

Jeff Susman, MD
Editor-in-Chief



Witnessing hell

At first, I couldn't believe that the filthy, inebriated man whom I led onto a van for the homeless had served as an officer in the Vietnam War. But as I took his medical history and examined him, my doubt dissolved. Horrible nightmares, shakes, alcoholism, a life on the street—"things no man should see." It all fit together.

On another occasion, I met Mike, a victim of an improvised explosive device, whose wife patiently explained that he'd never been the same since he came home from Iraq with a significant traumatic brain injury (TBI). And Jim, a former soldier on a special operations unit who lived for danger, long after his stint in the service ended. Jim liked to fly helicopters that he built—and crashed with some frequency.

The New York Times recently reported that while one American soldier dies every day and a half, veterans commit suicide at a rate of one every 80 minutes, and at least one in 5 veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder or TBI.¹

War is an experience that keeps on giving: addiction, divorce, and flashbacks.

It's easy to criticize the military for not providing proper protection for our troops or to blame the Veterans Administration for the dearth of mental health providers. As usual, we look for a quick fix to a complex problem. But war is an experience that keeps on giving: addiction, divorce, and flashbacks. Our soldiers and their families need all the support we can provide.

We need to enhance social services, ensure access to mental health care, and provide an integrated medical home for our vets and their families. We need barrier-free housing for those who have lost limbs. We need to do more to reintegrate returning vets into civilian life. The reality is that we owe our vets—and their families—far more than we provide.

I'm writing this from Washington, DC, a month before we celebrate Memorial Day and remember those who died in service of our country. On the flight into our nation's capital, I sat next to a young man returning from his tour of military duty. He seemed mature, upbeat, whole. But when I asked him about his experience, he responded: "Sir, I gotta tell you, what I saw was hell."

1. Kristoff N. A veteran's death, the nation's shame. *The New York Times*. April 15, 2012;SR1.

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