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### ANDERSON COOPER 360 DEGREES

Coming Home

Aired November 13, 2006 - 23:00 ET

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ANDERSON COOPER, CNN ANCHOR: ... all heard the stories of brave men who served their country and found themselves blamed for an unpopular war. Thankfully, that is not how it is today. Even those who oppose the war in Iraq are quick to say they support the troops, respect and honor their sacrifices.

We watched them return, and along with their friends and families, we celebrate their homecomings.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

COOPER (voice-over): The wars they have been fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan are unlike any conflicts in recent history. And the challenges some of these vets are now facing when they come home are unprecedented.

For instance, incredible medical advances are allowing our troops to survive wounds that would have killed troops in past wars. These lifesaving technologies in turn have created new challenges for veterans who now must find ways to adapt to new lives.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

COOPER (on camera): In the hour ahead, you will meet some remarkable men and women. They've come home from war changed, but determined. Their stories are filled with courage, even those who've lost the most. That's where we start, with two young men, whose injuries are a signature of this war and so is their resolve.

Here is CNN's Dan Simon.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

DAN SIMON, CNN CORRESPONDENT (voice-over): Brett Miller might have lost a lot of his memory, but not his love for music.

BRETT MILLER, SUFFERS FROM TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY: The guitar kind of gives me an opportunity to kind of not feel so alone. Kind of gives me the opportunity to do something right.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: And bring your head back to center.

SIMON: Tim Jeffers is learning how to walk.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Just make a right turn. We're going to head on down the hall.

SIMON: For the second time in his life.

TIM JEFFERS, SUFFERS FROM TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY: When you are the victim, it is kind of like, why me? Why did it have to be me?

SIMON: Tim, a 22-year-old Marine; and Brett, a 31-year-old Oregon National Guardsman, both suffer from traumatic brain injury, the signature injury for America's troops in Iraq. The reason? I.E.D.s, improvised explosive devices, the enemy's signature weapon. The two were wounded last year in separate attacks.

JEFFERS: I've never seen, as far as I know, the enemy face to face. And to me, it's kind of like if they knew me as a person, they probably wouldn't have done that because I think I have a good personality and I am good to everybody I meet.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: OK. Here we go.

SIMON: It was because of the number of people like Tim coming back from Iraq that V.A. created rehab centers for those with multiple devastating injuries.

This hospital in Palo Alto is one of four such facilities in the country.

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UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: 15 more. Come on, 15 more. Go, go, go.

SIMON: Here, Tim spends his days learning how to use his new legs and cope with the reflection he barely recognizes. He wears a helmet because doctors removed part of his skull to allow his brain to swell.

JEFFERS: This is me when I was 18. I was a senior in high school.

SIMON: Doctors are confident with more surgery, he will look much closer to the way he did. Tim remembers when he woke up in the hospital and realized his legs had been amputated.

JEFFERS: It was one of those things where it was like I need my mom over here because I really wanted to cry. I was like, I was scared. I was like how in the hell could someone take my damn legs.

SIMON: Looking at Brett, you wouldn't know there was anything wrong. His physical wounds healed for the most part. But a few months later, he realized his short term memory was shot.

He told me that he probably won't even remember this interview. He also worries that his 8-year-old daughter won't understand why her father acts so differently now.

MILLER: I started to realize that I was forgetting a lot of things. People, people weren't kind of -- it seemed like they weren't acting normal, but in a way thought, well maybe it is me. SIMON: To keep track of people he meets and what he does each day, this former firefighter and college instructor records everything in his memory book. It's all backed up on a handheld computer that patients here jokingly refer to as their brains.

MILLER: If I could choose injuries, if there is one thing that I would lose, it wouldn't be my mind. Everyday is a new page, nothing on it.

SIMON: At Walter Reed Army Medical Center, of those wounded in a blast or explosion, four out of 10 also had traumatic brain injury. Nearly 2,000 cases had been treated at hospitals around the country.

For Brett, it was caused by shockwaves from an IED, the force so powerful it rattled his brain against the surrounding skull. The injury is not visible.

That's why doctors fear other soldiers may have the same problem, but not know it.

As for Tim, he stepped on an IED and was unconscious for three and a half weeks.

(On camera): Many of the injuries doctors are seeing here would have been fatal only a few years ago. Their lives saved by advancements in body armor and battlefield medicine. But there are also the wounds you can't see, the emotional wounds.

(Voice-over): Families are often the next to fall victim. Psychologist Harriet Zeiner says nearly two-thirds of the severely wounded will wind up divorced in less than a year.

HARRIET ZEINER, CLINICAL NEUROPSYCHOLOGIST: These are young people, and these are people who are being left while they are healing from a traumatic brain injury which they need all the support they can get.

SIMON: Tim and Brett were both single, but one day each hopes to marry.

MILLER: If I can find a girl who is willing to hang out with a guy who is going to forget to call her everyday.

SIMON: Brett still has a sense of humor.

So does Tim. He knows he's lucky. And at only 22, still has the optimism of youth.

