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Woolner: Make an effort to bring peace to our troubled veterans

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He is wearing an orange prison jumpsuit during the TV interview, so you figure life hasn't turned out so well for this open-faced young man with an engaging smile.

What you can't see is the Purple Heart Jose Barco earned when, as a teenage soldier stationed in Iraq, he ignored his own wounds and pulled burning wreckage off two Army buddies pinned beneath it, even as his own clothes were aflame.

These days Barco lives in a Colorado prison, where he's serving a 52-year sentence for twice shooting randomly at party-goers in Fort Collins, Colo., after his second tour of Iraq. No one was seriously injured, although a pregnant woman was shot in the leg. Barco was convicted of two counts of attempted murder.

Troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have been getting short shrift on several fronts. But, as Barco's case shows, the legal system usually cuts them no slack and sometimes slams them extra hard precisely because they wore a U.S. uniform.

Prison is where "Frontline" interviewed him for the documentary "The Wounded Platoon." He is one of 17 men returning to the Army's Fort Carson in Colorado, who, over a five-year period, were convicted or charged with homicide or attempting it. Most of them seemed to suffer from a condition that has plagued combat veterans as far back as anyone noticed.

Called "soldier's heart" when Civil War veterans experienced it, then "shell shock" and "battle fatigue" in later wars, the ailment now is recognized as post-traumatic stress disorder, which can afflict survivors of other horrific, life-threatening events. Depression, anger, insomnia, nightmares, flashbacks and paranoia are among its symptoms. Its sufferers often fall into alcoholism and drug addiction. Some beat or shoot their wives or girlfriends.

The more intense the combat, the more likely the soldier is to suffer from the disorder. As many as 15 percent of combat troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan experience it, according to a Rand Corp. study and a Department of Veterans Affairs report.

When the U.S. needed more troops in Iraq, tours were extended, stateside breaks between deployments were shortened, and battle-scarred soldiers were sent into some of the most bloody, unrelentingly scary work of the war.

So it was predictable that the need for mental-health services would spike when these troops started returning from the surge, announced in 2007. But when it came to staffing up with psychologists and psychiatrists, the military somehow never got enough boots on the ground.

Nor had the Pentagon found a way to break the stigma a soldier faces when he admits a need for help, or to stop their superiors from ridiculing them when they do. It might have helped to remind them all that heroes suffer PTSD, too. Infantryman Audie Murphy, the most decorated serviceman in World War II, suffered from insomnia, violent nightmares, depression and drug addiction, according to biographers.

In the 1960s, Murphy broke his silence in hopes that other veterans might get more help. He urged the federal government to do more research into the emotional and mental-health consequences of combat.

Murphy, said to have killed or captured some 240 Germans, didn't go out and shoot up a party of strangers. He did face an attempted murder charge for beating up a dog trainer, although he was acquitted. And, like some of Barco's platoon mates, Murphy kept a loaded gun by his bedside when he slept. His first wife has said he once held her at gun point.

Barco had domestic problems, too. Before his arrest for the party shootings, he'd kicked in the door of his wife's home and, finding her gone, fired into her pillow, says District Attorney Dan May. He pleaded guilty to felony menacing.

Barco's unit saw more combat in Iraq more intensely for more tours of duty which lasted longer than most. And while plenty of platoon mates returned to normal, productive lives, others didn't land well. Recognizing the problem, Fort Carson has more than doubled its behavioral health specialists on staff since 2008 and instituted a number of programs aimed at better screening, identifying troubled soldiers and giving them the help they need.

Of the 508,000 veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan who have gotten medical help from the VA, almost 130,000 are being treated for PTSD, according to the VA.

Federal and state governments have collaborated on veterans courts that now dot the country. Aimed at getting troubled veterans into treatment rather than prison, the courts typically handle drug and other mostly nonviolent offenses. One such court opened last year in Colorado Springs, near Fort Collins.

Barco, diagnosed with PTSD and a concussive injury from his time at war, seems to have paid an extra price for his service. The judge slapped another 20 years onto the mandatory minimum sentence of 32 years, saying he "brings considerable discredit to the uniform."

The discredit to the uniform is that the country for which these men and women risked their lives did so poorly in quelling the war still raging within them.