



REUTERS/LUCAS JACKSON

A long way from home

A soldier from the 3rd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division carries his bag to begin his trip back to the United States at Camp Virginia, Kuwait

Soldiers return from the battlefields to do combat against unemployment, health care needs, and the looming specter of poverty and homelessness

BY SARAH EDMONDS
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Ryan McNabb was a medic in the Marine Corps for six years. He deployed twice to Iraq and worked on the front lines, experiencing, he says, what you'd expect to experience on a battlefield. He returned home in February 2006.

A few months later, he got in a fight and assaulted two police officers. He chalked it up to normal drunken sailor stuff — just blowing off steam.

When he blacked out in rage, while driving 65 miles per hour with his wife and five-month old son in the back seat, he realized it wasn't normal any more.

"I know I'm an intelligent human being. I know why babies cry, and they're trying to inform me of something," McNabb said. "But with PTSD, I don't like large sharp sounds. It reminds me of gunshots and explosions. My son had wet himself. He started to cry. I was driving. While he's screaming at the back of my head, he's screaming at my soul, which set me off. So I start screaming at my wife, while going 65 miles per hour down the freeway. She shouts back at me. I rip the rearview mirror off and threw it at the floorboard. I grabbed the GPS and threw it at the windshield and it spiderwebbed going 65 mph with my wife and child in back seat. I blacked out in rage. I don't

remember pulling to the side of the road at all."

McNabb tells people his story readily, if not comfortably, because most of the people who hear it are veterans of combat duty like himself. McNabb is the outreach coordinator for the Portland Vet Center, one of five branch offices of the Department of Veterans Affairs that work specifically with people who have faced combat. He helps returning vets navigate a world far removed from a combat soldier's reality. The center works with about 650 veterans, most of them Vietnam veterans, but McNabb was hired three years ago for outreach specifically to the returning soldiers who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Tens of thousands of Western troops are scheduled to leave those countries and make the journey home over the next couple of years. Those who leave the military will face an even more perilous journey — the road back into civilian society, where weak economic growth has made it increasingly difficult to get work.

This is a road that has already led to poverty and even to homelessness for thousands of veterans who travelled it in better economic times. Those who will now follow in their footsteps will be entering the mainstream amid increased risk of recession in Europe and the United States, and stubbornly high

unemployment.

Government agencies in the United States, Britain, Canada and other nations that support those who have served are braced for the expected influx of new veterans. Officials are implementing new programs to help ease the transition from the military to civilian life. The great unknown, though, is how the economy will fare in months ahead.

Dr. Susan Angell, executive director of the Veterans Homeless Initiative at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, said the VA will be keeping a concerned eye on those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, given trends already evident in the job market.

"That population, that young population, has the highest unemployment rate of any of our veteran populations, and it's much higher than the overall unemployment rate. So we're very concerned about this group," she said. According to Angell, joblessness among these younger veterans is running around 11.5 percent — higher still among female vets.

Jobs are crucial since officials and homeless experts agree that while a variety of factors make some veterans more vulnerable to personal crisis than the wider populace, the main reason they

A troubling trend, worldwide

In the past year, street papers across Europe and America reported on the struggle ex-soldiers face when they return to civilian life. Following service in Iraq and Afghanistan, both post-traumatic stress and the global recession increase the risk of veterans ending up on the streets. With support from Reuters journalist Sarah Edmonds, The Street News Service and its participating street papers produced this Special Report.

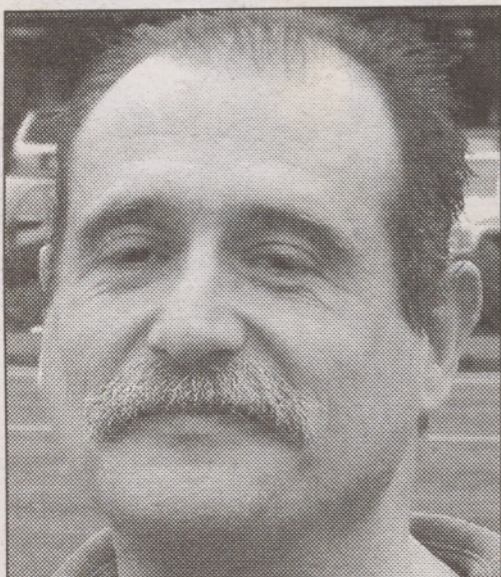
A survey conducted by the International Network of Street Papers in June 2011 showed that a quarter of street papers in the network have seen an increase in the number of homeless war veterans in their cities in the last two years.

At some street papers, more than 30 percent of vendors report prior military service. The numbers are highest in the United States and Canada, but street papers across Western Europe also work with vendors who served in the army. The legacy of war in the Balkans accounts for many homeless veterans in Eastern Europe, some of whom now work as street paper vendors in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Croatia, Slovenia and Ukraine.

South Korea's street paper registered 74 veterans as vendors in the past two years alone.

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