JEFFERS: These legs aren't cheap and I look at those and think I'm not going to let those legs go to waste. I'm going to use those. I'm not going to be sitting in that wheelchair all of my life.

SIMON: As for Brett, nine years older, he worries about the rest of his life. He tries to be upbeat, but wonders, what happens next? After all, he had been a firefighter for years and he knows that's over. He figures he can no longer hold a job where people's lives depend on him.

Both are ready to go home, uncertain about what they'll find, but convinced that with these injuries, in another war in an earlier time, they wouldn't be going home at all.

Dan Simon, CNN, Palo Alto, California.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

COOPER: Those guys are incredibly brave. You know, the war follows a lot of servicemen and women home in less obvious ways, in flashbacks and nightmares, depression and anxiety attacks.

Thankfully, today the military knows what to call these psychological battle scars and how to treat them. That is a huge advancement from the days when post-traumatic stress disorder was wrapped in mystery and known as shell shock or combat fatigue.

Roughly one in six troops returning from Iraq suffers from PTSD. One in six. The military is doing more than ever to catch it and treat it, offering screenings before, during and even after deployment. But still, PTSD is life changing for those who have it. And for those who don't get the treatment they need, who don't reach out for help, it can be life threatening.

Here is the story of one soldier from the 10th Mountain Division in New York.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

COOPER (voice-over): An early morning last May in Albuquerque, New Mexico, a neighborhood wakes to a mass lockdown. A police sniper takes aim, a bomb squad stands by, and a S.W.A.T. team prepares to storm a house.

inside, an Iraq war vet Matthew Vargas sits alone, threatening to kill himself.

MARY LOU MUNOZ, MOTHER OF MATTHEW VARGAS: That day he wanted to die. Matthew attempted suicide in my garage that morning. He had a cord wrapped around his neck. When I went in the garage, he was too heavy for the cord and it broke, and he was on the garage floor when I found him.

COOPER: Vargas' family couldn't believe it had come to this. After months of seeking help for him, rescuers had at last arrived, but they'd come with guns drawn.

MUNOZ: And I said, why are you here now? Where have you been? And then I started thinking, well, you are too late.

APRIL VARGAS, WIFE OF MATTHEW VARGAS: Who is that?

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD: Daddy.

VARGAS: What's his name? Do you know his name? UNIDENTIFIED CHILD: No.

VARGAS: Matt.

COOPER: Five months before the standoff, home on leave with his family, Matthew Vargas went AWOL, refusing to return to Fort Drum in upstate New York, and from there, back to Iraq.

His wife, April, remembers how withdrawn he had become and why.

VARGAS: He just kind of just started to isolate himself. And I would ask him about it. And finally, he said that when he got shot, it just was an eye opener for him like he could never see his daughter again if he went back.

COOPER: It was a firefight after an ambush near Abu Ghraib. Three insurgents were killed. Private Vargas took a bullet to the chest. His Kevlar vest saved his life.

The family believes his brush with death touched off his depression and a diagnosis from the family doctor of post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD.

When Vargas started isolating himself in the house, the family knew he needed help.

MUNOZ: He is only 23 years old, and he said that he was already dead inside. He would just say that he was a killer machine now. That's the way he described himself.

COOPER: Days before he was scheduled to redeploy to Iraq, his mother and wife say they repeatedly called Fort Drum and a local military chaplain, but Matthew's sergeant was blunt.

MUNOZ: Tell Matthew he needs to be on the plane and he better be back in New York. And he wouldn't speak to me. He wouldn't talk about it. He said, we've all been through a lot. And he just hung up on me.

VARGAS: I was surprised they didn't help. They are so quick to getting you signed up, telling you all the benefits. And when he was getting deployed, I had all these support groups. But when I needed help the most, it seemed like nobody was there.

COOPER: In an e-mail, a Fort Drum spokesman told CNN, "Vargas' claim that he was not afforded assistance for his perceived mental and emotional needs is ill founded. His chain of command was not given the opportunity to evaluate his condition and render any necessary assistance due directly to his willful and unlawful absence from his unit." The spokesman went on to say, "Soldiers who ask for help get some of the best care that can be had."

On the day of the armed stand off, Vargas' father, Marty, a CNN engineer, caught the first flight to Albuquerque.

MARTY VARGAS, FATHER OF MATTHEW VARGAS: I didn't even want to get on the airplane because I was afraid that things would happen while I was on the airplane and as soon as I got off the airplane they would tell me that my son was shot dead.

Matthew had told me once that he had nothing left to live for anymore, that his country gave up on him, and he felt maybe his family gave up on him, too. At that time I kind of felt that he was already emotionally dead.

COOPER: By the time Private Vargas' father landed, the nine-hour standoff was over.

ANSWERING MACHINE: You have one old message.

COOPER: There was a message on his voice mail.

MATTHEW VARGAS, SUFFERS FROM PTSD (RECORDING ON ANSWERING MACHINE): It's Matthew. I don't know if my Dad's in town yet or not, but tell him that I love him and I'll try to call back later today.

MARTY VARGAS: I think he had given up at that point. It was his good bye.

I think he needs to see that we're here for him.

