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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Help Is on the Way

By **BOB HERBERT**

With so much attention understandably focused on the economy and the incoming administration, the struggles being faced by G.I.'s coming home from combat overseas are receding even further from the public's consciousness.

If you're in your late teens or early 20s and your energies have been directed for a year or more toward dodging roadside bombs and ambushes, caring for horribly wounded comrades and, in general, killing before being killed, it can be difficult to readjust to a world of shopping malls, speed limits and polite conversation.

Bryan Adams is the face of a sophisticated new advertising campaign that is trying to get troubled veterans to come in from the cold and piercingly lonely environment of post-wartime stress.

Bryan, now 24, was an Army sniper in Iraq from February 2004 to February 2005. At an age when many youngsters go to college or line up that first significant job, he and his squad-mates were prowling Tikrit with high-powered weapons, looking for bad guys.

He was shot in the leg and hand during a firefight, and he saw and did things that he was less than anxious to talk about when he came home.

"I wanted to go to college," he told me. "I had all these plans, but I couldn't seem to make them happen. I couldn't focus. I would get, like, depressive thoughts."

He said that he would party a lot. "Party" was a euphemism for drinking.

The drinking made him more depressed, and then he would get angry that he was "partying but not having a good time."

Bryan said he would "flip out," and friends began to shun him. "I just didn't care what I did or who I affected with my actions. I would break stuff. I'd break, like appliances. It was bad."

Returning to civilian life from combat is almost always a hard road to run. Studies have shown that a third or more of G.I.'s returning from the combat zones of Iraq and Afghanistan — more than 300,000 men and women — have endured mental health difficulties.

Many have experienced the agony of deep depression, and alarming numbers have tried or succeeded in committing suicide.

A CBS News study found that veterans aged 20 to 24 were two to four times as likely to commit suicide as

non-veterans the same age.

The advertising campaign, initiated by the advocacy group [Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America](#), was designed to increase the number of veterans seeking treatment for their mental health difficulties. Many are embarrassed to speak about their problems or are unaware that help is available, or even that they need help.

As Bryan Adams told me, “I didn’t know anything about these symptoms. I didn’t know what post-traumatic stress disorder was.”

To get the word out, IAVA hooked up with the advertising giant BBDO and the nonprofit Ad Council, which is famous for such public service slogans as, “Only you can prevent forest fires,” “A mind is a terrible thing to waste” and “Friends don’t let friends drive drunk.”

This campaign is titled, “Alone,” and focuses on the sense of isolation so many veterans feel when they come home. The television and print ads encourage the veterans to visit a Web site, [CommunityOfVeterans.org](#), as a place where they can share their experiences with other vets.

IAVA tells veterans in its promotional material: “Just listen in or share your experiences in a judgment-free environment.”

The site is filled with features and news updates on many topics and information on a wide range of mental health resources.

The ads are powerful.

In one, a somber Bryan Adams is shown, in camouflage fatigues, standing alone in an airport, then riding an otherwise passenger-less subway train, and then walking through empty streets in Manhattan. He is eerily and absolutely alone. There is not another soul in sight, until a marine in civilian clothes walks up to him, extends his hand, and says: “Welcome home, man.”

The ad then flashes the message: “If you’re a veteran of Iraq or Afghanistan, you’re not alone.”

Bryan, who lives in Palmyra, N.J., is a real-life example of what the timely intervention of mental health counseling and treatment can do. At his family’s urging, he enrolled in a treatment program at a V.A. hospital in Boston. It turned his life around, and he is now back in college.

This ad campaign, if disseminated widely enough (it is depending on donated media), will reduce the heartache of G.I.’s and their families, and will save lives.

The need for more attention to this issue is tremendous. Combat does terrible things to people. As Paul Rieckhoff, IAVA’s executive director, put it:

“Nobody can cross this river without getting wet.”

