

Combat Vet's PTSD Untreated; Blames Her Gender

by TERRY GILDEA



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 Courtesy of Marti Ribeiro
 Staff Sgt. Marti Ribeiro interviews an Army sergeant while embedded with a combat unit in Afghanistan.

March 13, 2010

text size **A A A**

According to recent VA statistics, PTSD and depression are the top disability claims among America's female veterans — many of whom served in Iraq and Afghanistan. But many of them have trouble proving that they saw combat — a key to getting treatment for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

A decorated war veteran, Marti Ribeiro's return to America — marked by a divorce and bouts of anxiety — highlights the struggles many female veterans face. Ribeiro, 30, spent eight years in the Air Force, achieving the rank of staff sergeant. She served tours in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Sitting for

an interview recently, Ribeiro smoked a cigarette, looking both tired and nervous.

In 2006, she was embedded with the Army's 10th Mountain Division in Afghanistan as a military journalist, covering the unit's humanitarian mission. But on many occasions, Ribeiro, a slender woman with hazel eyes and blond hair, had to drop her camera and pick up her rifle.



Of the attacks on her unit, Ribeiro said, "We were hit with mortars and RPG [rocket-propelled grenades] and it ranges from IED's on our convoys to a lot of small-arms fire."

A Troubled Return

Ribeiro was awarded the Army's Combat Action Ribbon, but the medal did little to slow the mounting chaos in her life. She was getting ready to separate from the Air Force and return to her husband and young daughter in the United States when her husband filed for a divorce.

VA Hospital Upgrades Care For Female Vets

Shaken by the tension and grief of combat, Ribeiro came home to take on her new role as a single parent. She recalls being overwhelmed by stress and anxiety.

"It's like having a burning sensation in the pit of your stomach that doesn't ever go away," she said. "You become very paranoid in that sometimes you feel like people are out to get you."

Ribeiro was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder by military doctors at a hospital in San Antonio, where she was stationed. She says doctors recommended she apply for benefits through the Department of Veterans Affairs. More than 40 percent of America's female veterans have enrolled in the agency's health care plan.

After being discharged, Ribeiro moved to Oklahoma City with her daughter, and her symptoms got worse. According to her VA medical records, her PTSD claim was approved — but when she tried making an appointment at the local clinic, another battle began.

"They kept saying 'Oh, well you've got to go get registered at the clinic, and then you've got to go to your primary care physician, and then we will set you up with a mental health appointment,'" Ribeiro said. "And one day, I just walked into the mental health facility and stood there and said, 'I'm not leaving until you help me.'"

High Demand For Help

She was finally evaluated by a physician and a psycho-therapist, but Ribeiro claims she was over-medicated with drugs like Xanax, that covered up her symptoms but didn't deal with the roots of her anxiety. Eventually, she found a psychiatrist who helped her.

"He got me on the right medication, the exact medication I needed to be on," Ribeiro said, "but there are two psychiatrists, that's it, for the entire Oklahoma City VA Medical Center, and I'm only allowed to see him once every six months."

Officials at the Oklahoma City VA say there are 14 psychiatrists on staff — but only one solely dedicated to PTSD issues from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Ribeiro says her counselors denied her access to a

group therapy program designed for combat veterans of those conflicts.

Speaking of the PTSD treatment options meant for veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, Ribeiro said, "They've got sleep therapy, they've got a nightmare group therapy program — but they are sticking to their guns and they won't refer me."

When asked why that is, Ribeiro said, "You're asking the wrong person. It seems to be the only thing that's excluding me is the fact that I'm female."

Studies show that female veterans often have a hard time proving they saw combat — something that can help get a PTSD claim approved. But in Ribeiro's case, she earned a combat medal.

Dr. Dan Jones is the director of the Post-Traumatic Stress Recovery Program at the Oklahoma City VA Medical Center. He didn't comment directly on Ribeiro's case, but Jones says there are national policies that should prevent a female vet with an approved claim from being denied access to a support group.

"I can't think of a reason that she would be denied for entrance into most of these programs if she had those qualifications," Jones said.

Facing The Future

Marti Ribeiro says she's given up on the VA's ability to provide free counseling. She's found a good therapist for herself and her daughter, through private insurance.

"It's 30 bucks a week — that's my co-pay for seeing a specialist, basically. So it can get expensive, especially between that and my daughter's counseling."

Today, Ribeiro has a full-time job, and she's found support from a committed relationship. She wants to move on from the memories of war, but she knows her life will never be the same.

"You don't want to forget. You feel guilty for wanting to forget," Ribeiro said.

"I served my country honorably for eight years. I should be proud," she says. "I've seen things and done things that a million other people haven't, and I lived through it and I'm fine, and I'm on the other side, and I'm going to get through it."