COOPER: It was not Matthew Vargas' last good-bye. He surrendered shortly after the house was tear-gassed, walking out unharmed.

The following day, his family tried to visit him in jail.

MARTY VARGAS: I'm so thankful today - I really am -- that he is alive and that we can help him now.

COOPER: In June, Matthew Vargas was charged with desertion, but ultimately convicted of a lesser charge, going

AWOL. His family says he continues to struggle with depression. The terms of his discharge make him ineligible for unemployment benefits. Vargas might be able to get medical benefits, including counseling, if he applies to the Veterans Administration, but he's told his family he's not ready to take that step.

MARTY VARGAS: Well, we'll go in and see what happens.

I know that the rough road is not over for my son. I hope that the military will step up and acknowledge that Matthew does have a problem. And it's not one of fear. It's one of the psyche.

No, I think they...

COOPER: A Vietnam Veteran himself, Marty Vargas speaks from experience.

MARTY VARGAS: In war, you hear people screaming, crying. You hear a lot of sounds that you are not really used to. And these sounds and visuals come back to haunt you for the rest of your life.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

COOPER (on camera): Well, Matthew's case is obviously an extreme one, complicated by the fact that he was absent without leave.

But post-traumatic stress comes in many forms and many degrees of severity. And there is help out there. Through the V.A., most discharged veterans are entitled to at least two years of mental health services at no cost, including individual and group therapy, plus medication to treat the symptoms.

If you're a veteran with combat stress or know one that needs help, the Department of Defense has this 24/7 hotline, 800-342-9647. Or you can log on at [www.militaryonesource.com](http://www.militaryonesource.com).

It often takes months for PTSD to surface. A soldier who returns from war and seems fine is still at risk. Here's the raw data. In one study, just 4 percent of vets had PTSD one month after returning home from war. After four months, the rate was 9 percent. At seven months, it was 12 percent. Fully 78 percent of those soldiers with PTSD or depression at seven months showed no signs of either condition at one month.

When PTSD strikes, it can be devastating, as we just saw. The question is, could reliving the trauma that caused it help tame it?

Coming up, a fascinating new treatment for PTSD. An elaborate video simulation that looks, sounds even smells like real combat. It's called Virtual Iraq.

And next, on this special edition of 360, our Dr. Sanjay Gupta tries it out.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

DR. SANJAY GUPTA, CNN SENIOR MEDICAL CORRESPONDENT (voice over): I am very uncomfortable right now. Especially - I'm trying to get this thing to get us out of here as quickly as possible. Every time I hear a new noise, I can feel my heart starting to pound, I have a little bit of the shakes with my hands.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

BILL WALDEN, VIETNAM VETERAN: My name is Bill Walden. I enlisted in the United States Marine Corps in 1967. And then in October of 1970, I got orders to go to Vietnam.

Once I got over there, I said to myself, I'm going home. I got a wife and a daughter. I'll do what I have to do. I'll do my job, but I intend to be in the 12 months of going back home.

The men and women that are coming home today, the first thing I would say to you is, welcome home and thank you for your service. Don't hold it in. Don't repress it like some of our - my fellow comrades did. Come right out and say it. You know, we will do what we can to get you the help if you need help. And maybe just a good cry or a good laugh is all you really need.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

COOPER: The Veterans Administration estimates that 15 percent of Iraq War veterans have experienced some form of post-traumatic stress disorder.

PTSD is treatable. The key is talking with someone about it. Soldiers with PTSD are typically treated with some form of talk therapy, and if necessary, antidepressant medication.

The military is also working on a new kind of treatment that's based on a popular videogame. It's called Virtual Iraq, and it allows soldiers to relive their combat experiences, often in excruciating detail.

360 M.D. Dr. Sanjay Gupta visited a test site to see for himself how it works himself.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

DR. SANJAY GUPTA, CNN SENIOR MEDICAL CORRESPONDENT (voice over): I was experiencing the reality of war, but in fact, it was virtual reality of war.

(On camera): Helpless. Totally helpless and really, really scared. Because I thought I was going to die. I didn't want to die like that.

(Voice-over): I wasn't ready for what would happen. It was perhaps as unnerving, as intense and as disturbing an

experience as I could imagine.

(On camera): Every time I hear a new noise, I can feel my heart starting to pound. I have a little bit of the shakes with my hands.

(Voice-over): Here at the Naval Medical Center in San Diego, therapists use videogame technology to help Iraq vets overcome PTSD. They take the vets back virtually to the place where their trauma began.

It's an electronic deja vu. They feel as if it's real. The sights, sounds, vibrations, even the smells of the Iraq War, but in a safe environment.

I experienced it for myself with the help of Dr. MaryRose Gerardi at Emory University in Atlanta, one of the therapy's test sites. I was quickly brought back to my time covering the war in Iraq.

MARYROSE GERARDI, EMORY UNIVERSITY: Right now, you are sitting in the humvee. I'd like you to just move ahead slowly.

