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Jay Velasquez is an Iraq war veteran who served as a chaplain's assistant. He had planned to join a seminary when he returned, but is now considering college.

STEVE CAMPBELL: CHRONICLE

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Back from war, but not the same

Memories stay with veterans and add to trauma

By ROSANNA RUIZ
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Veteran Jay Velasquez doesn't need snapshots to remind him of Iraq.

In his mind, the 28-year-old finds himself back in the war zone when he sees a pile of trash that could conceal an improvised explosive device along a Houston road. On a nighttime walk, a car seemingly steers right for him. His nerves bristle when he's in crowds.

Velasquez, among the 1.6 million who served in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, recently joined the ranks of about 400,000 other veterans in Southeast Texas, about half of whom live in Harris County.

The vets — about 5,000 in Houston who served in the current wars — are now reunited with families, back to work, or like Velasquez, back to a college classroom.

But in many ways, the war remains with them.

The transition from war zone to civilian life can take several weeks or much longer for some veterans, including Velasquez, who suffer from post traumatic stress disorder.

Velasquez, 28, returned to his hometown in August after a stint in San Antonio. In Iraq, he served with the 82nd Airborne and was among the first wave of troops at the start of the war.

"There's something about putting yourself in an environment where you can die," said Velasquez, who is seeing a counselor at a Veterans Affairs Vet Center.

He also found a weekend retreat program for veterans that, he said, saved him.

The program, Vets Journey Home, allows veterans to talk freely with one another without fear of judgment. He now serves as one of the retreat staff members and considers it his new mission to help others make the transition to civilian life.

"I can help veterans who come back from war and let them know they're OK and not alone," he said.

Preliminary research indicates that about 18 percent of those serving in Iraq and 11 percent of those in Afghanistan will have post traumatic stress disorder, according to the National Center for PTSD.

"We absolutely know from past experience, if we can reach them at an early stage, we can help them," said Kerri Childress, spokeswoman for the Center for PTSD at the Veterans Affairs' Palo Alto Health Care System.

Veterans, however, are wary about asking for help.

But even those who do not have PTSD can benefit from counseling, he added.

Velasquez said he resisted at first, but because of the free medical service he has a better grasp of his anger and feels as though he can get on with his life.

Before he went to war, Velasquez had planned to join a seminary when he returned.

That has changed.

He said the war tested his faith and though he still clings to his Catholic beliefs, he's now more interested in college and the prospect of marriage and children. For now, he's taking college courses at a community college.

"I'm more grateful for little things," Velasquez said. "for connections, relationships and the precious gift of the moment."
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May 31 – June 1, 2008
Cameron Retreat Center
Houston, TX

TIMES: 7pm Friday evening until 5pm Sunday, including a celebration ceremony at 4 pm. Participants stay at the Retreat Center. Meals are provided.

COST: The program is free to veterans, supported by private donors through the Starfish Foundation [501(c)(3) tax-exempt charitable organization] – donate online at www.starfishfound.org

LOCATION: www.diogh.org/RetreatCenters/RetreatCenter-Cameron.htm

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

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