

Invisible wounds: For veterans, the war goes on

by [Jim Keyser](#) in the [February 22, 2005](#) issue

We hear about the U.S troops killed in Iraq, and we sometimes see their faces on the TV screen or staring out at us from the newspaper. The number of dead stands at about 1,442. There is a second statistic: 10,770 troops have been injured. For many of them, their bodies are terribly damaged and disfigured, and they will never be the same.

There's another category of wounded that is almost always ignored and neglected. We'll never see this statistic, but I am certain these wounded will number in the tens of thousands before the war is over. These men and women may look fine. They may have no burn scars, gunshot holes or missing limbs—no visible evidence that they've been in combat. Yet their lives are as irreversibly damaged and debilitated as if they'd lost arms, legs or sight. Their wounds are emotional and spiritual, and they have left deep scars.

I recently had a preview of what we're in for with Iraq veterans when a veteran of Vietnam, a man who had gone to Sunday school in the church I'm serving, came into the office and asked if he could talk. He was 50-something, dressed in jeans, denim jacket, and a T-shirt with a picture of the American flag emblazoned on the front. He looked fine. He wasn't drunk or drugged. He wasn't asking for money. He was a truck driver who "just wanted to talk." I'll call him John.

John said he needed to tell someone things he couldn't tell his wife. A few days earlier, he'd been driving in his truck and had almost hit a motorcyclist who "appeared from nowhere."

"Imagine what I would have done to him," John said, his hands trembling as he spoke. When he told his supervisor, John added that he wasn't sure he'd be able to drive a truck any more.

John's close call reminded him of a time on the road outside of Saigon when the driver of a jeep he was riding in turned and casually said to him, "See that eight-year-old kid on the bicycle up ahead? He ain't goin' home tonight." He swerved and hit the boy, John recalled, his voice cracked with emotion. "What we did to that little boy flashed back to me when I nearly killed the motorcyclist."

He went on to tell of other horrific events, some of which he participated in, others he merely witnessed. He told of finding young U.S. soldiers hanging by hooks in trees, still alive, their bodies grossly mutilated, and of the innocent women and children that his platoon would find dead. You never knew, John said, whether the boy approaching your platoon with arms folded across his chest was holding grenades or was just shy about meeting the soldiers. Sometimes you took appropriate action to keep yourself from being killed. I had to keep myself from wincing or crying as I listened to John's confession.

The campaign references to Vietnam, along with TV reports from Iraq, had brought on John's terrible flashbacks and guilt. His wife has watched as he wakes up in the middle of the night, crouches low to the floor and stealthily inches his way into the next room just as he did 30 years ago in the jungle. John is afraid to have his young grandchildren stay overnight with him. "I don't trust myself in the dark, caught in a Vietnam flashback with grandkids in the house."

We talked briefly about God and guilt and forgiveness and letting go of the past. I reminded John that God's grace and mercy can be trusted to overcome all our inadequate attempts to fix or forgive ourselves. I encouraged him to get help at the Veterans Hospital, where vets find group support and treatment for posttraumatic stress disorder. I reminded him that I'm available to talk. I said a prayer, and he walked away.

U.S. troops are coming home from Iraq with these sorts of wounds, which will fester and infect lives and relationships for years to come. Some vets' ears will ring with the sound of machine-gun fire that killed an innocent family; others will remember the sights and smells immediately after a suicide bomber has detonated in a busy marketplace. Some will see friends die next to them—again and again. Others will look into the silent, staring eyes of an enemy they've just killed. Some will catch themselves remembering what shrapnel does to children's bodies.

Meanwhile, in my church office, the phone rings. It's John. He wants to talk again.