GUPTA (on camera): That is wild. (CROSSTALK)

GERARDI: You can certainly stand up if you'd like, but please be careful. Now, as we go along, what I can do is add stimuli along the way that hopefully would elicit some of your specific memory, for instance...

GUPTA: Helicopters flying overhead.

GERARDI: Yes. I'm going to give you something that's a little bit more disturbing.

GUPTA: That is really frightening. You have no idea what is happening right now. Just two of our vehicles have just -- looked like they (UNINTELLIGIBLE) because we're trying to get out of there as quickly as possible. I can feel my heart rate just starting to pound. It looks like we just took some gunfire. More gunfire.

GERARDI: Now I would be asking you if you were working on a specific memory to be recounting your memory and confronting that memory.

GUPTA: Well, there was one time when we were driving along and all of a sudden our convoy came under fire.

GERARDI: What happened next?

GUPTA: It was nighttime and so all these tracer fire, I guess, hitting the front of the convoy in front of us.

GERARDI: OK.

GUPTA: And we all just ducked down into the truck as low as we could go. You're literally just sort of covering your head, and making sure your helmet chin strap is on as tight as it can be.

GERARDI: Yes. What were you feeling at that point?

GUPTA: Helpless, totally helpless and really, really scared because I thought I was going to die. I didn't want to die like that.

I am very uncomfortable right now, especially as I -- and I am trying to get this thing to get us out of here as quickly as possible.

Every time I hear a new noise, I can feel my heart starting to pound. I have a little bit of the shakes with my hands.

GERARDI: What I would be doing also at this point, Sanjay, is asking you to rate your level of anxiety on a scale from zero to 100.

GUPTA: 90. I don't feel good at all right now.

GERARDI: Ok. But the goal, as we had talked about, is to confront the fear memory in a safe place. You don't want to avoid it. Confront it and find out that you can habituate to that level of anxiety and be OK with it. GUPTA: I have to tell you, I was stunned by my reaction. I mean, I know it's only a simulation, but my reaction was so powerful. What I didn't show you was that I went through that simulation two more times. And I can't say that it ever really got any easier, but I did feel more in control.

And from what the psychologists tell me, that's the goal. Face your fears until you can control them, maybe even defeat them.

Now, this therapy is only available on a limited basis, but it does seem to be very effective at treating our warriors who are coming home.

Dr. Sanjay Gupta, CNN, Atlanta.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

COOPER: Well, PTSD isn't the only problem our servicemen and women face when they come home. Remember, they have been separated from their loved ones for nearly all of their tour of duty. That separation and the stress of combat is tough on relationships and especially marriages.

Coming up, husbands and wives, changed by combat, struggling to reconnect. And how the military is helping them do that.

You are watching a special edition of 360, "Coming Home."

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

MELANIE GRAY, HUSBAND DEPLOYED FOR 15 MONTHS: One time he said to me, he said, you know, I know, hon, you are used to being in charge, but I'm back and your service is no longer needed.

RANDI KAYE, CNN CORRESPONDENT: Your service is no longer needed?

M. GRAY: Yes, that's what he said to me, and I go, do I look like one of your soldiers?

KAYE: You said that?

MASTER SGT. SHELDON GRAY, U.S. ARMY RESERVE: Yes, something like that.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

ERIC "DOC" NAEGELY, VIETNAM VETERAN: Well, when I went to Vietnam, I was 20. I was with the 14th Infantry Division, 101st Airborne. I was a combat medic.

Dealing with death as a medic, you think about the ones you've lost. And you try not to think about it, but it's always there. And that's what the Iraqi guys, when they are going to deal with when they get back.

Yes, it's going to be a long road and it's a long hard road. And just don't give up. You've already been through a war, and this is only secondary. You have already gone through the worst part. You survived, you came home, and now, you have to start taking care of yourself so you can take care of your family.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

COOPER: Well, taking care of your family isn't easy when you are far from home. Long deployments are incredibly hard on military families. It's hard to overstate the sacrifice that our servicemen and women make when they leave their families behind.

I mean, imagine being deployed half way around the world for 12 months with little more than e-mail to stay connected to your spouse. Even the strongest marriage would be strained.

CNN's Randi Kaye has one family story and how the Army was able to help them.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

RANDI KAYE, CNN CORRESPONDENT (voice-over): Melanie Gray is happy to finally have her husband home, after his 15 months in the Middle East. But home doesn't feel as good as it did before Master Sergeant Sheldon Gray went to Iraq.

MELANIE GRAY, HUSBAND DEPLOYED FOR 15 MONTHS: Before deployment, we did everything as a family, you know, we went away together. You know, when you saw one, you saw the other. I mean, it was all about our family.

KAYE: Today, the Grays and their three children find themselves struggling to return things to the way they used to be. But in this house, communication is complicated by the ghosts of war. And a long separation that is fracturing military families around the country.

M. GRAY: I felt like I was living the life that we were supposed to live together, and then he was living a totally different life that I didn't understand. I felt like a single parent, a single person, you know, like everything was up to me. I had to get it right. It didn't matter what it was, the trash, you know, the bills, the kids.

KAYE: Like many soldiers upon return, Master Sergeant Gray became a stranger in his own home.

