

Afghanistan, scarier than the Mid E

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Subject: Afghanistan, scarier than the Mid E

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Vets need help fighting war in their heads

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BY CAROL MARIN Sun-Times Columnist

President Obama's new secretary for Veterans Affairs, retired general Eric Shinseki, is coming to town Friday to visit the VA Medical Center in North Chicago.

Here's hoping he meets Maj. Shari Johnson of the U.S. Army Reserve 452nd combat support group.

Johnson, 47, is a registered nurse. But she's not on staff at the VA hospital. She's a patient who just checked herself in on Sunday, hoping and praying that she can learn to turn down the volume on the war that's raging in her head.

Two years ago, I wrote about Johnson and her husband, Sgt. Mike Johnson, who also is a nurse.

Both were sent to Afghanistan in 2003. Both were assigned to the hospital at Bagram Air Base in Parwan province. Both suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Mike had already been diagnosed with PTSD in after serving in the 1990 Gulf War -- but the Army called him up again anyway. Duty in Afghanistan profoundly affected them both.

At Bagram, Shari treated children whom the Taliban had placed in boiling water up to their waists as their horrified parents looked on. It was a way of punishing the parents for collaborating with Americans. One of Mike's jobs, meanwhile, was to meticulously prepare dead soldiers for the trip home to grieving families, piecing them back together and dressing them with care so that if coffins were opened, they could be presented with the full dignity they deserved.

Six months after returning home to their small farm in Downstate Sheldon, the aftershocks began. Shari told me in 2005 that she started, "crying all the time . . . not wanting to go anywhere. I just wanted to hide out."

Mike, whose medications covered a small table in the living room, couldn't sleep, couldn't cope easily with crowds or with vehicles pulling up behind him on the highway.

The war they had left was all around them.

For awhile, both husband and wife continued their medical work at civilian hospitals, Shari in the intensive care unit of a local hospital and Mike doing emergency room medicine. But problems with anger have sidelined Mike, and though Shari still has a job, it's in the area of nursing education, not on the floor anymore with badly injured or desperately ill patients.

The Johnsons are, at their very core, soldiers. They don't want to be hobbled by PTSD. They don't want pity or even sympathy. All they want is to be well again, whole again. And believe it or not, they would, if they could, go back to serve again.

If anyone understands this, Shinseki does.

As a wounded soldier who lost part of his foot in Vietnam and fought the bureaucracy to stay on active duty, Shinseki has long had a reputation of speaking truth to power across the administrations of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and now Barack Obama. As the debate rages over whether only the physically wounded qualify for Purple Hearts, there is an even bigger fight at hand. It has to do with how we care for the soldiers who stood strong for us, fought in time of war and protected us in time of peace. The VA in America is a mess. You need only try to reach its offices in Washington to find out that it takes 10 calls before one is answered. You need only talk to Mike and Shari to understand how hard it has been to get treatment and at the same time support themselves.

But there are signs that we are beginning to open our minds to the full toll of war.

Recently, Carter Ham, a four-star Army general who commands U.S. soldiers in Europe, admitted to suffering from PTSD.

"Such candor," wrote USA Today, "is critical to overcoming a military macho culture that's outdated and counterproductive."

Veterans like Mike and Shari Johnson deserve help.

Shinseki's visit may signal that help is coming.