

The High Cost of Living—With PTSD

The cost of the war in Iraq is staggering, certainly in terms of U. S. dollars, even more so in terms of human suffering. Lives lost in the war do not begin to equal that of previous wars, but the number of lives devastated by the war is even greater than before. Homelessness, disability, debt, addictions to drugs and alcohol, slow response from the VA, primary and secondary health problems from PTSD, effects on veterans' families, are all taking a huge toll on returning veterans, their families, and society in general.

Time Magazine in an article written by Julie Rawe and reported on by Jeffrey Ressler and Amanda Bower reports on the plight of a Marine:

At the age of 23, James Brown has already spent four years in the Marines and two months in a homeless shelter. After serving in Iraq and Afghanistan before being honorably discharged last summer, he moved from Dayton, Ohio, to Los Angeles seeking work but soon wound up in a 515-bed facility run by the public-private organization U.S. VETS. Brown's plight is not unique. The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans is releasing a nationwide survey this week that counted 67 vets from Iraq and Afghanistan in homeless shelters at some point last year. "A lot of guys I met in the service were loners," says Brown. "And when they get out, their support system is pretty small."

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has confirmed that there are 38 homeless vets from the Iraq campaign alone, and although this is a tiny fraction of the 168,000-plus soldiers discharged after serving there, experts are surprised to see them show up in shelters so soon. "A lot of Vietnam vets didn't start to experience problems until eight, 10, 12 years later," says Ed Lowry, executive director of the Philadelphia Veterans Multi-Service and Education Center.

The VA says it is better prepared than it was 30 years ago to catch people before they fall through the cracks. Brown, for instance, never slept on the streets, and U.S. VETS is helping him with job interviews. But with so many deployed in a war that could be psychologically scarring, homeless shelters are bracing for an influx of returning soldiers. And advocates fret that if the problem grows, resources may not: the federal budget has cut funds for veterans' housing two years in a row.

The primary reason for homelessness among returning soldiers is PTSD. It is becoming clear that two of the causes of rising number of soldiers coming home with PTSD are the constant redeployment of troops and inadequate training before leaving for Iraq. Soldiers are spending longer tours, given shorter recovery time, then being sent back into the horror. This is having a huge impact on their mental health.

Complicating the problem of longer tours and shorter recovery is the rush to get fresh troops to the front lines. This sprint to the front is resulting in a lack of adequate preparation. Mark Thomson of Time Magazine writes:

For most Americans, the Iraq war is both distant and never ending. For Private Matthew Zeimer, it was neither. Shortly after midnight on Feb. 2, Zeimer had his first

taste of combat as he scrambled to the roof of the 3rd Infantry Division's Combat Outpost Grant in central Ramadi. Under cover of darkness, Sunni insurgents were attacking his new post from nearby buildings. Amid the smoke, noise and confusion, a blast suddenly ripped through the 3-ft. concrete wall shielding Zeimer and a fellow soldier, killing them both. Zeimer had been in Iraq for a week. He had been at his first combat post for two hours.

If Zeimer's combat career was brief, so was his training. He enlisted last June at age 17, three weeks after graduating from Dawson County High School in eastern Montana. After finishing nine weeks of basic training and additional preparation in infantry tactics in Oklahoma, he arrived at Fort Stewart, Ga., in early December. But Zeimer had missed the intense four-week pre-Iraq training--a taste of what troops will face in combat--that his 1st Brigade comrades got at their home post in October. Instead, Zeimer and about 140 other members of the 4,000-strong brigade got a cut-rate, 10-day course on weapon use, first aid and Iraqi culture. That's the same length as the course that teaches soldiers assigned to generals' household staffs the finer points of table service.

The Army and the White House insist the abbreviated training was adequate. "They can get desert training elsewhere," spokesman Tony Snow said Feb. 28, "like in Iraq." But outside military experts and Zeimer's mother disagree. The Army's rush to carry out President George W. Bush's order to send thousands of additional troops more quickly to Iraq is forcing two of the five new brigades bound for the war to skip standard training at Fort Irwin, Calif. These soldiers aren't getting the benefit of participating in war games on the wide Mojave Desert, where gun-jamming sand and faux insurgents closely resemble conditions in Iraq. "Given the new policy of having troops among the Iraqis," says Lawrence Korb, a former Pentagon personnel chief, "they should be giving our young soldiers more training, not less."

Zeimer's mother was unaware of the gap in her son's training until TIME told her about it on April 2. Two days later the Army disclosed that Zeimer may have been killed by friendly fire. "They're shipping more and more young kids over there who don't know what they're getting into," Janet Seymour said quietly after learning what her son had missed. "They've never seen war other than on the TV."