(On camera): What was it like when you first got back?

MASTER SGT. SHELDON GRAY, U.S. ARMY RESERVE: Getting back was, it's almost like tiptoeing into a haunted house.

KAYE (voice-over): Unsure how to be a husband and father, unsure how to talk to his wife.

M. GRAY: One time he said to me, he said, you know, I know, hon, you are used to being in charge, but I'm back and your service is no longer needed.

RANDI KAYE, CNN CORRESPONDENT: Your service is no longer needed?

M. GRAY: Yes, that's what he said to me, and I go, do I look like one of your soldiers?

KAYE: You said that?

MASTER SGT. SHELDON GRAY, U.S. ARMY RESERVE: Yes, something like that.

KAYE (voice-over): While there are no overall statistics on military marriages, the Army does keep track of its own. And between 2001 and 2004, the relatively low number of divorces in the Army had nearly doubled, even though the number of troops remain the same.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: It's not your problem or my problem, but...

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKERS: Our problem.

KAYE: Seeing a strong relationship at home means a stronger soldier overseas, the Army began offering weekend retreats, like this one, to returning veterans and their spouses, helping them learn how to readjust to married life after spending more than a year apart.

The program, called "Strong Bonds," has counseled more than 30,000 couples and it seems to be working. The Army says its divorce rate is now dropping.

CHAPLAIN MACK GRIFFITH, U.S. ARMY RESERVES: The Army recognizes that the person and the relationship, marriages, the relationship with children is critical to the effectiveness of the soldier. In fact, we say we recruit a soldier, but we retain a family.

S. GRAY: I guess one of the things I feel as though...

KAYE: Melanie and Sheldon Gray decided to give the retreat a try after a friend recommended it. In just two days, they say, their communication improved.

M. GRAY: I learned to be more patient and to actually hear when he said stuff, because I wasn't hearing him, you know, I just wanted stuff done. Because, you know, this is my life. I mean, I didn't go away, he did. You know, so for him to come back and want something to be explained, I am like, OK, whatever, I've been here doing this, not a big deal.

KAYE: What is a big deal is they have identified their issues. And with the help of the Army, are already working to resolve them.

S. GRAY: So what did you hear about in the news this week?

KAYE: For some, returning home is like fighting a second war. And for the Grays, it is a battle they plan on winning.

M. GRAY: There are a lot of people getting divorces, you know, so I was afraid that that could happen to us, too. And I wanted to do whatever we could do to make sure that we end up being, you know, on the other side of the statistic.

KAYE: Randi Kaye, CNN, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

COOPER: Well, it's great that things seem to be working out for them. For kids, of course, the separation is especially hard. Tens of thousands of children in the U.S. have at least one parent serving in Iraq. That's tough enough. But imagine having two parents in combat at the same time.

Coming up, you will meet a family that made a very difficult decision. We'll tell you why they did it. And despite the toll it took on their kids, why they said they'd do it again. When this special edition of 360, "Coming Home," continues.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Let me give you a tissue, OK. I am sorry to have made you cry. Are you crying because it was so hard when they were away?

(END VIDEO CLIP)

(BEGIN GRAPHIC)

Family Counseling

For more information: [www.strongbonds.org](http://www.strongbonds.org), DOD 24-hour hotline: 800-342-9647.

(END GRAPHIC)

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

COOPER: It is estimated that more than 100,000 children have at least one parent serving in Iraq. For these young Americans, the war comes home everyday as they worry and wait for their moms and dads to return.

Imagine if you were a child how hard that would be. Well, you are about to meet some kids who had both parents in Iraq at the same time.

We have talked a lot about sacrifice in this hour. Well, the sacrifices that this family has made and may make again are truly extraordinary.

Here is CNN's Gary Tuchman.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

GARY TUCHMAN, CNN CORRESPONDENT (voice-over): Eric and Heidi Erickson are back home, after they both spent more than a year in Iraq. While their three children, Nathan, Taylor and Nicholas, stayed behind in Nebraska.

When they came home how did you feel?

TAYLOR ERICKSON, BOTH PARENTS SERVED IN IRAQ: Happy.

TUCHMAN: Was it the happiest day of your life? And how do you feel right now?

T. ERICKSON: Sad.

TUCHMAN: Tell me why you are sad right now.

T. ERICKSON: Because they went.

TUCHMAN: Husband and wife are both in the Army Reserve. They could have gone to Iraq at the different times. But with four grandparents available to take care of their children, they came to this decision.

HEIDI ERICKSON, SOLDIER AND MOM: His feeling was if he didn't go when I went, then he would go the next rotation and him and I wouldn't see each other for three years.

TUCHMAN: So off they went. Sergeant Heidi Erickson drove a gun truck. Sergeant Eric Erickson drove a truck that hauls armor. And then one day...

ERIC ERICKSON, SOLDIER AND DAD: We were driving through the town. And as soon as we come around the corner, it started, the gunfire, everything.

TUCHMAN: The blast shattered his eardrum. And then, 12 days later...

