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Behind Bars, Vets With PTSD Face A New War Zone, With Little Support

By Quil Lawrence
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Combat veterans often face a particularly daunting set of challenges upon returning home from war, which may include psychiatric disorders, unemployment, a lack of access to healthcare, or any number of other issues. In the United States, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) provides patient care and federal benefits to veterans and their dependents. Despite this federal attention, many argue that the government does not do enough to ensure that returning veterans are able to successfully and productively reintegrate themselves into civilian society. As you read, take notes on the way David Carlson characterizes his experiences, and the way his time as a soldier has informed his life.

- [1] At the county court in Waukesha, Wis., in September, Iraq¹ veteran David Carlson sat before a judge hoping he hadn't run out of second chances.

The judge read out his record: drugs, drunken driving, stealing booze while on parole, battery² while in prison. Then the judge listed an almost equal number of previous opportunities he'd had at treatment or early release.

Carlson faced as much as six more years on lockdown — or the judge could give him time served and release him to a veterans' treatment program instead.

The judge's tone was not encouraging.



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- [5] "This criminal justice system frankly has bent over backwards in an effort to maintain you in the community," said Judge Donald Hassin, Jr. "And frankly, sir, the response to all that has not been good."

Carlson has spent most of the past five years locked up. Before that he did two tours in Iraq. His family says the second tour, in particular, scarred him, sending back a man they hardly knew. They attribute his criminal behavior to war trauma — and the Department of Veterans Affairs agrees: Carlson has debilitating³ post-

1. The Iraq War was a lengthy and violent conflict that began in 2003 with the invasion of Iraq by a coalition led by the United States and ended in 2011, when the U.S. formally withdrew all combat troops. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers were killed during the war, and many returning veterans faced mental health issues, as well as limited employment and housing opportunities.
2. The crime of unconsented physical contact with another person, even when the contact is not violent.

traumatic stress disorder.⁴ Being locked up isn't helping, he says.

"For my PTSD issues, jail is the least therapeutic atmosphere you could ever imagine. You come in one way and you leave three times worse," Carlson says, by phone from jail.

Prison and war take some of the same survival skills, he says.

"Same as when I'd been on patrol in Iraq ... Iraqis know, they know if you're [an] aggressive unit, or if you're a weak unit, if you're a soft target,⁵ if you're a hard target.⁶ It's the same in prison," Carlson says.

- [10] So Carlson made it known that he was a hard target. He mapped out the blind spots in the prison surveillance system. He had tricks like putting a slick of baby oil down at the door of his cell to slip up an attacker. And he got into plenty of fights, which is why he came up with his own version of prison basic training.⁷

"In cell fighting, the No. 1 rule is take the initiative," he says. "My training always geared around very good cardio, because I knew no matter how good a fighter was, as long as I could outlast him, I would win. I came up with all sorts of philosophies in my mind the same way I had in Iraq. We were always hypervigilant."

Hypervigilance isn't a bad thing if you're in Iraq, or in prison. It's not so good if you're trying to recover from PTSD.

"Staying in that mode of contemplating violence, I feel there's no way to work on PTSD," he says.

Most treatment for PTSD involves winding down from the combat mind-set, and learning not to treat the world around you like a war zone. But behind bars, mental health treatment is rare and VA⁸ health care is suspended.

- [15] The VA doesn't track the number of veterans incarcerated.⁹ The most recent government statistics are from 2004, but new numbers are expected to be released this month. A recent study did show that Iraq and Afghanistan vets in prison — like Carlson — have high rates of PTSD.

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3. **Debilitating** (*adjective*) (of a disease or condition) making someone very weak and infirm; draining, exhausting, wearisome
 4. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a psychiatric illness. Sufferers experience symptoms of panic attacks, night terrors, flashbacks, and severe anxiety. PTSD is common in people who have experienced scary, shocking, or dangerous events, such as combat veterans or survivors of sexual assault.
 5. A person or thing that is relatively unprotected or vulnerable, especially to military or terrorist attack.
 6. An apparently guarded or secure base or person. This is associated with the avoidance of predictable patterns, the maintenance of strong security measures, and other forms of visible readiness.
 7. Basic training is a military term for the initial period of training for new personnel. It involves intense physical activity and behavioral discipline.
 8. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA or DVA) is a government-run military veteran benefit system. The VA is responsible for administering programs of veterans' benefits for veterans, their families, and survivors.
 9. **Incarcerate** (*verb*) to imprison or confine

Being At War Behind Bars

Carlson says the only time he could see a therapist was if he threatened suicide. A couple of years in, Carlson said he started to lose it.

"I almost felt like I was delusional, but in my mind I was in combat with the jail, basically. I was at war, nonstop," he says.

