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The Second War

Iraq veterans and the people who treat them begin to talk about post-traumatic stress, coping and hoping

WEB EXCLUSIVE

By T. Trent Gegax

Newsweek

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March 12 - The war on their minds wasn't the Iraq war or the Persian Gulf War or the Vietnam War. **At a symposium last weekend at the University of Colorado in Boulder,** it was "the second war," the one that starts when vets return home. It's what a soldier faces when she has to prove that she hasn't invented her mystery illness. It's what a National Guardsman faces when some acquaintance at work asks him how many "rag-heads" he wasted. It's what injured vets face when they try to get the disability payment they believe they deserve. The Army does "a better job with the dead than with the wounded," Lt. Col. (Ret.) Ralf Zimmermann, a decorated Desert Storm tank battalion commander, told the audience of 135. From the sounds of it, too many service members are left to feel like they're begging for something they deserve in exchange for serving their country, or losing a buddy, or their hand, or, temporarily, their mind.

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Anger and injury were palpable at the symposium, called "Unseen Costs of War: Impacts and Recovery for Soldiers, Families and Society." "It's mistreatment, maltreatment and delay of treatment," said one of the handful of service members in attendance (he declined to be identified for fear of Army retribution). He said the care for soldiers was uneven at best, negligent at worst. "You just can't conceive of this kind of treatment for people who've done a lot for this country. Now they're getting kicked to the curb. They're fighting the second war." For instance, the Army caught a black eye earlier in the year after a UPIwire service story showed alarming numbers of Reserve component soldiers who had been injured in Iraq and warehoused in second-rate barracks for injured soldiers at Fort Stewart, Ga. Some had waited months for medical attention. Cpt. John Crow, a spokesman for the Fort Carson, Colo., "medical-hold" company said that the firestorm caused by the UPI story led to an upgrade of the base facility. "In my opinion," Crow said, "they've got it good."

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At times, the symposium, sponsored by an events-planner called Magis Corp. and U.C.-Boulder's Center for the Humanities and the Arts, was like hearing about a bad auto accident before it occurs. On the other hand, it also had the hopeful yet tutorial tone of a driver's education class. Mary Tendall, a psychotherapist contracted by the Dept. of Veterans Affairs to treat combat vets, said that post-traumatic stress

disorder (PTSD)—the mother of all second wars—wrongfully stigmatizes people. “PTSD is a normal response to an abnormal life event,” Tendall said before making a point of contradicting some doctors who say there is no cure. “Healing is an inevitable response to the right kind of treatment.” Yet the message was clear from the handful of experts and witnesses: A significant number of psychologically wounded soldiers are returning from Iraq.

Jon Aguilar is doing his best to force the military to treat these soldiers upon their return—rather than waiting for a cataclysmic event. A dogged retired Marine and soldier, Aguilar organized the symposium. The experts he assembled painted a picture that may become all too familiar. Aguilar was inspired by the story of Sp. Sgt. Andrew Pogany, who was given the charge of “cowardness” (maximum penalty: death) instead of treatment when he suffered a bout of PTSD in Iraq. Aguilar assembled people like Dr. Gene Bolles, fresh from a two-year assignment as chief of neurosurgery at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany, the largest hospital outside America for U.S. military in Europe and the Middle East. “One out of 10 soldiers arriving from Iraq and Afghanistan were [at Landstuhl] specifically for PTSD,” Dr. Bolles said, and that didn’t include the PTSD symptoms of soldiers arriving for physical injuries. “I did not come back thinking [the Army] is doing a good job of addressing [PTSD],” Bolles said.

To be sure, the Pentagon is concerned about PTSD. It commissioned the Mental Health Assessment Survey of soldiers serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom. But the study hasn’t been made public since it was finished three months ago. And the Army’s best expert on mental health, Lt. Col. Elspeth Cameron Ritchie, a psychiatrist at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, committed to a prominent role in the two-day Colorado symposium. But she pulled out at the last second due to a scheduling conflict.

The portrait wasn’t entirely bleak. Army Reserve Col. David Fenell, a psychologist and professor at U.C.-Colorado Springs, offered a dose of military pragmatism at the event. America’s democratic freedoms aren’t free, said Fenell, who also evaluates Special Forces candidates. Freedoms come with a price, and that regretful price is paid with casualties and fatalities. “The vast majority of the men and women have responded very well in terms of psychological health,” Fenell said of Iraq war vets.

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Fenell cited preliminary data from a recent Fort Bragg study of soldiers back from Iraq. The anonymous survey pointed to early indications that Iraq

may produce fewer psychological casualties than what was reported among soldiers returning from Vietnam. About 10 percent of those surveyed reported feeling moderate levels of stress and depression; about 5 percent said they were experiencing severe depression; and about 8 percent said they wanted to seek psychological help to cope

with what they experienced in Iraq.

The paradox is that seeking the sort of psychological treatment that can keep a soldier healthy can also undermine unit cohesion. The Fort Bragg study showed that many soldiers who wanted help were hesitant. They worried that fellow soldiers would see them as weak and lose confidence in them. They worried that they might lose their security clearance. They worried that it could harm their career. But what "Unseen Costs of War" showed was that ignoring the psychological trauma of combat on vets presents its own set of risks. It's immoral, for starters. But it could also hurt recruiting down the road. Ultimately, it's too many if even a handful of soldiers, marines, airmen and sailors come home to treatment that makes them long for the first war.

