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## Veterans' struggle

By Anna Fifield

US soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan face unemployment, isolation and indifference as they try to find their way back into society



©Emily Hope

Joe McDonald (left) and Jesse Llamas: McDonald served in Iraq. Military role: squadron fire support officer, US Army. Llamas served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Military role: vehicle mechanic, US Army

**I**n the car park of FedExField, a sports stadium in Maryland, just before Christmas, thousands of military types gathered for a curious American tradition: the tailgate. As the army and navy academies' football teams prepared to confront each other inside the stadium, row upon row of SUVs lined up outside. Commanding top real estate in the parking lot, hundreds of veterans associated with a group called Team Red, White & Blue (Team RWB) ate pulled pork cooked on a barbecue so huge it was towed in, filled their plastic cups from beer kegs and, between banter, watched the game on a TV set up on make-shift tables.

Two of those joking around were Joe McDonald and Jesse Llamas, both 28,

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both Iraq veterans, both students at the University of Maryland. They have known each other for only three months but they are developing a close bond.

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McDonald, a West Point military academy graduate who served two tours in Iraq and has almost finished his MBA, is acting as an “advocate” for Llamas, a self-described “army brat” who was deployed to Iraq three times. His last tour, starting in 2007, cost him both legs, most of his fingertips, and his get-up-and-go when an improvised explosive device blew up the vehicle in which he was travelling. This set off a chain of events that involved medical evacuation to Germany, three years in residential care in the US undergoing physical and occupational therapy

and a divorce.

“It’s awesome that you wear shorts,” McDonald tells Llamas when they meet up a week later at a café not far from their university. Llamas is in a grey hoodie and black sports shorts, ready to go to the gym. “It’s bad ass dude, a huge accomplishment!” McDonald says, exhorting Llamas not to pay attention to people who stare at his bionic legs.

The two have been paired up by Team RWB, an organisation that tries to help wounded veterans reintegrate into society. It was set up by Mike Erwin, an active duty army major and West Point professor. The idea is to recreate the kind of close community that service members enjoyed in the military but is absent from their civilian lives.

McDonald, who was in the army until August 2010, heard about the group through a friend. “There are a lot of organisations that help veterans but for me, the thing that was the most helpful was having people with a shared experience that I could talk to. I wanted to be able to pass that along,” he says.

For Llamas, having McDonald spurring him along is helping him get back on to his prosthetic feet. “I still have pain in my limbs and sometimes I get depressed,” he says. “This helps me out of my depression, helps get me motivated. I’d just be sitting at home thinking about the past otherwise.”

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Thousands upon thousands of troops such as Llamas and McDonald have returned home from Iraq in the past few months as the [US ended the long polarising war](#) there. Ninety thousand more will arrive from [Afghanistan](#) over the next two years as that mission also winds down.

The toll of this decade of combat is now well known: the lost limbs, the brain injuries, the deaths. The separations from spouses, children and normal life. More than 6,000 dead, 30,000-plus life-altering wounds, untold numbers with post-traumatic stress disorder. Suicide now claims more lives than combat – about 18 a day, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Veterans comprise 9 per cent of the total population but 15 per cent of the homeless. From The Odyssey – the original returning veteran story – onwards, society has always recognised that service members are out of sorts when they come home from war. But what is seldom recognised is how different things are this time around.

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This is the first time that the US has fought a sustained war overseas without a draft, leaving the country without a sense of shared sacrifice and with little connection to those who have borne the burden of fighting. That makes the 2.3 million Americans who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan the forgotten “1 per cent”.

Unlike the Wall Street bankers who have been feeling the heat from the 99 per cent – but also unlike the Vietnam veterans who were called “baby-killers” – this 1 per cent come home to complete indifference.

Veterans such as Llamas are returning to a country that in some ways seems just as foreign to them as Iraq and Afghanistan once did. The ambivalence is especially pronounced over Iraq because it is widely seen as a mistake, an unnecessary war.

The “Costs of War” project by Brown University’s Watson Institute for International Studies conservatively estimates the two wars will cost \$3.2tn. Three years after the global financial meltdown began, Americans are simply tired of war and tired of paying for war.

So vets have to contend not only with their psychological and physical injuries, but also with a country disconnected from their experiences.