H. ERICKSON: As soon as I passed the first truck parked on the side of the road, the middle one blew up. And it was a huge explosion.

TUCHMAN: Glass lacerated her face. The couple recovered in Iraq and decided not to tell the family back in their quiet hometown of Central City, Nebraska, what happened so they wouldn't be scared. But the grandparents and the children already were.

PATRICIA GREGG, GRANDMOTHER: I worried that the kids might be without one or both parents at different times, yes.

TUCHMAN: Let me give you a tissue, OK? I am sorry to have made you cry. Are you crying because it was so hard when they were away?

After they recuperated, the couple came back home. And both were awarded Purple Hearts. The parents reunited with their family, and reflected about what their children went through.

H. ERICKSON: It was the third month and the fourth month where they started to get really upset and, when are you coming home, Mommy? And then the baby started talking, and that was really difficult. TUCHMAN (on camera): Were you after afraid they were going to forget who you were?

H. ERICKSON: I knew my older children wouldn't, but I was worried about the baby. I really was.

TUCHMAN (voice-over): Having two parents in Iraq at the same time is rare. The Pentagon tries to avoid the scenario. But an estimated 115,000 American children have at least one parent in Iraq.

ANGELA HUEBNER, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, VIRGINIA TECH: Young people need -- of all ages -- need predictable environments. And military deployments put a big wrench in that. It really makes for a lot of changes, both good and bad.

TUCHMAN (on camera): The Erickson family's life here in Central City is now back to the way it used to be. But that could soon change. Because it may surprise you to learn that both parents expect to be sent back to Iraq.

(Voice-over): And they say they are ready for it.

H. ERICKSON: Because I believe in all of the good we are doing over there. I believe it is a worthy cause.

TUCHMAN: And despite all they've been through, they are ready to do it again together.

Gary Tuchman, CNN, Central City, Nebraska.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

COOPER: Their sense of duty inspiring.

You know, we like to think that every soldier, Marine, Sailor and Airman who comes home can quickly restart their life, get a job, move back home, but sadly, that is not the reality. Hundreds of thousands of vets from previous wars are homeless right now living in shelters or on the streets. Already some vets from Iraq and Afghanistan are homeless as well.

In a moment, you'll meet one homeless soldier. He almost died in Iraq, but now says he is facing even tougher battles here at home.

We'll be right back.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

JOE RAICALDO, HOMELESS IRAQ VET: I'm just saying, you should be treated like a human being, for God sakes. That is all I want. And I think about the other veterans from other wars and are still fighting to this day. And it's just, it's horrible.

(BEGIN GRAPHIC)

For more Coming Home stories, visit: [cnn.com/cominghome](http://cnn.com/cominghome). (END GRAPHIC)

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

KENNETH HERRMAN, VIETNAM VETERAN: My name is Ken Herrman, and I was stationed with the 196th Light Infantry, southwest of Denang, at a small village called Hepduk (ph). I left a part of myself in Vietnam.

When one is in combat, I think when you leave, your soul stays where you were fighting. And you are not the same person when you return. And one of the things you have to be aware of is that the war has changed you. It's giving you the ability to be able to capitalize on your experiences, to readjust your priorities in life, to recognize the value of



life, and the preciousness of relationships between people.

It's a difficult journey and it's a struggle, but it's well worth the effort.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

COOPER: Well, coming home can be a difficult journey. For some, more than others. Whether it's physical wounds or emotional ones, some returning servicemen and women lose their way and wind up homeless.

There is help for them, but sometimes reaching out is a hard thing to do. Finding the help can be difficult.

This is one veteran's story.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

COOPER (voice-over): There are two things that National Guard Corporal Joe Raicaldo never dreamed he'd see. The sun setting over Iraq, and the sun setting over his '98 Plymouth, the car he now calls home.

JOE RAICALDO, HOMELESS IRAQ VET: I never thought, like after the ball was dropped, you're out here in this parking lot. I never thought I'd be here.

COOPER: The long road to get here, a parking lot in Jones Beach, New York, began two years ago in Iraq.

COOPER (on camera): So you were in the sling here?

RAICALDO: Yes, actually in that top piece, and the gun turret.

COOPER (voice-over): Joe was the gunner in this humvee when his vehicle took a sharp turn and flipped. His body was nearly crushed underneath.

RAICALDO: I just remember I couldn't move anything. I couldn't breathe. I was bleeding. I just felt blood all over me, my face, and I squeezed out the words, you better get a med-evac fast because I thought that was it.

COOPER: Joe suffered traumatic brain injury, broke his back, all his ribs, and shattered his left arm. He was unconscious for days.

RAICALDO: They told my sister they were going to fly her out there, I wasn't going to make it.

COOPER: But to the surprise of his own doctors, he survived. Over many months, doctors pieced him back together using metal rods and screws to fuse his spine and metal plates to hold his shattered arm together.

(On camera): So you have a lot of metal in you?

RAICALDO: A lot of metal. Could probably build a small Eiffel Tower with the metal I have.

COOPER (voice-over): Today, every step hurts. But Joe remembers when he could run on this beach for miles.