WAR STORIES MAIL CALL

In a recent column, Martha Brant wrote about the Pentagon's investigation into charges of soldier-on-soldier rape in Iraq. The discussion of sexual assault in the military provoked both heated and heart-wrenching replies. Here's one from Evan Williams, who did not give his city:

Those limp-wrist little things in Iraq who whine and complain about being assaulted should realize they are there solely by virtue of pressure from left-wing liberals, lesbian groups and tree huggers. They have NO business on the front lines during live conflict and real war. They do nothing more than provide MAJOR distractions for the young male troops who have over time been the backbone of our national defense. Time spent by senior military officials should be spent addressing the situation in Iraq, not holding focus groups on just how to deal with whiners-of-the-female-gender, a national media with too much ink, too many computers, too many gullible listeners/readers and a total disregard for the security of this great nation.

Scott Beal, a veteran in Eureka, California, had a different perspective: Hi, I served in the Marine Corps proudly from 1982-1991, the title "Tone Deaf" was what really caught my attention. I watched and listened as women Marines in several units I served with were the topic of "sexual harrasment" I never appreciated this at all, my wife at the time was a woman Marine. Comments were made to her that were "ignored" or the old familiar "you may have something there" or "don't be so sensitive" and at her unit in Virginia, a male Sergeant threatened to "cut your baby out of your stomach and laugh at it." Your article only proved once again that while women can serve in the Armed Forces if they choose to, they are up against the "old boy" system. If you talk things will get bad for you, extra duty, a change of duty, pass over for promotion opportunities. I saw myself many times very competent woman Marines passed over for promotion boards and these same women were by far more competent than some of their male counterparts. However, as the saying goes: "If you don't put out, get out!" And of course, if the woman who is sexually assaulted or raped, it's all over the camp or base by the next morning and there is no consolation, no compassion, no help for these women who were/are victims of a violent rape, period. The military protects its own and that is the male hierarchy. Yes I am a man and proud of it, but I do not support those who "protect" rapists in the military. I also worked at the

Family Service Center at Camp Lejeune, N.C. and I was so shocked at husbands who "hit" and "beat" their wives and sometimes their own children and yet the Battalion Commanders and Company Commanders were barely open to the idea that these men needed help that the FSC could provide with a good group of counselors. The most common excuse was "I need Sgt. X here at the unit, what he does at home is his business." I must say I am sad to read and see with my own eyes that the Pentagon and the military establishment are still in the stoneage with neanderthal thinking today when it comes to women who are victims of sexual assault. Wake up, Joint Chiefs, commanding generals, battalion commanders, company commanders. Thank you, *Scott, Eureka, Calif., veteran, USMC-Sgt.*

Russ Noguchi of Pearl City, Hawaii said this:

I found your article to be naive and incredulous. Get Real! The military does not have sociologists, psychologists and criminologists to study and analyze rape as it would be done in the civilian world. The military's mission is to deter war; and failing that, fight them. Articles like yours merely forces the military to wrongly discharge accused rapists instead of trying them for rape at large costs and years of court proceedings. Can't you understand that? You should get off your high horse and quit harassing military officials to take the easy road which is to spend time and tax payers money to try rape cases. Let the military fight and win wars. That's what they are for. If women want to charge GIs for rape, they should press charges in civilian court. That's what you should push for. That's real! Now go do the right thing.

Many others wrote in about the abuse they had experienced or seen. Such as this:

Sadly, this is not a new problem. Until relatively recently, the Army did not recognize rape between regular Army soldiers, as women were in a separate component (WAC), and rape would then be a homosexual act and punishable in a different context. Women became part of the regular Army in 1976, with the first class of West Point to have women.

I was made quite aware of this while stationed in Germany in 1992. My now ex-husband decided five days after the birth of our child was too long to wait for sex and he brutally raped me. The response of the MPs was "Aren't ya'll married? What's the big deal?" JAG said there was nothing I could do because of the then-current UCMJ (Uniform Code of Military Justice) and that it was a 'domestic' issue and I would have to hire a civilian lawyer in the States. The whole affair was swept under the (very dirty) rug and I was treated like a pariah.

Several years a ticked off JAG lawyer got together these cases and presented a change to the UCMJ. Too late for soldiers such as myself, but hopefully it will help other women who follow.

—*Elisabeth Phipps*
Ssg, USA, MI

And, lastly, this:

I read with interest your story about rape or however they want to phrase it. May I tell you something that I witnessed when I was active duty in the Navy? We had a young lady, "Julie" who was always in trouble for one thing or another, the girl just didn't get it. She was

about to be court marshaled, at that same time, we had some visiting "dignitaries" in for the weekend visiting our base. Julie was taken into the office by our commanding officer and told that everything would be "dropped" if she would be "nice" to the visiting dignitaries, after all, Julie was young, attractive and nicely built. The C.O. was trying to provide "entertainment" for the guests. How do I know this you ask? I was working in the personnel office and heard the entire conversation as I was the executive secretary for the C.O. and I was directly outside of his office. I'm not sure if this falls into the line of prostitution, rape, or whatever, but all of the charges were dropped on Monday when I came back into work, I got off of active duty soon afterwards. There are a LOT of "things" that go on in the military that NEVER get reported.

—Brad Paschke, R.N. MSN/MBA

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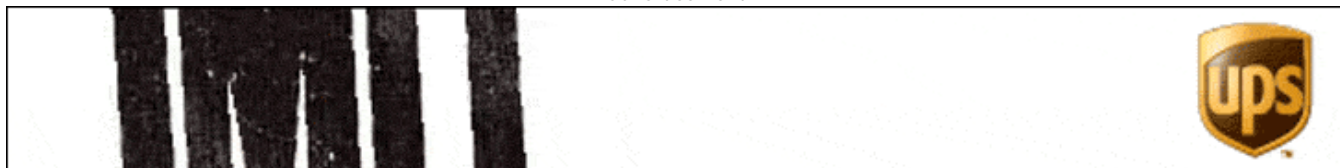
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