

## Vets are home and homeless

### After fighting in Iraq, some end up on streets

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Three years ago, when he returned from Iraq and a stint in the U.S. Army, Herold Noel thought he'd be treated as a hero. Instead, he faced a series of degradations, including learning he was ineligible for public-housing assistance.

That's when Noel went back to the red Jeep that had become his home at night. That's when Noel -- fueled by alcohol -- took out a gun. That's when Noel fired the bullet intended to pierce his skull and kill himself instantly.

Noel misfired, then passed out. When he woke up, he realized what had happened.

"I was fed up with this situation," he says now, speaking on the phone from New York about the housing setbacks, job rejections and other stresses that pushed him to attempt suicide. "I just felt like I'd rather die on my feet than on my knees. This country was putting me on my knees. I said I'd rather die with a little bit of pride, because they stripped me away from all that."

Homelessness was a central factor in Noel's desperation, just as it is for many veterans returning to cities and towns all across the United States from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

On any given night, an estimated 100 to 300 vets who were part of Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom (the government's name for its Afghanistan campaign) live in transient conditions, according to organizations that help homeless ex-GIs. These men and women who once proudly represented the U.S. military now live on the street, in shelters, in their cars, with their friends -- anywhere they can unload their belongings for a night or two or longer. The number may seem low, but homeless advocates worry that these wars will eventually produce tens of thousands of homeless vets, as the Vietnam War did.

Brian Dadds, a Navy veteran whose ship monitored missile strikes on Iraq in the war's first months, now bides his time in San Francisco, where he has slept everywhere from Ocean Beach to a city-run homeless shelter. His hair much longer than in his military days, Dadds, 24, says he'll often just "walk around town" before deciding on a place to sleep.

Swords to Ploughshares, the San Francisco organization that helps former military personnel who are homeless, has seen more than 20 Iraq War veterans. Vietnam Veterans of California, which has temporary housing sites throughout Northern California, says it has assisted more than 60 veterans of Operation Iraqi

Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom who were in need of permanent housing.

Historians often compare the Iraq war to Vietnam in terms of scope, casualties and military aims gone awry, but for homeless advocates, there's a disturbing difference between the conflicts: The Vietnam War, which lasted more than a decade, produced a steady stream of homeless vets in the years after hostilities ended; the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns, which are less than 6 years old, have resulted in homeless vets while hostilities are still going on.

Many of those who join today's volunteer army, like Noel, come from economically depressed backgrounds, say homeless advocates, and when they return home, they face the same financial vulnerabilities they had before, but now they might suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (Noel has been diagnosed with it) and might rely on alcohol or other drugs to cope with their traumas. They may also be reluctant to admit their problems to the Department of Veterans Affairs or the many nongovernmental organizations that help homeless veterans.

"What happens sometimes is that young men and women come home from Iraq and Afghanistan, and they think everything is going to be cool and that life is going to begin again," says Cheryl Beversdorf, president of the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans in Washington. "But then things start occurring, like they begin recognizing symptoms of PTSD or depression or whatever, and some people say, 'I'm not going to the VA -- that's where my dad went.' Or they say, 'There's nothing wrong with me.' Or they don't know about community-based organizations (that help homeless vets)."

About 200,000 veterans are homeless in the United States, according to estimates by the Department of Veterans Affairs, with about 80,000 having been in Vietnam. About 2.8 million Americans served in Vietnam. So far 1.5 million U.S. troops have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Judging by experience, tens of thousands of Americans who went to Iraq and Afghanistan will eventually become homeless -- a number that Veterans Affairs is woefully unprepared for, says Paul Rieckhoff, a former Army lieutenant who fought in Iraq in 2003 and 2004 and now heads a group called Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, which lobbies on behalf of homeless vets.

"History is repeating itself," Rieckhoff says. "Systemwide, there's not an adequate plan in place to deal with homelessness. ... It starts with a lack of adequate transitional resources and capacity, but there's also a lack of beds, a lack of outreach, a lack of good data. One of my biggest criticisms of the VA is that they don't have an accurate tracking mechanism. If you ask the secretary of the VA how many people are homeless, he won't be able to tell you adequately. He can't even tell you how many people are dead, because there is no registry. That's one of the legislative initiatives that we've been pushing for -- a Department of Defense registry that tracks everyone from the moment they get home."

After the Vietnam War, the Department of Veterans Affairs did establish homeless outreach programs around the country. VA medical centers, such as the one in San Francisco's outer Richmond District, have coordinators who specialize in homeless services. The VA has a national director of homeless programs and a multimillion-dollar budget that, among other things, pays for temporary housing. But the staggering number of Vietnam vets still on the streets 30 years after the war ended reveals the extent of the problem, including the VA's role, say homeless advocates.