RAICALDO: Me and my friend, we used to go eight miles that way.

COOPER: Joe can't lift more than 10 pounds, so he couldn't go back to being an auto mechanic. Instead, he took a job with the National Guard, patrolling Penn Station in New York. He says he lasted six months before landing in the hospital again with back pain and a bone infection.

RAICALDO: At that point I gave up. I simply gave up. I know I can't work. I have no income coming in. I'm finished.

COOPER: What he had coming in was \$218 a month from a disability check. So it wasn't long before Joe, at age 50, ended up homeless.

RAICALDO: This is my clothes closet here.

COOPER: The trunk is your closet?

RAICALDO: Yes, forgive me, the maid never showed up this morning. I'm going to fire her when I get a hold of her.

COOPER: Joe says he's looked for part-time work, with no luck.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Hey, Joe.

RAICALDO: Hi (UNINTELLIGIBLE).

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: How are you?

COOPER: He has one sister and a few friends who have offered to help, but he is too proud to accept it and too proud to stay in a shelter. So he spends most days alone, a stranger in his hometown of Hicksville, New York, on Long Island.

One possible reason for his withdrawal, Joe was recently diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

RAICALDO: I just don't belong. I don't feel I belong anywhere around here.

COOPER: Joe is one of an estimated 600 homeless veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan. That's not many compared with the 200,000 or so from all wars who are currently homeless, but these vets are showing up even more quickly than after Vietnam, a war that left nearly 70,000 homeless. An even greater number than died in combat.

CHERYL BEVERSDORF, PRESIDENT, NATIONAL COALITION FOR HOMELESS VETS: If the experience with Vietnam is any predictor, I am very worried about the numbers of homeless veterans or people at risk of being

homeless who are returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

COOPER: The Department of Veterans Affairs is working to avoid a repeat of what happened after Vietnam.

JIM NICHOLSON, SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS: There was a delayed effect with a lot of the veterans after Vietnam. We know that. We have studied it. We have learned from that. And so that's why we are trying to intervene now, right away.

COOPER: The V.A. spent more than \$1 billion on homeless programs last year, but some veterans still fall through the cracks. Misclassified, as the V.A. now says Joe was, unable to receive full compensation.

(On camera): You feel sort like you got lost in the system?

RAICALDO: Absolutely. Lost, I'm still lost. I'm still dizzy for what happened.

COOPER (voice-over): And sick and tired of fighting for benefits. Last month, though, Joe's persistence began to pay off. His disability status was raised from 20 percent to 60 percent or \$873 a month.

But as Joe puts it, in New York, that is just enough to either afford an apartment or eat, not both.

RAICALDO: I'm disgusted. And it's not because I'm a veteran or a soldier or somebody who served. That means nothing. You know, we choose to go. No one forced us to go. I'm just saying, you should be treated like a human being, for God sakes. That's all I want. Then I think about the other veterans from other wars and are still fighting to this day -- it's just, it's horrible -- and that had to live it.

COOPER: It was only after CNN made repeated inquiries about this case that the V.A. called to inform us that Joe would finally be granted full 100 percent disability status, retroactive to March and worth \$2,600 a month. Meaning, he may actually get to sleep in a real bed very soon.

When we called Joe with the news, he said he'll believe it when he gets the first check. The war in Iraq may have broken his body, but it's the fight here at home that's come close to breaking his spirit.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

COOPER (on camera): He went to Iraq with his life ahead of him. An IED changed everything. Coming up, from combat to college, one young man's journey and the unexpected turns he's taken. Next, on this special edition of 360, "Coming Home."

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: It's important to be a part of the best, the best institutions. So, if you're going to be in the military, go in the Army. All right? If you're going to go to school, you go in the Ivy League.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

(BEGIN GRAPHIC)

National Coalition for Homeless Veterans

800-838-4357 (800-VET-HELP)

VA Hotline

800-827-1000

(END GRAPHIC)

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

COOPER: As we have been talking about in this hour, for thousands of veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan, the war has changed the course of their lives in ways none of them could have predicted.

An IED blows up next to you and so does the future you had planned for yourself. When you finally come home after the surgeries and the rehab, you have to make new plans.

The young vet you are about to meet has done just that, trading combat for college, the green zone, for the Ivy League.

Here again is CNN's Gary Tuchman.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

GARY TUCHMAN, CNN CORRESPONDENT (voice-over): Garth Stewart's life has taken turns he never envisioned.

GARTH STEWART, Iraq WAR VETERAN: I was a mortar gunner in the most combat effective motor platoon and theater.

TUCHMAN: Sgt. Stewart served in the Army in Iraq, where he and another soldier stepped on a land mine.

STEWART: I heard a boom. The next thing I know, you know, we were both laying on the ground bleeding.

TUCHMAN: While both men were hurt, Sgt. Stewart's wounds were far more serious.

STEWART: It was a series of amputations. So the first thing I lost was my big toe. Then it was half the foot. Then it was the ankle, and then it was up to seven inches below the knee.

TUCHMAN: After the native Minnesotan got out of the hospital, he went back to active duty at Georgia's Fort Benning

because he wanted to be sent back to Iraq.

