Lenexa office of an international firm that specializes in power plant design and construction. “He was just in this party mode, and you could tell that he only did it to not have to worry about anything, you know.” With a push from his brother, Anthony sought help at the Kansas City VA Medical Center. There he was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, given medication and, far more crucial in Schmiedeler’s estimation, counseling: “They opened up my eyes and made me realize I wasn’t the only one dealing with these problems.”

I n fall 2010, both Schmiedeler brothers enrolled at KU and, within a day or two of arriving on campus, attended a meeting of the KU Collegiate Veterans Association. Making new friends over a big spread of pizzas, they sensed they had finally found their first true sanctuary since leaving the Marines.

“We had been home for more than a year and hadn’t really talked to any veterans,” Schmiedeler says. “So it was cool to get back into the life and tell some stories.” Schmiedeler immediately signed up for illustration classes, and his military experience was quickly evident to one of his instructors. Paramount in Marine training, Schmiedeler explains, is the ability to independently identify and solve problems; the instructors, counseling: “They opened up my eyes and made me realize I wasn’t the only one dealing with these problems.”

His first-year troubles at JCCC left him a year short on his G.I. bill scholarship funds. He feared he could not finish school while working full time to support himself and pay tuition. Last spring, his brother suggested that he apply for a new opportunity offered by the Office of Graduate Military Programs, the privately funded KU Wounded Warrior Scholarship for veterans, primary caregiving survivors and surviving spouses and children. Schmiedeler says he was hesitant to apply because he judged his PTSD to be a lesser sacrifice than those suffered by so many others. The scholarship committee did not agree.

“Everybody can see the visible wounds of war,” says Director Mike Denning, c’83, a retired USMC colonel and president of the Alumni Association’s KU Veterans Alumni Chapter. “But it’s the invisible wounds of war that are every bit as debilitating—and potentially even more so, because they are invisible and people may not give them the accommodation that they would otherwise.” Anthony identified for us a vision of what he wanted to do with his life and how the scholarship would contribute to that.”

Anthony Schmiedeler and Jennifer Thornton, a social work master’s student whose Army veteran husband suffers from PTSD, in fall 2013 were named the first recipients of the new $10,000 scholarship. Three more will be named this spring.

“Once that came through, “ Schmiedeler says, “I didn’t have any worries. It gave me another push, just knowing that this school is behind me, trying to help me graduate and fulfill this career path.”

As he slides an unfinished portion of his lunch sandwich across the counter at a popular new Mass Street restaurant—filled with the sort of bustling crowd that once unnerved him—Schmiedeler is asked which chervrons or walking down the Hill in May?

“That’s tough. … They’re actually pretty close … I don’t know.” Again, he pauses. Then: “Probably the diploma, to be honest. It might have been harder to get the sergeant’s chervrons, but I’ll feel more proud about graduating college. That’s a big accomplishment that me and my brother have been talking about doing for years and years and years.”

In Fallujah, Schmiedeler faced more than the horrors of war. He also took to heart the living conditions of people who had nothing, less than nothing, and yet yearned only for security. He recalls the day an Iraqi man waved down his convoy. Schmiedeler expected that the stranger would tell them where to find some bad guys. Instead, he offered a small meal that for Schmiedeler remains a spiritual feast.

“It was chicken. Some really crazy sauce and really dry bread. But it was … it was awesome. I was really happy about that. It was cool to see when Iraqis appreciated you being there. It was really weird just seeing how they lived, the lack of everything that they deal with and that they have no problem with. That was eye-opening.”

“Some of that is probably what pushed me toward the public-interest design, just knowing that we don’t really need everything that we have and there’s a lot of people out there who need help.”

The tools of his trade will be far different this time around, but clearing the path so others might find a safe road to travel is a calling this warrior-artist has already proven he’ll embrace. —

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Jumpstart

KC REP

ASRF

Clockwise from top left: War Was Easier website; Sayso app; Backyard Creatures; Hitchcock book cover; Without Water campaign posters; Blacktop Creative logo designs; logos for the Kansas City Repertory Theatre, Ambler Student Recreation Fitness Center 10th anniversary and Jumpstart Lending