

# Haunted by echoes of wartime, some veterans get lost on the streets

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The crusts of dirt lining 50-year-old Tony Guevara's splintered fingernails seem to bear the kernels of a very long story. His hair has grayed and deep wrinkles crease his skin, etching the face of a man whose epic is not quite finished.

Stationed as a security officer in Germany during the Cold War era, he looked forward to settling down with a job and a family when he returned home. After he was discharged he found a girlfriend, got married, had kids, and lived the life he wanted.

But not for long.

"Sometimes I would wake up at night and not know where I was and I would hear voices, bombs going off and stuff," Guevara said recently at San Jose's Julian Street Inn homeless shelter, where he is staying. "Or I would be sleeping and sense someone was around me. I almost hit my wife a couple times. It comes naturally, just your instinct of trying to survive."

Guevara said he suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a mental disorder afflicting people who have experienced life-threatening events. Though



Veterans Tony Guevara, left, and Ernie Garden live in a homeless shelter.

Guevara didn't see combat during his six years in the military, he said he heard incessant test bombings each day that contributed to PTSD. According to the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, military exposure is enough to trigger the anxiety disorder.

Guevara's problems underscore the difficulty many vets face readjusting to civilian life. Santa Clara County recently reported that 14 percent of the 7,086 homeless people in the area are veterans. Experts say that high percentage can be partially attributed to common side effects of military life: mental insecurity and a numbed attitude toward life.

"When people feel that things are just so overwhelming or they don't know where to begin, it's human nature to retreat because they can't deal with it right now,"

Veteran Affairs spokeswoman Patricia Matthews said.

Guevara said his psychological problems following his military experience were compounded by a difficult home setting, including dealing with an autistic son.

"The only way to escape from everything was alcohol," Guevara said. "That was how I dealt with it. I didn't want to think about it."

Guevara says he began drinking while in the military and had difficulty stopping afterward. He left his wife, their two children, and their San Jose home in 2003. For a few weeks he stayed at the homes of family and friends, but he also spent some days on the streets. He picked up a few odd jobs, including a position at a paper company; but he never was able save enough for a home.

Carl Perez, a 26-year-old Iraq War veteran who works as an outreach coordinator at the San Jose Vet Center, understands the psychological strife veterans battle long after they leave war zones. The center provides psychotherapy to help veterans readjust to civilian life and aids with employment, financial and family issues. Most of all, the organization tries to help veterans

get their lives together.

"PTSD goes so deep and is so hard to overcome, (veterans) often end up overworking themselves and neglecting their families," Perez said. "It's hard to get them to admit that they need help because in the army they're taught to be stronger and tougher."

One of the most difficult challenges of treating veterans suffering from PTSD, he said, is getting them to understand that balancing a career and family is healthier than living on the streets.

"I met a homeless veteran who only calls his daughter but never meets her in person," Perez said. "He says, 'I can be a father on the phone, but when she sees me I'm just another homeless man.'"

Many soldiers are afraid to show signs of weakness, even after they are discharged. According to the Department of Veteran Affairs, such veterans often have difficulty forgetting war traumas and can withdraw into self-blame. They may avoid readjustment altogether: Trying to raise a family becomes too big a burden, and some lose themselves wandering the streets.

"The stigma of having been in the military is that you don't want anything wrong with you," Mat-

thews said. "You want to be OK, you want to be strong."

Twenty-five years after he came home, Guevara is trying to take charge of his life. He has been sober for the past three months, he says, and now works in shipping and receiving at an engineering construction site.

Guevara is divorced, but says he remains in contact with his children through phone calls. He says he puts some of his earnings into a savings account for his kids.

Now he has a direction, goals and faith. As Guevara jingled the coins in his pocket, he shared his dream of one day saving enough money to pay for classes to become a certified scuba diver. For Guevara, scuba diving is an opportunity for adventure, and the money he saves from no longer drinking gives him hope he can achieve his that goal.

Finally, after a quarter-century of struggles, Guevara's life is beginning to model the message painted on the wall of a homeless shelter near where he stays:

"Believing is just the beginning..."

And that is about all Guevara really needs right now—something he can believe in.