Is there anything about it, though, going back to war without a leg that scares you?

STEWART: No. You're like 50 percent immune to landmines now.

TUCHMAN: Garth felt a patriotic duty to go back. But...

STEWART: The opinion of my sergeant major was just that, you know, there's no way we're going to let you deploy back to Iraq.

TUCHMAN: Instead, he was offered a military desk job, but decided if he was going to sit at a desk...

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: What does this passage refer to?

TUCHMAN: ... it would be in college.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Another way to look at the Peloponnesian War, as kind of a clash war throughout all of Greece.

TUCHMAN: But Sergeant Stewart didn't want to go to just any college.

STEWART: It's important to be part of the best, the best institutions. So, if you're going to be in the military, you go in the Army. All right? And if you're going to go to school, you go in the Ivy League.

TUCHMAN: So Garth is now majoring in ancient history at New York City's Columbia University.

(On camera): How are you doing in college?

STEWART: Very good. Very good. As and Bs across the board.

TUCHMAN (voice-over): The sergeant remains a strong supporter of the war, setting him apart from a good number of students on this campus. He says almost everybody has been very welcoming and friendly to him.

He goes to V.A. Medical Center in New York to get new prosthetic legs which have to be frequently replaced because of wear and tear. STEWART: I lost one leg for my country and in return, you know, I have been given at least 20.

TUCHMAN: Garth Stewart can be seen regularly on Manhattan's jogging paths. He doesn't even have a limp.

STEWART: I've tried to make the best of my situation at every step.

TUCHMAN: Pun intended. His sense of humor remains in intact, as does his desire to serve his country. What would you ultimately like to do?

STEWART: Well, I think it'd be fantastic to run for Congress one day.

TUCHMAN (on camera): President?

STEWART: Well, I mean, I suppose if I ever had the chance, of course, I'd go for it. But I think that's a long way down the road. I'm just 24...

TUCHMAN: I hope it's a long -- you have to be 35 to be president, by the way.

STEWART: Yes. Well, look for me in 2020.

TUCHMAN (voice-over): But in 2006, look for him with the schoolbooks. Keeping his grades high is his current mission.

Gary Tuchman, CNN, New York.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

COOPER: And with a positive attitude like his, I think we're going to be hearing a lot from Garth Stewart in the not too distant future.

Coming up next on this special edition of 360, a mother welcomes her lost son home.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(BEGIN GRAPHIC)

For more Coming Home stories, visit: [cnn.com/cominghome](http://cnn.com/cominghome).

(END GRAPHIC)

KAYE (on camera): Hello, I'm Randi Kaye. "Coming Home," a special edition of 360, continues in just a moment.

First, a 360 bulletin.

Former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani has potentially taken the first step in a 2008 presidential bid. He's filed papers to form an exploratory committee that will allow him to raise cash for a possible campaign.

Tamiflu will now come with a warning label, advising patients to watch for abnormal behavior. The FDA approved the label, even though there is no evidence that the flu drug is responsible for more than 100 reports of hallucinations and delirium in children, including some suicides. Most of the cases were in Japan. Tamiflu is being stockpiled around the world in case of a bird flu pandemic. The maker stresses there's no evidence Tamiflu was responsible for the

psychiatric problems.

And you may be paying a bit more at the pump. The price of gas climbed three cents last week, to a national average of \$2.23 a gallon. Still, prices are six cents lower than one year ago and have fallen 80 cents since last summer.

In addition, oil prices today fell below \$59 a barrel. That's despite expectations of higher demand and OPEC production cuts. Those are the headlines.

Coming up, more of "Coming Home."

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

COOPER: Thankfully, the vast majority of troops in Iraq and Afghanistan come home and come home safely. More than 3,000 American troops have died, however, in both conflicts. And for their families, coming home means something very different.

This letter was posted on our [cnn.com/cominghome](http://cnn.com/cominghome) webpage by Linda Hendrickson, a mom in Purcell, Oklahoma.

She writes, "Our son Spc. Robert T. Hendrickson, assigned to the 1st Cavalry Division from Ft. Hood, Texas, came home one year ago, February 7, 2005. Rob did not come home with flags flying, signs, cheering crowds, family members waiting to run across a tarmac. Rob came home quietly, in a mahogany coffin draped with the American flag. We embraced him as best we could, knowing we would not see him again after his service. Rob was a son, a brother, a father, an uncle, a cousin, a grandson. He went where he felt he needed to go. We have huddled around each other and his 7-year-old son Dylan to support and embrace each other as best we can." She goes on to say, "people ask us what do we need, what can they do. Our response has been to hug your kids, hug each other, and remember that life is precious."

If you'd like to write about your experiences coming home, you can contribute to the Coming Home web page at [cnn.com/cominghome](http://cnn.com/cominghome) or you can check out the 360 blog where we also have resources for veterans.





We hope you have been inspired as we have by the courage of the veterans in tonight's program. Their sacrifices have been heroic. And we thank them and their families and all of those who are and have served. Good night.

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