

## Another side of military mental health

By **RICK ROGERS** For the North County Times | Posted: Friday, May 20, 2011 12:00 am

While most of you slept Sunday morning, I motored north to Pasadena to attend the longest running post-traumatic stress disorder conference in the world.

Some of you might remember I gave the Navy and Marine Corps generally high marks for its Operational Stress Control Conference held a few weeks ago in Mission Valley.

The sea services are on the right track, letting mental health experts run the mental health ship, instead of allowing military leaders to steer it where they'd like it to go.

There is, however, something slightly furtive about holding a military-sponsored combat stress conference during the week, and so far from Camp Pendleton and MCAS Miramar that it's practically impossible for family members to attend.

And I'll never agree with the mass drugging of our troops because better alternatives exist.

Remember the commandant's harangue a few years ago about fat Marines? FYI: A side effect of many mental health drugs is weight gain.

But I'll stop beating that drum for a column or two. I get tired of it myself.

For 19 years, La Costa psychologist Bart Billings has run the military and civilian combat stress conference ---- the oldest such confab in the world, as he never tires of saying.

For years and years it was held at Camp Pendleton and open to anyone who wanted to sit and listen.

It should still be, but the Marines ran him off the base and Billings took his show to Los Angeles County about five years ago. Maybe someday I'll tell you that illuminating story.

But this is what I heard at the Pasadena conference:

-- German troops are struggling with post-traumatic stress and depression stemming from multiple deployments. I note them for a compare/contrast aspect and for insight as to what might be in store for us.

Motivating German troops to seek help for their associated drinking binges and anger issues is the fear of losing their families. American mental health workers said the attitude among U.S. troops concerning their families is more along the lines of "don't let the door hit you on the way out."

The divorce rate in the United States hovers just north of 50 percent. In Germany, it's about 30 percent.

At first, the typical German troop hobbled with PTSD came from a troubled background. Now after multiple deployments, more solid-citizen types are gripped by depression and PTSD. This bolsters a recent USA Today story about lousy morale among American vets with two or more deployments.

German officials aren't interested in knowing who is predisposed to combat stress because then they'd have to act accordingly.

Only 2 in 10 German troops with mental health issues are medicated. The percentages are roughly flipped in the United States. Five years ago, 10 percent of combat stress patients were hospitalized in Germany; today, it's 50 percent.

-- The 30,000-troop surge of 2009 to Afghanistan took place without sufficient mental health assets. Commanders are keeping troubled troops in theater because they can't get replacements.

Physician assistants are writing prescriptions minus thorough medical evaluations and oversight because they need to keep the troops going.

"Medication is compensation for poor leadership," said a mental health expert who asked not to be identified. "Maybe we can help troops re-integrate (into civilian life) because the Department of Defense is not spending time on this."

Peer conflicts, leader conflicts and home-front issues account for 70 percent of all stressors for deployed troops.

What is eating these guys alive isn't the bad guys shooting and blowing them up daily, it's the wife emailing about her new boyfriend ---- sometimes even sending adulterous videos ---- or emptying the bank account.

-- Pain medication abuse is skyrocketing here at home. The latest self-medicating craze is bath salts ----- smoked, snorted or mainlined. Of no surprise to anyone doing this: Drug tests can't detect this household fix.

-- Women are committing child abuse at three times the average when their husbands are deployed.

-- Troops aren't seeking mental health counseling, in large part, because the pain of therapy isn't worth it when they'll just be sent down range again.

-- Service members need to pay attention to low levels of agitation because they quickly escalate. Superior force might work in combat, but never in personal relationships.

Counseling can only work when it quenches the pain and reaches the heart.