Carlson treated his war with the jail like the counterinsurgency¹⁰ he'd fought in Iraq. He even recruited other inmates to his cause. That got him thrown into solitary,¹¹ and eventually he began to get his life under control. He started exercising to the extreme, doing thousands of pushups and long, CrossFit-style¹² workouts.

He began reading the Bible every day, which he says gave him a more positive outlook.

[20] Last year he retained a new lawyer. Tony Cotton worked much of the case pro bono.¹³

"I think we owe every combat veteran who had those experiences not just our platitudes¹⁴ and thanks," says Cotton. "We owe them opportunities within the criminal justice system because a lot of veterans find themselves within the criminal justice system. We owe them a different level of treatment ... in my opinion."

Cotton managed to persuade two judges in Wisconsin to agree, and clear away outstanding charges so Carlson would be able to leave prison and enroll in a veterans' treatment court. Just one sentencing hearing stood between Carlson and the treatment he needed.

By happenstance,¹⁵ the week of David Carlson's sentencing hearing, retired Judge Donald Hassin, Jr. was filling in on the bench at Waukesha County court. Hassin graduated from West Point, class of 1971, and he has a son and daughter who are both in the Army.

As a fellow veteran, that might make the judge more sympathetic. Or it could mean he's a stereotypical, strict Army officer, with none of the awe that civilians sometimes feel toward combat vets.

Carlson's Sentencing

[25] On the morning of the hearing, Carlson's family and friends — including his Iraq buddies — filled the hallway outside the courtroom.

10. Military or political action taken against the activities of revolutionaries.

11. Solitary confinement refers to the isolation of a prisoner in a separate cell as a form of punishment.

12. CrossFit is a strength and conditioning program that emphasizes high-intensity interval training.

13. Denoting work undertaken for the public good without charge, especially legal work for a client with a low income.

14. **Platitude** (*noun*) a remark or statement, especially one with a moral content, that has been used too often to be interesting or thoughtful

15. **Happenstance** (*noun*) coincidence

His Iraq pals were a mixed bunch. One had the shakes,¹⁶ because he quit booze for the whole day to come out and show support. Others are doing fine.

David Rock was with Carlson during his second Iraq deployment. He says he wouldn't have come to court to support just anyone.

"When it came time to push, David was the guy to have out there. He's the definition of a leader in terms of what you want to see in combat," Rock says. "He had a mission, and it was to get everybody back."

When the doors opened, Carlson was already sitting at a table with his lawyer. He got one glimpse of his family and friends before the bailiff¹⁷ told him to face the front, toward the judge.

- [30] The case would decide whether he should serve up to six years in state prison for operating under the influence — it's his fourth offense in five years, which makes it a felony — and felony bail jumping.¹⁸

Cotton called on a few character witnesses: a Vietnam vet who has been counseling Carlson in prison and his grandmother, who talked about how much Iraq had changed him. Cotton asked the judge to give Carlson time served for the two felonies and let him go home with his family.

The judge, though, seemed to have already made up his mind.

"I'm looking at a fine young man sitting in front of me today, that I'm going to end up putting in prison for a little bit. The reason I'm going to do that Mr. Carlson is 'cause you're not ready. And I have an obligation above and beyond your rehabilitative needs, to protect the public," said Hassin.

He then pronounced: "The sentence today is two years on each count."

- [35] Carlson's family gasped and his Iraq buddies stared at the judge in silence.

Then Hassin explained: The sentences are to be served concurrently. That effectively means it's a total of two years. Plus, Carlson gets credit for all the time he has already served.

"That, by my estimation, will give you a few brief months to better prepare you for return to the community. Because the next time you come to the community all that we wish from you is your success," Hassin told Carlson.

"I'm giving you the challenge, sir, of leaving the state prison system in a fairly short period of time," Hassin continued. "The good news is you're going to get out soon. The bad news is Mr. Carlson, that you're going to have to face those circumstances of being back on the street again. But, you know what? You can do it. You're very capable of it ... These guys behind you believe you're capable of it today as well or they wouldn't be here."

16. Physical tremors often indicative of alcohol withdrawal

17. An official in a court of law who keeps order, looks after prisoners, and other duties are required by a judge

18. "Bail jumping" refers to failing to show up to court at a predetermined time after posting bail and being released on bail.

Calling from jail the day after sentencing, Carlson says he's pleased — not just with the sentence.

- [40] "I mean at the end he called me a fine young man," Carlson says. "Honestly and it didn't matter what sentence he gave me. That meant a lot to me ... throughout all of this that's what I've been looking for. Just for people to see that I meant well, and that I went down the wrong road."

Carlson is trying to get on the right road. He says the PTSD is with him there in the cell, and every day he fights it. If he stays on that road, he'll be out of prison before the new year.

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