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COLUMN ONE

Home Is Where the Hurt Is

■ Some military personnel, suffering from stress as they return from combat in Iraq, are struggling with family relationships.

By Nora Zamichow and Tony Perry, Times Staff Writers

For half his 10-month marriage, Lance Cpl. Sean Rodriguez-Street slogged through the Iraqi desert and fired at enemy soldiers in Baghdad.

Then he came home, and trouble started.

He feels distracted and edgy. He finds himself being rude to his wife, Amanda. He wakes up long before she does, and in the loneliness of those hours, he misses the crisp certainty of military mornings: wake up, eat grub and check weapon.

Rodriguez-Street is among the veterans of the Iraq war who are discovering that short tempers and feelings of alienation may sour the sweetness of coming home.

Some returning servicemen are sleeping less and arguing more. Others are drinking heavily. One Marine told his fiancée he no longer wanted to have children. One senior Navy petty officer asked his wife for a divorce. Some suspect their spouses have been unfaithful. A number are experiencing flashbacks and other symptoms of combat stress.

In many cases, the problems are not severe. For example, Rodriguez-Street, a 21-year-old Camp Pendleton Marine, said there are advantages to being together again with his wife. "It's like being newlyweds all over."

Yet once the flag-waving and rounds of free beers subside, military personnel are feeling the friction of homecoming, and having to renegotiate roles in the family. One Marine planned to resume handling the family's finances, then realized his wife had done just fine. He gave her the bills and took over mowing the lawn.

"Most families get through it without long-term ill effects," said Shelley MacDermid, co-director of the Military Family Research Institute, a Pentagon-financed group at Purdue University. "You can't just flick a switch and say, 'Now, we're going back to the way it was.' There is no returning to normal, because the world has changed."

For a serviceman, shoehorning himself back into peacetime life entails an attitude adjustment. "You have to realize that the whole world did not stop while you were away," said Master Sgt. Nicholas Morin, 43, who served with a reconnaissance unit in Iraq. "The whole world can't feel sorry for you because you stood in harm's way."

Reentry to life at home typically takes as long as the individual's deployment, MacDermid said.

Some postwar carousing is expected. But the line between celebrating and running amok worries high-ranking military officials.

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"My first concern is that the first night out they'll all get drunk and the second night they'll all beat up their wives or girlfriends," said Vice Adm. Tim LaFleur, commander of the Pacific naval surface fleet headquartered in Coronado. "We've already seen a rash of 'We won the war and we're going to celebrate' incidents."

After the 1991 Gulf War, divorce rates skyrocketed in communities surrounding large Army bases. Domestic violence increased in Marine communities. And about 15% of veterans experienced such combat-related difficulties as post-traumatic stress syndrome, depression, anxiety and alcohol or substance abuse. (For Vietnam vets, the toll reached nearly 50%.)

Whether a serviceman suffers psychological fallout from battle can depend on how close he was to combat and the cohesiveness of his unit, said Cmdr. Jack Pierce, a psychiatrist at the Marine Corps' Health Services Headquarters in Washington, D.C.

Pierce thinks about 25% of those returning from Operation Iraqi Freedom will suffer difficulties — a higher rate than returnees from the 1991 Gulf War, who did not deal with as much ground combat.

Lance Cpl. O.J. John B. Santa Maria, 21, a machine gunner, was badly wounded in his right arm and shoulder during a firefight in Nasiriyah in central Iraq. After four surgeries, Santa Maria has not regained full use of his arm and suffers constant pain. He cannot sleep without prescription drugs, and he's plagued by flashbacks. He's been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress syndrome.

Several times a day, he relives the moments before he was wounded. He sees himself reloading his machine gun. He hears a loud explosion that seemed to rock the Humvee. He realizes he cannot move his right arm and discovers that it's dangling as blood pours down his side. He sees himself stagger out of the vehicle, yelling: "I've been hit! I've been hit!"

"I thought I was going to die," said Santa Maria, who moved to Daly City, Calif., from the Philippines with his father after graduating from high school. President Bush granted U.S. citizenship to Santa Maria in a ceremony at Bethesda Naval hospital. In coming months, the Marines will evaluate whether Santa Maria can remain in the Corps. Meanwhile, he undergoes physical therapy, though doctors have said it's unlikely he'll regain full use of his arm.

"I've been feeling down," said Santa Maria, who had hoped to become a police officer. "I just feel down. Sometimes I don't know what to do."

At Camp Pendleton, to which 8,000 of 27,500 deployed Marines have returned, the Marine Corps and Navy have assembled what officials call the most comprehensive array of counseling, therapy and services ever offered to returnees and their families. Dubbed the "warrior transition" program, it includes lectures, seminars and counseling even before Marines and sailors leave Iraq and Kuwait.

Assistance is also being offered to families at Pendleton, where more than 20,000 children have a deployed parent.

"We expect our Marines to return a little more emotionally stressed," said Maj. Scott MacFarlane, part of the "family team building" campaign. "But we're also finding that the stay-at-home spouse is stressed" from watching the war on TV "every day, all day."

Morin, who's spent 24 years in the Marine Corps, says he cannot sleep at night.

