

THE INVISIBLE WOUNDS OF WAR

“With hundreds of thousands of military personnel expected to return from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan over the next few years, many of them will struggle with acute pain and face the possibility of a lifetime of chronic pain.”

— Derek McGinnis, Iraq IED survivor and pain authority

The injuries inflicted during service on a foreign battlefield aren't always as obvious as a lost limb or blinded eye. Brain trauma, combat stress and depression are persistent foes, as is the phenomenon of chronic pain.

In conjunction with the American Pain Foundation in Baltimore, Md., the DAV Charitable Service Trust helped launch the publication of a new book by Derek McGinnis, “Exit Wounds: A Survival Guide to Pain Management for Returning Veterans and Their Families” and its companion web site, www.exitwoundsforveterans.org.

The foundation provides veterans like Mr. McGinnis – who sustained brain injury, shrapnel wounds, eye damage and amputation of his left leg while serving in the U.S. Navy in Iraq – with unfettered access to information relating to pain and pain management. “Thank you to the DAV Charitable Service Trust for your support with the development of this project,” writes Will Rowe, chief executive officer of the American Pain Foundation.

In 2009, Pentagon officials estimated that up to 360,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have endured traumatic brain injuries (TBIs), with approximately 45,000 to 90,000 suffering persistent symptoms that warrant specialized care.

From speech impairments to vision problems, from sleep disorders to memory lapses, a range of difficulties face our returning and disabled defenders. Many maladies are the result of roadside explosions, sniper attacks and suicide bombings. Recurrent and crippling migraines damage the lives of 60% of the head injury patients returning from the wars.

For example, a Georgia Marine who was shot in the head by an Iraqi sniper now has trouble remembering names and must use a Global Positioning System to find his way through the streets of his hometown. TBI, indeed, has become the signature wound of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition, one in five veterans of today's wars – more than a third of a million – suffer depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Make no mistake about these “invisible wounds.” These are war-wounded veterans, vast numbers severely disabled for life. Yet very few hold the Purple Heart, so they're never included in the official number of “wounded in action” so often quoted by politicians who'd rather not focus on the real cost of today's wars. That's a problem because the American people are being denied a true picture of the human cost of war.

The DAV Charitable Service Trust, however, keeps a firm grasp of that cost and addresses it head on. For one thing, we know that brain injuries and mental health issues are leading reasons why veterans make up a fifth of the homeless people in America. That's why you'll see so many programs for homeless veterans listed in the “Homeless Heroes” section that follows.

Many other enlightened initiatives such as these are thriving across the nation with assistance that you bring forward through your support of the DAV Charitable Service Trust. Some examples:

- ★ Baltimore Station in Maryland provides housing, food, medical care and job training for veterans suffering PTSD.
- ★ Freedom Service Dogs in Englewood, Colo., trains and places dogs with disabled veterans suffering spinal cord injuries, PTSD, and traumatic brain injury.
- ★ Monterey Bay Veterans in Monterey, Calif., uses marine activities to offer a recreational therapeutic program to disabled veterans.
- ★ Oceanside Ivey Ranch Park Association in Oceanside, Calif., provides therapeutic equestrian activities for brain-injured veterans.
- ★ Team River Runner in Bethesda, Md., uses kayaking to promote the physical and mental healing of severely injured troops at military and VA medical facilities.
- ★ National Education for Assistance Dog Services in Princeton, Mass., trains assistance dogs for veterans. They focus on veterans suffering PTSD and brain injuries.
- ★ The U.S. Association of Blind Athletes in Colorado Springs, Colo., offers sporting programs for veterans and active duty troops who lost their vision while in the service.