

Silver Star recipient says talking helps counter PTSD

By Virginia Reza
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“Alcohol, drugs and partying are not the answer; it just makes things worse,” said Silver Star Medal recipient Staff Sgt. Omar Hernandez. “Talking really helps.”

Hernandez, who underwent treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder after he returned from his third tour in Iraq in 2007, said he hesitated to seek mental help because he did not want to be perceived as crazy or weak. He serves with B Company, 1st Battalion, 77th Armor Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, Fort Bliss, Texas.

Hernandez’s courageous actions on the battlefield June 6, 2007, earned him a Silver Star Medal. His citation read, “For gallantry in action against a determined enemy, Sgt. Hernandez’s exem-



Photo by Virginia Reza

Silver Star Medal and Purple Heart recipient Staff Sgt. Omar Hernandez of B Company, 1st Battalion, 77th Armor Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, shows the wound he sustained on June 6, 2007, during his third tour in Iraq.

plary bravery under fire and a complete disregard for his own safety, enabled him to single-handedly pull two members of the Iraqi National Police Force to safety despite having already been severely wounded himself. The gallant actions of Sgt. Hernandez are in the finest traditions of military heroism.”

Hernandez said most service members who witnessed atrocities in Iraq have either mild or severe cases of PTSD but do not want to admit it. He was once in the same situation. He suffered from insomnia and was very angry for getting shot and leaving his comrades behind. He was unable to cry, and experienced an emotional roller coaster, he said. Finally, he decided to “let it all out,” which lifted a huge weight off his shoulders.

“Talking about it helped so much,” Hernandez said. “Soldiers should talk about experiences they encountered down-range. It’s about making themselves better in their heads and hearts.”

Staff Sgt. Brandon Falls, Hernandez’s platoon sergeant in Iraq, said he was very proud of him.

“I’ve been in the Army a while, and Hernandez is one of the top team leaders I’ve ever had,” Falls said.

Falls also agreed Soldiers should talk about their experiences as soon as they return from deployment. He said if it were up to him, he would make it mandatory for all Soldiers to get some kind of counseling until “they get it all out of their system.”

“When I came back, I wanted to talk about everything that happened, and it helped me. After a while, I was happy,” Falls said. “If I had waited, I probably would have developed PTSD.”

Born in Jalisco, Mexico, and raised in Houston, Hernandez was granted his U.S. citizenship during his second tour in Iraq. The ceremony took place in one of Saddam Hussein’s palaces, which was an unforgettable experience, he said.

As a young boy, Hernandez liked to watch combat movies, especially *Rambo*, which he jokingly said inspired him to join

the military. He began his military career in the Army Reserve. He was deployed to Iraq for six months as an engineer during the initial invasion of Operation Iraqi Freedom. After redeployment, he enlisted in the active Army as an infantryman to better serve his country, he said. He attended airborne school at Fort Bragg, N.C., and thereafter deployed with the 519th Military Intelligence Battalion for 12 months.

During his deployment, he pulled security for interrogators. He was then re-assigned to 4th BCT, 1st AD, and deployed for seven months versus 12 due to a severe wound to his leg. He is now attached to the protocol section.

Hernandez said his wound hurts on occasion, especially when the weather changes. His friends often tease him by asking if it’s going to rain.

“The guys ask if I sit on my front porch and predict what the weather will be like today: ‘Is your leg aching?’ they ask,” Hernandez said. “They give me a hard time, and I love it.”

After six months of physical therapy and some training, he is now able to run McKelligon Canyon in El Paso’s Franklin Mountains while carrying a 50-pound rucksack. Hernandez’s injuries include loss of 30 percent in his quadriceps, three inches of girth and nerve damage to his right thigh. He still has shrapnel in his leg.

Hernandez said what still haunts him is the sad and fearful expressions on the faces of the Iraqis. He can’t forget the children running around without shoes.

“Some don’t even have a mom and dad who can give them a hug,” Hernandez said. “It’s pretty hard on them and pretty hard on us to see. ... That’s why I want to go back, to help the Iraqi people acquire the same rights we have in the United States.

“People who want to pull out from Iraq should walk a mile in my shoes and see the things I saw,” he added. “I’m sure they would change their minds immediately.”