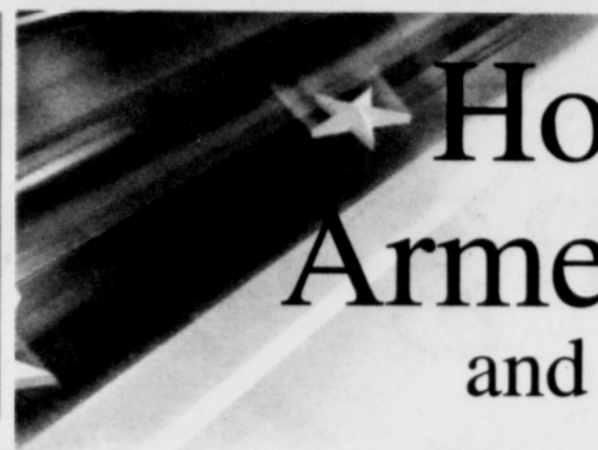


# The



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# Honoring the Armed Forces and Veterans

Special edition coverage, inside

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# Coping at War and Peace

## Female soldier changed by deployment

BY CARI HACHMANN  
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

As a helicopter mechanic for the U. S. Marine Corps, veteran of war Marissa Rivera, 31, returned home after her third deployment to Afghanistan and Iraq in 2008.

Rivera was just 22-years-old and working at Auto Zone when she felt a calling to enlist in the military after terrorists crashed American passenger jets into New York City's twin towers, the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and into a Pennsylvania field on Sept. 11, 2001.

Fearing the unknown and wishing loved ones goodbye, she deployed for her first time overseas in late 2004 to an air station in a cold mountainous region of Afghanistan. During her six to eight month stay, she survived three separate bombing attacks by Taliban insurgents.

After returning home to San Diego's marine base at Miramar, Rivera deployed again in 2006, only this time with the Navy, on board the U.S.S. Peleieu. She was one of two female helicopter mechanics confined to a cramped air shop where the male to female ratio was near 100 to 1.

There, Rivera learned to suck it up as one of the guys. "I had to work 10 times harder and 10 times faster," she said. "It was pretty evident-- they didn't want me there."

Following a brief docking at a U.S. base in Kuwait, Rivera returned to the southern California shore, where she would leave again in 2007 for her final deployment to an air station in Iraq. By this time, the young woman was what soldiers call "salty"—she knew what she was getting into. Yet, the seasoned marine still found few comforts in the sand-stormed, 140 degree Fahrenheit Iraqi desert.

Rivera says she didn't realize how the war had changed her until after she got out and even then, it was a slow process of coming to terms. It took her four years to realize she had symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

The stigma of PTSD in the military comes



PHOTO BY CARI HACHMANN/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

*Iraq and Afghanistan veteran Marissa Rivera (right) gets a helping hand from Belle Landau of the Returning Veterans Project, a southeast Portland non-profit offering free health services to veterans and family members.*

from not wanting to be considered weak or crazy by fellow soldiers and commanders. The condition keeps a lot of veterans in the dark and they don't seek the help they need, said Rivera.

"You've been re-programmed by the military to be a certain way," she said. "How do you undo that?"

After marrying a fellow soldier from her unit, moving to Portland and finishing a degree in psychology at Portland State University, Rivera was working at Portland's

Veterans Affairs Medical Center, assisting counselors with other veterans, when she began noticing her own PTSD symptoms.

Ailments such as flat affect, hidden emotions, anger flair-ups, impatience, hyper-vigilance, isolationist tendencies -- these were conditions where, "I saw myself in other veterans," said Rivera.

As a female in a no-excuse, male-dominated warzone, Rivera grew a thick skin.

"You can't have weakness in the military," she said. Every day she had to prove

to others that she could fix airplanes flown by fellow soldiers and handle herself in life or death situations. It never got easier, she said.

Once home, she suffered the effects. "It's not something I asked for. It's not my fault. It's something that happened," she said. "How do you separate from being a weapon to being someone who's breaking down?"

Post-war, Rivera is very private and

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