Upon returning to the United States, veterans must register with a system already backlogged with 400,000 applications for disability benefits, a bottleneck that puts veterans at risk of homelessness, warns Linda Bilmes, a Harvard lecturer in Public Policy who is the author of a paper published in January, "Soldiers Returning from Iraq and Afghanistan: The Long-term Costs of Providing Veterans Medical Care and Disability Benefits."

During the long wait for their first disability check -- six months or longer -- "veterans, particularly those in a state of mental distress, are most at risk for serious problems, including suicide, falling into substance abuse, divorce, losing their job, or becoming homeless," Bilmes warns in her report.

Noel was one of those vets forced to wait six months for his first disability check. At one point, he stayed in a homeless shelter in the Bronx, where he says someone stole his Iraq War medals and photos. Noel would sometimes sleep on the roof of a building. His nightmares followed him wherever he went.

During his seven months in Iraq in 2003 and 2004, Noel delivered fuel for tanks and other military vehicles. His tanker was shelled by militants, and every time he took to Iraq's roadways, Noel feared he would be killed. During his deliveries, he carried an M16 that he fired at people he believed were trying to harm him. In other interviews he's given after his appearance in the 2005 documentary "When I Came Home" (which is about homeless veterans), Noel has implied that he had killed eight Iraqis. He says he witnessed the deaths or dead bodies of many other people.

After Iraq, Noel's marriage collapsed in divorce. Two of his three kids lived with another family in New York, while he and one son slept in Noel's SUV, usually parking it on the streets of Brooklyn. "Although he now can afford to rent his own apartment, Noel still has thoughts of suicide.

"We came back to a country that won't fight for us," Noel says. "We're still sacrificing." Noel, 27, says homelessness among former service members should spark as much outrage as the conditions at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, where a Washington Post probe prompted a shakeup.

The government is trying to do something about vet homelessness, says Peter Dougherty, director of homeless programs for Veterans Affairs. In the past 15 years, as the VA has boosted services to homeless vets, the number of ex-GIs who are homeless has decreased by 50,000, he says. About 300 members of the military who saw duty in Iraq and Afghanistan have stayed in VA-sponsored housing for homeless veterans, Dougherty says. Instead of being a foreboding sign, he says, the number of new veterans seeking shelter is an opportunity for the government to work with veterans in vulnerable positions -- to offer assistance before problems get out of control.

"I'm of the theory that the earlier we can intervene, the better off that veteran is going to be," Dougherty says. "Some people always ask me, 'Isn't it tragic that we're seeing these veterans?' Well, it's tragic we're seeing anyone. But I think the best news we have is that the earlier we see them, the more likely it is that they're going to get better, faster, and get on with their lives."

During this fiscal year, Washington is spending \$210 million on programs directly related to helping homeless veterans, Dougherty says. Next year's budget is scheduled to increase by \$77 million. Homeless veterans who enter the doors of the San Francisco VA clinic on Third and Harrison streets have access to showers, storage lockers, and a clean place to sit with other veterans who are trying to right themselves.

They can meet with counselors and medical staff, and attend group sessions on ending abuse of alcohol and drugs.

Among those who have recently visited the center, according to clinic head Bobbie Rosenthal, are an Iraq vet who lives in a van on a street near AT&T Park and another who lives with his girlfriend "on the edge" of homelessness. The ex-serviceman in the van has overcome a drinking problem, Rosenthal says, while the other man is struggling with the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Dadds says he doesn't have a drug or alcohol problem, nor is he struggling with emotional trauma from his time in the Persian Gulf. Though he learned to shoot and was assigned guard duty on his Navy ship, his main task was to work in the vessel's computer room, he says. Since his Navy service ended in July 2003, Dadds -- a native of Maryland who has lived in Florida and San Diego -- has been traveling from city to city, content with living on the street if he can't find a temporary bed to his liking. In San Diego, he slept on the street for four months. At shelters, he has met veterans who fought in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, and in the 1992-94 Somalia operation. Dadds avoids reading or watching news about the war.

"The less I see it, the less I hear about it, the less I think about it," Dadds says.

Dadds would one day like to "settle down" into a steady job and home, but for now, he's unconcerned about his transient lifestyle, even if it means sleeping on a mat in a strange shelter.

Compared with the tens of thousands of people who have died in the Iraq War, Noels, Dadds and other young veterans are fortunate. The reality, though, is that homelessness can be a debilitating experience, and for veterans, nothing they ever expected when they first put on a uniform.

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