2005

From War Hero to War Haunted

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Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Hero’s Own Hell

Back from Iraq, NY soldier grapples with anxiety that affects thousands of GIs

A4-5
From war hero

March 25, 2003

■ NY vet depicted in famous image details struggle with menacing stress disorder that escalated to a standoff

BY INDRANI SEN
STAFF WRITER

Army Spc. Joseph Dwyer angled a mirror out the back window of his apartment in El Paso, Texas, trying to make out the Iraqis in the evening gloom. He couldn’t see them, but he felt that they were out there somewhere, ready to attack.

Holding his 9-mm handgun tight, the 29-year-old medic from Mount Sinai phoned in an airstrike using military code. He directed the fighter jets to his own street address.

Then he heard a noise from the roof — maybe an Iraqi trying to get in? — and that’s when Dwyer began firing.

Nobody was hurt in the three-hour standoff Oct. 6 in which Dwyer, deep in a post-traumatic stress-induced delusion, barricaded himself into his apartment, fighting off an imaginary Iraqi attack.

Back then, an image of hope

So much has changed for Joseph Dwyer. Only two and a half years earlier, in March 2003, a startling battlefield photograph of him cradling an injured Iraqi child showed America a hopeful image of the new war.

Dwyer, who is still in the service, is being treated by psychiatrists on the Army base in Fort Bliss, Texas. He was released on bail and faces a misdemeanor charge of discharging a firearm in a municipality.

During his 92 days in Iraq, Dwyer was attached temporarily to the 3rd Squadron of the 7th Cavalry Regiment of the 3rd Infantry Division. The unit scouted for the division which saw heavy combat in the first days of

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The El Paso standoff involving Army Spc. Joseph Dwyer has a painful familiarity for some veterans.

It’s not simply because of other dramatic cases involving Iraq vets, such as the shooting of a couple in Las Vegas last July, and the incident in Massachusetts in August, when a Marine shot into a nightclub crowd.

Mostly, they say, they can
the war as U.S. forces swiftly moved north from Kuwait to Baghdad. One Army officer called the unit “the tip of the tip of the spear.”

“It took 21 days to get to Baghdad.” Dwyer said last week, speaking by telephone from the William Beaumont Army Medical Center in Fort Bliss, Texas. “We had four days that we didn’t get shot at.”

Dwyer came back to the United States in June 2003, and visited his family on Long Island on July 4. He seemed happy to be back, but he was also gaunt and fidgety, said his sister, Christine Dwyer-Ogno, 38, of Mount Sinai. His wife, Matina, declined to comment.

“We didn’t think of his mental health,” said Dwyer-Ogno.

“We were just so glad to have him back in our arms.”

He was back, but he wasn’t the same, and he continues to struggle. Dwyer can no longer go to movies or other crowded public places. At restaurants, he’ll only sit facing the door, with his back to the wall. A month ago in Texas, he crashed his car when he swerved to avoid what he thought was a roadside ambush by Iraqis.

Concerned about Dwyer’s increasingly strange behavior and his use of inhalants to get high, three friends staged an intervention days before the El Paso standoff. They tried unsuccessfully to persuade him to give up his weapons and to get the help he needed.

He knew on some level that they were right, Dwyer said, but he still couldn’t do it. “I’m a soldier,” he said. “I suck it up. That’s our job.”

Dwyer is one of many Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. Known in previous wars as “shell shock” or “combat fatigue,” PTSD was identified as a psychiatric disorder in 1980 after its symptoms were seen in returning Vietnam veterans. Those with PTSD often relive the stressful event in nightmares or flashbacks; avoid activities, places, or people that are remind- ers of the trauma; and have a sense of perpetual vigilance, as if on sentry duty. PTSD is often compounded by substance abuse.

Psychological fallout
Almost one in six soldiers returning from Iraq have symptoms of PTSD, major depression or anxiety, a study published in July of last year in the New England Journal of Medicine found. If the study, led by Department of Defense researcher Col. Charles W. Hoge, is an accurate predictor, more than 25,000 of the 124,000 who have served in Iraq will have mental health problems.

Always a quiet kid, Dwyer enjoyed a happy childhood on Long Island, family members said. Son of a New York City Transit Police lieutenant, Dwyer loved to fish, and he played golf for Mount Sinai High.

He signed up for the Army two days after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. At the time, he was living in North Carolina, working as a transporter at a hospital and considering going into a nursing program. But his plans changed when his older brother, Patrick, lost two close colleagues in the attacks.

“They knocked my towers down,” Dwyer said. “So I was ready to go.”

In March 2003, a week into
VETERAN'S PATH FROM WAR HERO TO WAR HAUNTED

Dwyer with comrades in Iraq, above, says he was motivated to enlist after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Dwyer, shown with wines, Matina, at Fort Benning, Ga., tried to escape from his historical trauma.

SOLDIER FROM A4

the long war, it's easy to see why the Department of Defense might have feared an angry bite struck a chord and why it ran in newspapers across the land.

Dwyer's face was weathered from his month nightly sleep on the field, as if guarding for Air. He was still

his first Gulf War and 10,000 Korean War veterans. The morning of Oct. 6, some 12 hours before the stand-off started, Dwyer, called Barraza and

by the Fort Bliss clinic where he worked. He seemed淡淡的 and almost absent-minded. He drove home, and his friends said he stayed up for part of that day sniffing on secured

interview. He said he could not change his mind, though he added, “I think I was probably too young in my mind, even though I wasn’t.”

Dwyer’s mother, Matina, Dwyer said, was "not at Joseph that point," she said. "He was a soldier in Iraq.

Still, Dwyer admitted he had a hard time trying to find an apartment, Barraza’s said. When he knocked on the door of an inn to ask for help, he was told he was too drunk. "I was trying to find an inn," he said. "It made it hard to think about mom and
do my job," he recalls. "It made it harder to think about mom and
do my job," he remembers.

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TOKYO, Dec. 23 – Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi announced plans to seek a budgetary increase for Japan’s

OBDURATE

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