The truncated training--the rush to get underprepared troops to the war zone--"is absolutely unacceptable," says Representative John Murtha, the Pennsylvania Democrat and opponent of the war who chairs the House Appropriations defense subcommittee. A decorated Marine veteran of Vietnam, Murtha is experiencing a sense of déjà vu. "The readiness of the Army's ground forces is as bad as it was right after Vietnam," Murtha tells TIME.

Even Colin Powell--a retired Army general, onetime Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and Bush's first Secretary of State--acknowledges that after spending nearly six years fighting a small war in Afghanistan and four years waging a medium-size war in Iraq, the service whose uniform he wore for 35 years is on the ropes. "The active Army," Powell said in December, "is about broken."

Bush warned that if Democrats in Congress did not pass a bill to fund the war on his terms, "the price of that failure will be paid by our troops and their loved ones." But they are already paying a price for decisions he has made, and the larger costs are likely to be borne for at least a generation.

So it is no small irony that today's U.S. Army finds itself under the greatest strain in a generation. The Pentagon made that clear April 2 when it announced that two Army units will soon return to Iraq without even a year at home, compared with the two years units have traditionally enjoyed. One is headed back after 47 days short of a year, the other 81. "This is the first time we've had a voluntary Army on an extended deployment," says Andrew Krepinevich, a retired Army officer who advises his old service.

The main consequences of a tightly stretched Army is that men and women are being sent into combat with less training, shorter breaks and disintegrating equipment. When those stories get out, they make it harder to retain soldiers and recruit them in the first place. "For us, it's just another series of never-ending deployments, and for many, including me, there is only one answer to that--show me the door out," wrote an officer in a private e-mail to Congressman Steve Rothman of New Jersey.

The quick turn-around is compounding post-traumatic stress disorder. The first tour is difficult, but facing return to such horror without adequate rest is causing an unprecedented number of soldiers to want out. They want out of the war, many want out of the service.

In the early days of the war, soldiers were eager to heal from their injuries in order to rejoin their buddies in combat in the war zone. The longer the war drags on, the greater the number who are reluctant to go back. Others simply can't face going back and are going AWOL. Punishment and humiliation rather than treatment is lurking for these "deserters" who are undoubtedly suffering from post traumatic stress disorder.

Add to this the large number of returning soldiers who survive horrendous wounds. These young people are also subject to PTSD made worse by the fact that not only humans, but weapons and machines are wearing out.

Reporter Nancy Gibbs reports on the unusual numbers of wounded who survive their wounds in this most recent war:

You have to stand a ways back, but from a certain angle these look like the lucky ones. In any other war, they would be dead, having bled to death on the battlefield or died in a hospital from wounds so grievous that their armor could not protect them and the doctors could not save them. In World War II, 1 in 3 wounded soldiers died; in Vietnam, 1 in 4. In the Iraq war, the rate is 1 in 8. As of last week, (Feb. 3, 2008) just over . . . 11,000 had been wounded. The Pentagon does not keep counts of dead or wounded Iraqis. Human-rights groups and academics have tried to estimate the number of Iraqi deaths, speculating it could range from 15,000 to 100,000. No one has even tried to guess the number of Iraqis who have been wounded. . . .

Every war mutilates in its own way, leaves its distinctive marks. In this war, unlike battles past, only 16% of injuries were caused by gunshots, according to a study; 69% were from explosions--the roadside booby traps, the car bombs, the rocket-propelled grenades. The vast majority of injuries are to arms and legs left vulnerable even as body armor is protecting vital organs. The amputation rate of 6% of wounded soldiers is twice that of earlier wars.

But in addition, doctors are seeing new injuries, some of them inconspicuous compared with the shredded flesh of bombing victims. Traumatic brain injury occurs when the shock from an explosion damages neurological fibers. Soldiers may survive a blast with scarcely a cut, only to find over time that they suffer coordination and memory loss, dizziness, insomnia. Some have to learn to walk again--or to recognize their wives and children.

Regardless of how they were wounded, soldiers are suffering enormous emotional damage. Those whose wounds are of the "unseen" kind, suffer even more at the lack of understanding of the reasons for and personal cost of PTSD.

Both those who were physically wounded and those who have unseen wounds of brain trauma and/or PTSD must be cared for if they are to have any kind of productive life. We cannot allow them to linger in homeless shelters, go deeper and deeper into debt, and ultimately commit suicide as a solution to their problems. It is indeed time to find a solution that works for PTSD.

www.healingveteransptsd.com

About the website designers:

The web site ptsdforveterans.com is a new web site designed by EFT practitioners Nancy Dunkin, Evergreen, Colorado and Lisa Lindsey-Brändli, Geneva, Switzerland. Their company is called "Joy." Both women are experienced in working with PTSD and are most concerned about the tragic suffering experienced by veterans of all wars.

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