

*When you get a great night's sleep,*

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## Giving Back to Veterans

By Joe Klein

In the spring of 2007, Fred Wilpon, the owner of the New York Mets, accompanied his team on a visit to the wounded troops at Walter Reed Army Hospital. Wilpon was haunted by the experience, especially by a lieutenant who had just arrived at the hospital after being severely wounded in Iraq a week earlier. The doctors said the lieutenant would have bled to death in previous wars, but the efficacy of the battlefield medical care in Iraq and Afghanistan was remarkable. "I'd say it was a miracle that kid was still alive," Wilpon says, but then he realized he was in a hospital full of miracles. As he thought about this afterward, Wilpon figured--as others involved in the care of veterans have--that there was going to be an unprecedented need for psychological counseling for the survivors of horrific wounds. "The other thing that struck me was how removed most Americans are from the troops," Wilpon says. "Most people don't think much about the war. When I was a kid during World War II, we were always being asked to do something for the troops. I wanted to reconnect the public with the military."

Wilpon went to work, talking to military leaders about what the returning troops needed most--and to his fellow baseball owners about organizing a massive program to help out. The result, unveiled this July Fourth weekend, is an ambitious effort to raise \$100 million to provide free psychological counseling for returning veterans and jobs for those who need them. The scope of the problem is enormous: upwards of 20% of combat veterans are coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). As recently reported in TIME, the military is prescribing antidepressants to troops downrange to help blunt the psychological effects of combat. "There's just a tremendous need for counseling," says Paul Rieckhoff of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. "The [Department of Veterans Affairs'] psychological-counseling program is overwhelmed. The suicide rates for returning vets are just off the charts. If Major League Baseball can get this program up to scale, we could save thousands of lives."

Psychological counseling is a sensitive subject in the macho world of the military. "There's tremendous stigma attached," says retired general David Grange, president of the McCormick Foundation, which will administer the program for Major League Baseball. "In my day, you'd never ask for psychological help

because you'd be disqualified for command." To eliminate the stigma, a few regular Army units have started to make psychological counseling mandatory for soldiers returning from combat. "We decided to do it after those murders at Fort Bragg," said retired general B.B. Bell, who initiated mandatory counseling when he commanded the U.S. Army in Europe. (Bell was referring to the three returning soldiers who murdered their wives in 2002.) There is a similar program at Fort Lewis, Wash. According to Dr. Charles Hoge in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, such programs can significantly reduce the number of soldiers reluctant to go for counseling.

But those are isolated programs. And the need is even greater in the National Guard and Reserves. Because of the all-volunteer Army, "we've never had so many Guard and Reserves involved in combat," Grange says. These troops tend to be less well trained and yanked out of settled civilian lives and therefore more susceptible to psychological stress. "They also come home totally removed from the base of support that regular troops have. They're all alone," he says. Indeed, a disproportionate number of Guard and Reserve service members have civilian jobs as first responders--police, firefighters, emergency workers--and they can be removed from their posts, sent to desk jobs or medical leave, if they seek psychological counseling for PTSD. "A lot of these people come home and find that their jobs are no longer there," says Grange, explaining why Major League Baseball included a jobs component in its program. "Ideally, if this thing works, we'll be able to link up a returning veteran with a job and counseling--and prospective employers can be reassured that the veteran isn't going to go postal on them."

With Veterans Affairs overwhelmed by two wars, it may be a good thing, spiritually, for the rest of us to help those who have sacrificed so much in Iraq and Afghanistan. A few years ago, a colonel who had just returned from combat told me, "Over there, it always felt like we're stuck in hell and the country is at the mall." Part of the responsibility for the disconnect lies with President George W. Bush, who never asked us to sacrifice for the war effort. It's time to rectify that. "I'd like to see every kid in America give part of their allowance to help the troops," Wilpon says. As an elderly kid, I'm giving part of mine. If you want to help, please visit [welcomebackveterans.org](http://welcomebackveterans.org)

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