

Adjusting to Life after Combat

Soldier just wants to be welcomed home

BY CARI HACHMANN
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Mrowczynski, 32, a native of Eugene, does not want to be thanked for the year of service he spent as an infantry soldier in Iraq; he just wants to be welcomed home.

Six years after his deployment, he is adjusting to life in the Tualatin suburbs. When crabbing at the Oregon Coast, canning home-made jams, or relaxing with yoga, he momentarily forgets the traumatic year of combat overseas.

He is among the one in three U.S. veterans of the post-9/11 military, according to a recent poll by the Pew Research Center who believe the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were not worth fighting.

By his own experience, Mrowczynski recommends that no one join the military. "We have two illegal wars going on - I don't want to see more people involved in it."

He shares a litany of problems he faced in active service and upon his return to civilian life.

After graduating high school in 1996, military recruiters encouraged the 19-year old to join the National Guard under the persuasion that he would be granted scholarship money in return for his service. He became a 'tanker by trade' and was stationed in Fort Hood, Texas from 1998 to 2001.

Sometime later, Mrowczynski met his partner. As a gay soldier enlisted under Don't Ask Don't Tell, he had to keep his love and family life secret.

Under strict military policy, a gay lover would not be welcome at his deployment ceremony. Mrowczynski stood alone as a massive crowd of soldiers said their goodbyes to surrounding loved ones. "Everybody else's family was there except mine," he said.

Even after a year-long hell in Iraq, wherein the first few months a 'terrified' Mrowczynski survived his first improvised explosive device and witnessed a fellow soldier die, he was still not greeted by his closest loved one at his return ceremony.

Compared to the violence that caused him Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or "scatter brain," Mrowczynski said keeping his sexuality hidden was easy. Not flamboyant as many in the military believed gay men to be, he said, "I never fit the bill of what peoples' stereotypes of what homosexuality was."

Though he talked on the phone with his partner, he avoided sharing family stories with other soldiers. He kept a photograph of a female friend in his wallet to create the impression he was straight.

When Mrowczynski left the military, he returned to Eugene and graduated from University of Oregon with a sociology degree. But like a million other graduates hoping to get a decent job in the worst economic slump this country has ever seen, he was disillusioned by the poor prospects.

He was told that his Veteran status would add points to his resume on state and federal jobs that would put him ahead of civilian applicants. But with only tanker experience in the military to



Noah Mrowczynski plays music less often since he was in the service, but living with his partner, George, he is discovering new enjoyments that help him adjust to a more peaceful life, like caring for his two dogs, three cats and four chickens.

back a sociology degree, he got no job offers.

Mrowczynski finally found employment after applying to Verizon, apparently a pro-military company. Today, he works for Frontier Communications, a company that gives preference to veterans with degrees.

But he is still running into obstacles to Veterans benefits.

In attempts to purchase a house with a VA loan, he and his partner were told that they could not qualify as domestic partners. The couple needed to be married.

"So now we can serve our country, but were not going to get the same benefits?" he said.

When he applied for benefits for his PTSD, he stopped taking his medications, so they would believe that he needed treatment. He expects to get 30 percent of his costs reimbursed.

Mrowczynski said it wasn't until he returned from Iraq and began classes at U of O that he began to question the government's reasoning for invading Iraq. "Knowledge is power. We were kept in the dark."

"They sent me to Iraq, for what reason? I still don't know," he said.

Veteran Services Seek Volunteers

Volunteers are needed to help improve the quality of life for veterans within the community.

Washington County Disability, Aging and Veteran Services, which serves over 3,600 veterans and their families each year, are recruiting volunteers to help them coordinate claims and appeals for veterans benefits.

The volunteers provide administrative support, including the upkeep of files, record keeping, researching case topics, computer data, telephone services, and special mailings.

Needed skills include a basic

knowledge of office practices and procedures, an ability to effectively alphabetize files correctly and efficiently, good organization and communication skills, and an ability to maintain confidentiality.

The time commitment is flexible on most days and times. The Veteran Services office is open in Hillsboro, Monday through Friday, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., located at 180 E. Main Street, Suite 208.

If interested, email Rebecca_Tabra@co.washington.or.us with a resume or call for an application at 503-846-3087.

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