Restless Nights

A communications chief for a unit that came under sniper fire and fought the Republican Guard, Morin saw Iraqis killed. He also witnessed a landmine blow up, severely injuring three fellow Marines.

Morin's unit worked at night, moving into enemy territory. Although it's been two months since his nocturnal forays, "my sleep cycle hasn't adjusted yet," Morin said. "I find myself awake at night and asleep during the day."

His wife, Master Sgt. Kara Morin, is an administrative chief who's spent 21 years with the Corps. After her husband went to Iraq, Kara Morin made sure nothing — not even the location of knickknacks — changed in their Temecula home.

"It's not good to change too much because it's tough to come home and be a stranger in your own house," she said.

The military plans to give special attention to troops coming home from battle. In part, that's a result of the slayings of four wives last summer at Fort Bragg, N.C., by their soldier husbands, including three Special Forces members who had recently returned from Afghanistan. (Later, three of the men committed suicide.)

The Army announced a new program to help returning troops and their families. Supervising officers will use a checklist designed to determine which soldiers might be at risk for alcohol abuse, domestic violence or depression. The Army also hopes to open a toll-free phone number soon through which soldiers and families can reach a counselor.

Not everyone believes these efforts go far enough. The checklist, which some soldiers jokingly refer to as the "Don't-kill-your-wife survey," depends on someone reporting him- or herself.

"Batterers are notoriously known for underreporting," said Christina Hansen, executive director of the Miles Foundation, a Newton, Conn.-based nonprofit organization that specializes in services to victims of domestic violence linked to the military. "They know what to report and not to report. They're not going to check a box that could lead to counseling."

Seeing a therapist carries a stigma in military circles, one counselor said, because it is seen as a sign of weakness.

And unlike the confidentiality guaranteed civilians and their therapists, a commanding officer has the right to know what a serviceman says to a counselor. Mental health specialists are required to report, for example, suspicions that a serviceman might be unfit for duty.

Even for those who seek help, experts say, there is no single cure for the psychological damage of war. Some tell spouses not to question returnees too much.

Kara Morin found that approach didn't work. One day, she overheard her husband in the driveway telling neighbors about gunfights with Iraqi soldiers — stories she had not yet heard.

"I felt very outside," she said. After that, she began asking questions.

Talking helps, other experts say.

On the other hand, Navy Petty Officer David Dimier's work was classified as a government secret. Dimier, 32, an explosive-ordnance technician, cleared mines in the

captured Iraqi harbor.

Now home in Temecula, Dimier feels alienated. When people ask him questions, he said, he frequently gets the sense that "they don't get it." Dimier, who's been in the Navy seven years, has yet to find the tempo of peacetime life, even though he returned a month ago.

"It's a sense of detachment," he said. "You see everybody's life going on around you and you're not part of it."

Navy Lt. Cmdr. Betty Burns, chief of counseling at Camp Pendleton, said Marines, sailors and their spouses are being warned of the "fantasy of the return."

"We tell them to take time," Burns said. "It's not going to be, 'I'm back home and everything is wonderful.'"

Many returnees suffer the greatest letdown in the first weeks after returning, said Navy Capt. Jennifer Berg, chairman of the psychiatry unit at Naval Medical Center in San Diego.

"There is a sense of not fitting in when they come home that is very stressful," Berg said. "After the initial wave of acceptance, interest drops off and people feel detached."

This was true for Rodriguez-Street, who was in the 1st Battalion, 5th Regiment of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force, the first Marine unit to storm Baghdad. He shot at Iraqi soldiers and saw the flash of their guns as they fired at him.

Haunting Images

But when he returned to Camp Pendleton two weeks ago, it was not the dead who haunted him. It was the Iraqi children who had scampered barefoot to wave hello to the victorious Americans. The kids were so skinny that their bones showed through their skin.

When he came home to his wife, Amanda, he sometimes felt unaware of his actions and words. Amanda had written him letter after letter about how she was fixing up their apartment.

But when Sean came home, he said nothing.

Amanda was crushed. He must not like it, she recalled thinking.

"I thought it looked awesome — I have no clue as to why I didn't say anything," Sean said.

Sean said he felt different. Tiffs with relatives that might have once upset him he let float by. At the same time, he was more emotional. At a cousin's house, he grabbed Amanda and, teary-eyed and voice cracking, he told her he was proud of her and loved her so much.

"He's very emotional in opposite ways — very moody or very affectionate," said Amanda, who works at a day-care program. Other times, she thought her husband was aloof or snappish.

In getting ready for her husband's return, Amanda had exchanged e-mail with spouses of veterans from the 1991 Gulf War, who advised her to be patient.

And she has tried to be. When her husband neglected to introduce her to a friend,

initially she felt snubbed. Then she thought of what he'd been through. Later, he apologized.

But Amanda realized she was different, too.

In living on her own, she'd become independent. She took up belly dancing, tai chi, and lost 15 pounds on a diet. Her newfound sense of self didn't alienate her from her husband, she said, but made her love him even more.

"I feel closer; there are not many couples in America who go through being separated without contact as we were," she said. "In time, he'll come back around to being Sean, the person he was."

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