

After decade of war, focus on combat stress has heightened

Treatment options include new short-term residential program in Point Loma

By Gretel C. Kovach • U-T,

Saturday, November 27, 2010 at 6 p.m.



Nelvin C. Cepeda / San Diego Union-Tribune

Lt. Cmdr. Paul Sargent is a psychiatrist who helped organize the Navy's first short-term residential PTSD treatment center for active-duty Marines and sailors. The facility unveiled this month in San Diego, called Overcoming Adversity and Stress Injury Support (OASIS), has space for 10 live-in patients. By next summer, capacity is planned to double.

A young soldier who returned from Iraq drives across the country to visit a buddy at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. The patient's legs have been blown off by a rocket-propelled grenade.

"Help me end this," the wounded soldier pleads.

You've got to be tough, his friend, James, replied. "It's our job to look out for each other."

James has all his limbs, but he too is injured by the war and fighting for his life. His battle is post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD.

Guilt, fear and rage wake him with night terrors, isolate him from his wife, drive him to drink and, finally, to cram the barrel of a gun into his mouth.

James is just a character played by San Diego actor Ryan O'Nan in "The Dry Land," an acclaimed movie that premiered this year at the Sundance Film Festival. But his suffering has been a real-life drama played out in military homes across America during nearly a decade at war.

As disturbing as the material can be, such films are one sign that awareness about PTSD and other forms of mental anguish suffered by today's combat veterans is at a peak.

Among recent developments:

- The Navy unveiled its first short-term residential treatment program this month for active-duty Marines and sailors with PTSD. The facility, at the Point Loma Naval Base and run by the San Diego Naval Medical Center, is called Overcoming Adversity and Stress Injury Support, or OASIS.
- On Veterans Day, HBO premiered "Wartorn: 1861-2010." The documentary about PTSD prompted a Pentagon roundtable discussion of the issues.
- Maj. Gen. David Blackledge, commander of Army civil affairs and psychological operations, has been speaking publicly about his own battle with PTSD, breaking what is often a wall of silence among military brass when it comes to their personal challenges in the aftermath of war.

"The Dry Land" builds to a troubling but ultimately hopeful crescendo, when James' loved ones refuse to give up on him or allow him to destroy himself. It is a difficult but important film to watch, according to Freedom Is Not Free, a nonprofit organization in San Diego County that assists the families of wounded or killed service members.

The group hosted a benefit screening this month in Oceanside to draw attention to the struggles of military families and the often tough adjustment that troops face after returning home from war.

"They need to be aware of what the military is going through, to help support them, to do what they can to help military families get through this," said Cathy Pratt, the wife of a Marine colonel stationed at Camp Pendleton and development director for Freedom Is Not Free.

As many as one in five veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars grapple with PTSD, according to the National Center for PTSD, which is run by the Department of Veterans Affairs. A 2008 Rand Corp. study put the number of such veterans who have developed PTSD or depression as high as 300,000.

More than 45,000 U.S. service members have been wounded or killed in those two wars, according to Pentagon data. The emotional toll of those losses will continue for years to come.

"It's been our longest war ever, and so many of them are willing to go back time and time again, because they don't want to let their buddies down. So they don't always get a break," Pratt said.

Some troops, she said, "they go away, they come back, they have PTSD and they deploy again before they fully recover. It just snowballs."

An earlier screening of "The Dry Land" at the National Heritage Museum in Washington, D.C., was attended by Army Chief of Staff Gen. George Casey, among other soldiers and their families.

O'Nan, the lead actor, said during his visit to Oceanside that he hopes the film will spark communication.

"There are all these systems in place to help," he said, but they don't work unless service members are open to them. "If these guys are talking about it, sharing these experiences, that's the only way to heal."

The Navy offers outpatient therapy for Marines and sailors dealing with combat stress-related issues. Those who become a danger to themselves or others can be forced into locked treatment facilities.

The launch of the OASIS center in San Diego, a voluntary live-in program where active-duty troops spend as much as 12 weeks in intensive treatment for combat-related mental health symptoms, is designed to fill the gap between those extremes of care.

"We are here to provide a more intensive structure for people who really struggled with other treatments," said Lt. Cmdr. Paul Sargent, a psychiatrist at the center who helped design the program, which accepts referrals through military health providers.

The OASIS center offers an array of services, including intensive psychotherapy, yoga and other relaxation strategies, anger-management sessions, substance-abuse treatment, exercise and community outings.

Five patients are currently enrolled, and the number is expected to rise to 20 by next summer.

Building camaraderie and overcoming the tendency to isolate oneself is an important aspect of the program. "These relationships are very healing," Sargent said. "I find the patients are more helpful to each other than anybody else, and that is the way it should be."


The effects of PTSD likely will ripple "not just across a lifetime, but across generations," he said.

Sargent hopes to see greater collaboration in the treatment of these invisible wounds among the Pentagon, the Department of Veterans Affairs, civilian entities and the public at large.

"This is not just a military problem," he said. "This is something we need to look at as a group to embrace and to heal, involving every aspect of our society in every way we can."

gretel.kovach@uniontrib.com (619) 293-1293 Twitter @gckovach

Find this article at:
<http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/2010/nov/27/after-decade-of-war-impact-of-combat-stress>

 [Click to Print](#)

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.