

The Way I See It...Combat Vets and the problem with coming home

A recent article in People magazine asked the following questions “What’s happening at Fort Bragg?” and “Is the Army doing enough to protect its women?” Three female soldiers from the nation’s largest army base have been murdered in the past six months allegedly by spouses or boyfriends that have served time in Iraq. These homicides echo the Fort Bragg murders of 2002 in which four Army wives were killed by their soldier husbands-three having just returned from Afghanistan. I could focus on how the military fails by not taking domestic violence seriously enough. That’s clearly the case. However, in each of these cases there were warning signs which look eerily similar to symptoms of PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder). I believe many of these domestic violence cases are a direct consequence of untreated PTSD.

Violence is inherent in the military culture. If we couldn’t train soldiers to kill, we wouldn’t be in the position to defend ourselves as a nation very effectively. I get that. The problem becomes how do we, as a country, address the issues these brave men and women face upon their return from war, where violence was considered necessary, to home where violence is inappropriate yet still just as lethal? Here are a few examples to illustrate the vast differences between combat life and home life, and why it can be so difficult to adjust to civilian life:

In Combat: Maintaining control of weapons and gear.

At Home: Too controlling. Becoming angry when someone messes with your stuff. Nobody cares about doing things right. Back home, the small details are no longer important. Family decisions are best shared.

In Combat: No one understands your experiences except your buddies who were there (cohesion). Bonds with fellow soldiers that will last a lifetime.

At Home: Withdrawal. Avoiding friends and family. Friends and family changed while you were away; re-establishing these bonds takes time.

In Combat: Targeted aggression involves making split second decisions that are lethal. The enemy is the target.

At Home: Inappropriate aggression e.g. snapping at your kids, buddies, or your NCO; assault or spouse abuse. Back home, there are no enemies.

In Combat: Armed at all times. It's dangerous to be unarmed.

At Home: Urge to be armed continues. It's dangerous to be armed.

In Combat: Controlling your emotions is critical for mission success. Controlling emotions is necessary.

At Home: Failing to display emotions (detaching), or only showing anger, hurts relationships. Limiting your emotions lead to relationship failures.

In Combat: Talk about mission only with those who need to know (OPSEC).

At Home: Soldiers may avoid sharing their deployment experiences with loved ones. The need to know now includes friends and family. It is important to share your story with loved ones.

In Combat: Your responsibility in combat is to survive and do your best to keep your buddies alive. Life and death decisions...in the heat of battle.

At Home: Guilt. Feel you have failed your buddies if they were killed or seriously injured. Bothered by memories. Learn from what happened..without second guessing.

In Combat: Unpredictable fast driving to avoid IEDs. Driving fast avoids danger.

At Home: Aggressive driving leads to speeding, accident, fatalities back home, driving fast “feels right” but is dangerous.

In Combat: Survival depends on discipline and obeying orders. Giving and following orders involves a clear chain of command which does not exist in families.

At Home: Too rigid. Trying to order around family and friends causes conflict.

In Combat: Alcohol use was limited.

At Home: Alcohol is now plentiful. Many soldiers use alcohol as a way to cope with deployment experiences, but this is not healthy. Learn to relax without using alcohol. 1

After reviewing this information it was obvious to me why it is inherently difficult for combat vets to return home, not just for some, but for most. They have seen the horrors of war- images most of us cannot even imagine. Add to that exposure to IED's (improvised explosive device) wherein the soldier is exposed to an explosive device that, if they survive, can leave permanent brain injury.

Then add to that, the suspension of “right and wrong” and the loosening of moral codes. The example I’m thinking of is the systematic torture by US soldiers and other government agents of the prisoners at Abu Ghraib. Make no mistake, these were not crimes perpetrated by a handful of rogue soldiers. These torture crimes were being committed by and condoned by the highest level of military intelligence. At first glance, I was disgusted by the pictures thinking that these men and women lacked any kind of conscience and morality. But when I heard the conditions of the prison were such that they were being bombed and targeted by enemy shells almost daily inside the prison, my PTSD alarm bells started

ringing! These soldiers will not just miraculously recover once they are returned to “normalcy”. I heard one soldier say that “When we go over there, we consider ourselves already dead. If we return home, then we are lucky, but otherwise, we couldn’t do what we need to do unless we are already gone.”

The way I see it not only do we need more programs to evaluate and treat their PTSD, but in doing so, we need to help them acculturate to what has become a distant and foreign concept- home.

“Mankind must put an end to war, or war will put an end to mankind....War will exist until that distant day when the conscientious objector enjoys the same reputation and prestige that the warrior does today.” John F. Kennedy

1 Walter Reed Institute of Research Land Combat Study Team, U.S. Army Medical Research and Materiel Command, Update 13 September 06
(www.battlemind.com)

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