A recent Pew Research Center study underscored the disconnect. Only one-third of those aged 18 to 29 surveyed said they had a family member who had served, while an astounding 84 per cent of veterans said civilians had little or no understanding of the military.

In an address to the graduating class at West Point last year, Admiral Mike Mullen, then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, noted the cultural gap. “I fear they do not know us,” Mullen said. “I fear they do not comprehend the full weight of the burden we carry or the price we pay when we return from battle.”

But it is not just the number of people with links to military life that has plummeted. The sectors of society that have felt the impact of this war are more narrow than ever before.

The 1 per cent tends to be concentrated in the southern states and among the working and lower-middle classes. With a few notable exceptions – such as vice-president Joe Biden’s son Beau – the children of the elite have not served in these wars. It’s a sharp change from the night of Pearl Harbor, when Eleanor Roosevelt told a radio audience, “I have a boy at sea on a destroyer, for all I know he may be on his way to the Pacific.”

Instead, America now has its first generation of political and business leaders who have not served in the military, and it shows. With the Pentagon ordered to slash spending as part of wider government budget cutting, military benefits, such as pensions, and college education funding for veterans are on the chopping block.

“The lack of general sacrifice is remarkable to me,” says Kurt Piehler, a historian at Florida State University who has studied the military experience within American society.

“It’s not just about the draft. The fact is that this is the first war where we

didn't have a tax increase, we actually had a tax cut," Piehler says. "Except for airport security, which Americans grumble about, there has been remarkably little impact." In fact, the American people were never even asked to sacrifice. After the [September 11 attacks](#), President George W. Bush cut taxes and exhorted Americans to go shopping to show their patriotism.

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Kayla Williams knows all about the disconnect and, as one of the first soldiers to be deployed to Iraq, she has had plenty of time to experience it. When her division returned to its home base at Fort Campbell in Kentucky after the 2003 invasion, the soldiers were greeted with "Welcome home" signs from their small, military community. But when she stepped outside the understanding embrace of that town, she was faced with a different world.

"I was watching CNN one day and seeing the kinds of stories that were being covered while troops were getting killed," says Williams. "I vividly remember a story about ducklings being fished out of a sewerage drain, while deaths of troops were on the ticker below."



Kayla Williams: Served in Iraq. Military role: Arabic linguist, US Army

Everywhere she went, she felt like an outsider. "When I came back, I encountered people who were complaining that their latte was taking too long at Starbucks," she tells me as we sit at a Lebanese restaurant in northern Virginia. "The divisions were so jarring. I felt like I had more in common with my taxi driver from a third world country than with my fellow Americans."

The Pew study found 44 per cent of veterans who served in the past decade had trouble adjusting to civilian life, 19 points higher than the veterans who served before them, including in Vietnam.

Williams went into the military in 2000 and trained as an Arabic linguist. Now 35, she lives in northern Virginia with her husband and two young children, and wears a sharp suit to work at a think-tank. But her transition back to normal life was rocky.

She recalls everyday situations she could not handle, such as going to Walmart and being overwhelmed by the variety of shampoo on the shelves. She abandoned her half-full cart and fled. Ordinary things such as this spook veterans – a car backfiring or fireworks. They swerve on highways when they see a crisp packet, a natural reflex after being trained to spot roadside bombs.

While serving in Iraq, Williams met Brian McGough, the man who would later become her husband. But first, he would become the victim of an IED, a blast that sent shrapnel into his skull and caused a penetrating traumatic brain

injury that took years to get over.

The indifference of America today continues to gnaw away at Williams.

"I'm actually more bitter at George Bush for not asking the nation to pull together and sacrifice than I am at him for starting the damn war in the first place," she says.

For another view, I tracked down Pete Hagstrom, an army captain I met several years ago at Paliwoda, a tiny base north of Baghdad. The base was so small it did not even have its own kitchen – instead lukewarm meals in insulated boxes were brought over each day from the bigger Anaconda base down the road. I was embedded with Hagstrom's unit, the third squadron of the fourth cavalry regiment, in early 2009, and was impressed with his work and his efforts to understand the local culture. A West Point graduate, he was on his second tour in Iraq and had hardly recognised the relatively stable country when he returned in 2008.

