

Iraq War vets face battle with stress upon returning home, expert says

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■ Portland/Vancouver Veterans Affairs Medical Center: 360-696-4061.

■ State Department of Veterans Affairs: www.dva.wa.gov, 1-800-562-2308.

■ Returning Veterans Resource Project NW, free counseling and psychotherapy for vets and families: www.returningveterans.com, 503-402-1717.

■ Clark College Counseling Center: 360-992-2345.

Vancouver VA campus doctor served in Iraq

By **TOM VOGT**
Columbian staff writer

First, it's a really lousy work environment: It's 130 degrees, and the sun beats down without pity, unless you're in a dust storm or in a downpour that turns the soil into peanut butter.

The job is grueling; just getting dressed for work can mean

putting on a lot of stuff that is hard, hot and heavy. And even though you're on the job 70 or 80 hours a week, you don't get to write down overtime.

You're always bringing your job home with you, since almost everything and ev-



James Sardo
Psychology professor at OHSU

eryone around you is part of the job — except for everything that creeps or crawls, which exists only to sting you or bite you.

You family needs you desperately. Or maybe they've learned to get along fine without you.

And then there all those people who are trying to kill you.

Stress comes with the job of fighting a war ... and it follows you home, James Sardo said Monday at Clark College.

Sardo is based right across the street from Clark, on Vancouver's Veterans Affairs cam-

pus. But he brought a world of perspective in discussing the mental and emotional toll of war. Sardo is an assistant professor of psychology at Oregon Health & Science University, and he spent nine months in Iraq as a major in the U.S. Air Force Reserves.

"It's a very difficult environment if you're just there for a week," Sardo said. "Even if nothing happens, there is an aggregation of stress of 10 or 12 months."

That's why he used the Monday session, sponsored by Clark's counseling center, to ex-

plain some of the challenges facing soldiers and their families in the transition to civilian life.

It was valuable information, as it turned out.

"I got two calls after the session," said Judy VanPatten, Clark College professor and counselor, who scheduled the presentation. "People said, 'Thanks for helping me understand what my family member is going through.'"

There's a good chance many students have gone through it

Veterans:

From Page C1

first-hand. About 360 students identified themselves as veterans during Clark's registration process; about half had been active recently, including Reserve or National Guard call-ups.

The transition is more than changing from a military uniform to civilian clothes, Sardo said. Something that would be diagnosed as a mental health issue here is a survival skill there.

"If you live among lions," he wondered, "does it make sense to be a sound sleeper?"

There is no front-line in this war, Sardo said, and he screened an image of a surgeon wearing a helmet and body armor. "Non-combatants are under fire."

When Sardo counseled soldiers in Iraq, some of his most frequent "customers" were personnel assigned to convoy duty, including truck drivers.

Urban combat brings more stress: "The specter of civilian deaths takes a tremendous toll on us," he added.

And, things can just get really complicated.

"Tribes have been fighting there longer than we've been a country," he said. "People talked with me about who was shooting at them for what reason on any particular day."

Even when soldiers are returning home, the prospect of another deployment can make it

tough to regain a comfort zone, Sardo said.

"If they don't get me on this deployment, they'll get me on the next one. A 'What the hell' attitude makes it more difficult to engage with your family," said Sardo.

Other relationship issues include hasty marriages, rushed pregnancies and the helpless feeling a soldier can have when there is a problem back home.

"Families renegotiate roles and responsibilities" during a deployment, Sardo said, and he didn't go far for an example.

"My wife got a new career," Sardo said, and re-created their long-distance conversation.

"I want to be a cop," she said.

"Are you nuts? That's dangerous," Sardo told her.

Followed by her reply: "Where are *you* right now?"