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Posted by [Paul Rieckhoff/ NJ Voices Guest Blogger](#) July 03, 2009 5:09AM

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AP Photo/Khalid Mohammed

U.S. soldiers cut up an American flag cake at a ceremony to mark the U.S. 4th of July Independence Day at Camp Victory in Baghdad, Iraq.

I'll never forget my Independence Day at war.

On July 4, 2003, I was in Baghdad, preparing to be return home with my infantry platoon after six months fighting Saddam's Army and an insurgency that was just beginning to exact its toll on coalition forces.

On that day, however, my expectations were thwarted, as my men and I were notified that our combat tour would be extended indefinitely. So instead of enjoying fireworks stateside, my unit watched AK tracer trails zip across the sky, walked patrols instead of parades, and ate MREs instead of hot dogs.

Many Americans will never see the inside of a Humvee on the Fourth of July. Instead, they will enjoy three-day weekends capped by barbecues, block parties, and roman candles. I'm extremely proud to be an American, but real patriotism is more than just picnics. And anyone who has served in any war will tell you that.

Ironically, for veterans, the Fourth of July can be a difficult holiday to celebrate. With every uniform that marches by in parades, we remember our friends that did not make it home. The sounds of fireworks remind us of incoming mortar rounds. And as large crowds gather to celebrate America's birthday, we sometimes find ourselves scanning the masses for potential danger.

But the impact of war isn't limited to July 4th.

In case you haven't been tracking the figures, our military is in crisis-mode, trying to fend off a silent killer among its ranks. Almost 20 percent of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are suffering from mental health injuries like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and less than half are receiving the help they need. Left untreated, the ramifications are clear: divorce, substance abuse, unemployment, and suicide.

Already, we've lost as many soldiers to suicide this year as to combat in Iraq and Afghanistan combined. This frightening trend has triggered military stand-downs, and finally gotten the attention of the media. The alarm has been sounded. But our troops are still waiting on real action from Washington. And families of servicemembers like Specialist **Joshua Omvig** from Gillette, Wyoming --who suffered in silence until combat stress led him to take his own life-- are left wondering what could have been.

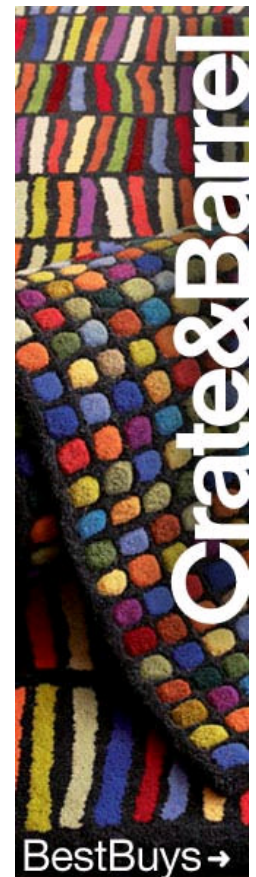
The military must take immediate steps to reduce unnecessary stress on the force, and our nation's lawmakers must also take an active role. For months, Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have been petitioning lawmakers on Capitol Hill to include a provision in the Pentagon's annual defense bill that would provide mandatory mental health screenings by licensed mental health professionals to all servicemembers. These screenings would go a long way towards reducing the stigma associated with mental health injuries, and identifying those that need care the most.

In just a few weeks, Congress will recess for the summer, and before they do, they must have ensured that every returning veteran gets the care they deserve.

Six years ago today, my men and I held the hand of a fledgling democracy as it struggled for its own independence. This week, I watched as U.S. troops pulled back from towns and cities in Iraq as Iraqis celebrated their own "National Sovereignty Day." For Americans, this means that more troops will be coming home, and for that, we should be thankful. But we must be ready to welcome them. Parades and applause are nice, but real support comes in the form of robust mental health care for our returning troops.

As we celebrate the birth of our great nation, it's time to appropriately honor those who have stood on the front lines of freedom and sacrificed in the name of liberty. Every second Congress wastes, more lives are on the line.

Paul Rieckhoff is the Founder and Executive Director of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), and the author of Chasing Ghosts.



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