But when he finished his second deployment, he also noticed a big difference at home, in people's perceptions of the war and how much they talked about it. "I would definitely classify it as war fatigue," he says.

The flip-side to indifference is that when people do pay attention, or acknowledge veterans' service, it can get their backs up. Some shudder at the common American phrase – "thank you for your service" – because they return feeling like anything but heroes.

Then there is the question that veterans report being asked with alarming frequency: did you kill anyone over there? Hagstrom, now 29, has had to face this more times than he can remember.

"I usually laugh and try to pass it off. I tell them we were actually rebuilding the economy, rebuilding the cities," he says. "But it still catches me off-guard. It's kind of an unusual thing to ask."

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Hagstrom is one of the fortunate ones. After returning to the US, he found a good job as a management consultant in Dallas. One of the biggest challenges facing those coming home is the economic environment. It could hardly be worse.

At a time when millions of Americans are out of work, trying to get a job in a society that does not understand your military experience is a hard slog. Just ask Steve Gallucci. He has applied for more than 400 jobs since he returned home last June, resulting in a dozen interviews and zero jobs.

"I'm not even joking," says the 26-year-old, with the serious demeanour of an army man talking to a reporter. His short hair is



Steve Gallucci: Served in Iraq. Military role: protection services detachment, US Army

combed with military precision, his perfectly pressed shirt does not conceal his love of working out. “At first I thought I would take two weeks off, doing absolutely nothing

– I was tired of working extremely long hours, seven days a week – then I started applying for jobs,” Gallucci recalls.

Growing up on New York’s Long Island, the September 11 attacks cast a shadow over his teenage years, so he enlisted in the army after university. Arriving in Iraq in June 2010, he worked first as an intelligence analyst and then as a bodyguard to the US’s commanding generals, and to visiting dignitaries, such as Joe Biden.

“I figured I could transfer into the government service pretty easily. I have a college degree and I have military experience and it’s not just operational – I did analysis and research work as well,” says Gallucci, who spent the end of last year as an intern at the Truman National Security Project in Washington.

He is not yet at the stage where he is considering a minimum-wage job, but is fully prepared to take a pay cut. “I might have to go back to managing a restaurant or personal training,” he says. “It isn’t a bad thing, but I didn’t want a job, I wanted a career.”

The unemployment rate among veterans is about 12 per cent, more than three points higher than the national average. In depressed states, such as Michigan, it is as high as 30 per cent. About one-third of male veterans aged 20 to 24 are jobless.

The fact that vets face additional challenges finding work riles Tom Tarantino, who himself spent a year looking for a job after leaving the army, where he served in Bosnia and Iraq, in mid-2007. He now works for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America.

“I didn’t spend my twenties getting an MBA,” Tarantino, 34, says in his office near Capitol Hill, with its

quirky mix of army regalia and Google-style beanbags. “I spent it in personnel management, managing military units of 400 people and three multimillion-dollar budgets, under the most extreme pressure imaginable.”



©Emily Hope

Tom Tarantino: Served in Bosnia and Iraq. Military role: cavalry platoon leader, US Army

Still, he found potential employers asking if he had what it took to lead a team of 30.

He believes his CV represented an unknown quantity for most employers. “How do they quantify my skills against a guy who’s been in school? It’s like speaking French to a Martian – it’s impossible to explain – and we don’t do anything as a society or a government to make it official.”

President Barack Obama has tried to address this problem with initiatives encouraging business owners to hire vets. “If you can save a life in Afghanistan, you can save a life in an ambulance. If you can oversee millions of dollars of assets in Iraq, you can help a business balance its books here at home,” the president said in November, exhorting Congress to act.

It worked. One of the few pieces of legislation to make it through the bitterly divided Congress last year was a bill giving companies up to a \$5,600 tax credit for hiring a veteran who has been unemployed for at least six months, and up to \$9,600 if the veteran is disabled.

While people such as Tarantino welcome such moves, no one thinks it will solve the current jobs problem, or the looming one. “The need for veteran services starts when the war ends,” Tarantino says. “We’re now looking at another surge, the surge when everyone comes back.”