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adam person (reason_abul) wrote:

Recent First

If the question is if there are any rules to prevent Ribeiro from getting treatment this is the answer:

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The situation:

After being discharged, Ribeiro moved to Oklahoma City with her daughter, and her symptoms got worse. According to her VA medical records, her PTSD claim was approved — but when she tried making an appointment at the local clinic, another battle began.

"They kept saying 'Oh, well you've got to go get registered at the clinic, and then you've got to go to your primary care physician, and then we will set you up with a mental health appointment,'" Ribeiro said. "And one day, I just walked into the mental health facility and stood there and said, 'I'm not leaving until you help me.'"

Seems to be just a matter of making an two extra appointments first. Where's the Beef?

Monday, March 15, 2010 10:13:31 PM

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Brian Chow (Bdc) wrote:

As a general internist who splits my time between a VA medical center and a large teaching hospital, women are in the vast minority at the VA. IF you want numbers, I refer you to the article about women's health at the VA below from the (Cleveland) Plain Dealer. When I started my residency there 5 years ago, I had no idea how to refer someone for PTSD treatment: I would just refer to psychiatry and pray they got to see the right person. Now we have a multi-disciplinary center dedicated to the treatment of PTSD.

Mr. Kadas apparently has little insight into psychiatric conditions. There is nothing about PTSD that makes someone unfit to be a parent. There are plenty of parents who have psychiatric diseases: depression, bipolar, schizophrenia. What makes them able to parent is that they are treated and the symptoms are controlled. Ms. Ribeiro tried to get treatment and the VA failed her. Also, Mr. Kadas assumed that her daughter was in counseling because of Mom's PTSD. Did it ever occur to you that divorce is hard on kids and that Dad get to share in the blame?

http://blog.cleveland.com/metro/2010/03/va_wants_to_improve_care_for_w.html

Saturday, March 13, 2010 9:12:16 AM

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Steve Carr (McEwin) wrote:

Mr Kadas should be a spokesman for the insurance industry: let's ration health care to nominal combat veterans over decorated noncombatant combat veterans. Also, Ms Ribeiro has a pre-existing condition: two X chromosomes. How can she possibly think she qualifies for proper health care?

Saturday, March 13, 2010 8:38:38 AM

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Robert Yost (nudeart) wrote:

I beg to differ with Mr. Kadas on his defense of the VA, as well as that of "noncombatants". Even an observer will fight back when threatened by an enemy. Women asked for the right to be in harms way and got it. Now they're finding out that this is on "Good old boys club" that isn't quite so good. I'm a Viet Nam Vet, 18 months worth, and it wasn't until we got a Vet Service Officer who served in that hole that I started getting what I needed. I was in the Corps and at that time, the Navy Corpsmen weren't allowed to carry weapons as they were considered "noncombatants". That's been changed somewhere along the line. Any person, male or female, who has to pick up a rifle or any other weapon to fight for their life is a COMBATANT, even if their specialty wasn't in combat arms. I hope she gets every benefit that the VA offers, and I wish her the best of luck.

Saturday, March 13, 2010 8:21:35 AM

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Dave Peach (DavePeach) wrote:

PTSD doesn't preclude the ability to parent except when the V.A. over-medicates and under-monitors, which is their standard procedure.


Groups are available for constant reminders of what is best avoided.

The synthetically induced apathy and irresponsibility greatly aligns patients with bureaucratic regimens and comforts. Prior military experience is beneficial training for the lines and delays that await disfunctional and neglected veterans.

Pills are anxiously doled out in a wide array of flavors, colors, and debilitating consequences. They are poor substitutes for, and often preclude positive results. Babysitters would occasionally employ the same strategies if allowed and the results would be the same.

Perhaps the new bosses can become informed about the atrocity they inherited. Thank you, NPR, for allowing a another attempt. https://iris.va.gov/Scripts/iris.cfg/php.exe/enduser/myq_idp.php?p_sid=pkfClWj&p_accessibility=&p_redirect=&p_created=1265497538&p_iid=627726&p_faqid=

Saturday, March 13, 2010 8:06:59 AM

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Richard Kadas (imgleader) wrote:

How did she get custody of the child when she has a psychological condition that might threaten its well being? Why would anyone allow a child be put in the custody of a parent whose psychological condition necessitates the child having to get psychological counseling. This woman was a reporter in a combat zone not a combattant so what's the big deal? The article didn't mention her having a CIB so she was primarily a noncombattant observer. Why is it that every time NPR reports about a woman encountering a problem it is immediately without any type of hard evidence(proof) blamed on gender discrimination? Women are a statistical majority. They are the gatekeepers in most HR departments, health, and social programs so this woman's inability to get into the VA program she desired was most likely causes by something else besides her gender. One likely reason is that it gave veterans from combat arms a priority over noncombattants. Now why didn't she consider that reason?

Saturday, March 13, 2010 5:49:43 AM

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Steven Blewett (zve482) wrote:

Can't wait to hear the interview and see some of her pictures!

Saturday, March 13, 2010 12:25:45 AM

[Recommend \(2\)](#) 

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