The most visible effects of the war are the physical scars left behind. On people such as Jesse Llamas, who has to learn to live without his legs, and Justin Constantine, who had his face shot to pieces just six weeks into his deployment. Constantine was a lawyer in the Marine Corps Reserve when he was given a rare opportunity: going to the front lines. He was attached to an infantry unit that was sent to

Falluja in 2006 – one of the most dangerous parts of Iraq at one of the most dangerous times in the war.



Justin Constantine --- Role: lawyer, Marine Corps Reserve  
Tour: Iraq 2006

“Besides getting shot, it was a great deployment,” Constantine, 42, tells me in the food court of a mall not far from his home, one evening after he’d finished work at the Department of Justice.

He was travelling in a convoy of four vehicles when one hit a roadside bomb. Stepping out of his vehicle in the wake of the explosion, a sniper’s bullet entered his neck in the sliver of skin between his helmet and the collar of his body armour, exiting through his mouth and causing catastrophic damage along the way.

More than 20 operations have followed, including ones in which his fibulas were taken from his shins and refashioned as jawbones.

Constantine has yet more surgery to go. He lost all but four of his teeth and his new dentures don’t match up. Eating is a messy process and his speech is impaired. He needs operations to restore his right eye socket – that eye is now blind – and to fix his “all messed up” nose.

Not surprisingly, Constantine’s injuries have left deep psychological scars too. He has trouble coping with loud noises or being in crowds or traffic and has relied on his wife Dahlia as a carer. “It’s affected me in a lot of different ways,” he says. “The most frustrating thing about it is that I’m not who I used to be.”

Constantine gets PTSD counselling through a network called Give an Hour, where more than 6,000 therapists donate their time.

While acknowledging that the VA is doing an unprecedented amount to help Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, Constantine says it could do more. “There are hundreds of thousands of people coming back from the wars. This is going to be a huge issue and it’s not going away, it’s only getting bigger.”

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Constantine raises an important point. Half of the veterans the VA now helps served in the Vietnam war. That gives a sense of the problems looming 30 or 40 years from now.

The key to helping veterans adjust lies with veterans themselves, says Jonathan

Shay, a clinical psychiatrist who works at a VA outpatient clinic in Boston and is an expert on the treatment of PTSD.

That means more groups such as Team RWB, and more military veterans acting as counsellors at the VA's "vet centres". "The people who belong in centre-stage are the veterans themselves, and our job is to be trustworthy stage hands," Shay says.

The reason that many soldiers have difficulty adjusting to civilian life is because they continue to operate with the "adaptations" that enable them to stay alive on the battlefield. Take the "avoidance cluster" of symptoms, where soldiers, faced with people who are trying to kill them, shut down every mental function that does not directly support survival. "When that persists into civilian life it's very, very bad for life in a family, life in a community, life in a workplace," Shay says.

The aversions to loud noises or the panic at Walmart are classic examples of adaptations that are useful at war but can wreck someone's life at home. Many veterans bottle themselves up at home, finding outlets for their psychological stress in television, the internet or video games. Many also turn to alcohol to help them battle the nightmares that inhibit sleep.

There are other simple, often free adjustments that society could make to accommodate veterans with issues. Shay cites a former marine in Boston who couldn't handle standing in the yard with his colleagues to collect his work orders each morning, even though he knew there was no enemy sniper on the roof. His boss, also a veteran, recognised the problem and arranged to leave the marine's work orders in a box so he could collect them.

But veterans also need to meet the community halfway, says Stacy Bare, an Iraq veteran who struggled with PTSD and now runs a military outreach programme for the Sierra Club, a leading environmental group. A key part involves taking veterans rock-climbing, showing them the lands they fought for at the same time as recreating some of the camaraderie and adrenaline rush that come with war.

"Because so much is given to veterans, it takes away a lot of their self-worth. It puts them in a position of charity, rather than strength," Bare says. "We need to challenge veterans to get back into the community. Community is so vitally important to our veterans and anyone who doesn't have a community is going to go off the rails at some stage."

Llamas is now taking steps to get on with his post-army life, with McDonald urging him on. He is helping Llamas with his CV, and the two are talking about running together. "I'm getting back into civilian life, thinking about working behind a desk," Llamas says. "It's a big change man, it's a big change."

*Anna Fifield is the FT's US political correspondent.*

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