

Defense Department statistics released in June indicate that the US Army experienced the highest rate of suicide on record over the past year. In July, researchers reported that thirty-seven percent of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans seeking care at Veteran's Affairs clinics for the first time since returning from those wars have been diagnosed with mental health disorders.

It is misleading to assume that a veteran returning home with no apparent injuries has been unscathed by his or her wartime service. Military personnel experience the effects of occupational injuries and exposure to chemical and environmental toxins for decades afterwards. Likewise, the effects of psychological trauma can be apparent for years to come.

A local veteran who was diagnosed with an orthopedic disorder after returning to civilian life from service in the Pacific during World War II is a good example. Serving as a first class electrician's mate aboard a Navy destroyer, he suffered a herniated disk in his back while helping to carry a piece of electrical equipment weighing about 500 pounds up a ship's ladder.

Navy ships cannot run on damaged engines and very few young enlisted men or draftees possessed the electrical skills necessary to make required engine repairs so that ships could be returned to wartime service quickly.

This man grew up working in his family's electrical equipment service and repair business. He had a very high level of a valued skill. As a result, upon reporting to sick bay, a medical corpsman administered pain medication and sent him right back to his post in a narrow, cramped engine generator room.

A year after being discharged, he required surgery on his back. A second operation was performed nearly three years after the first. Many years later, he was diagnosed with spinal stenosis, accompanied by painful arthritis.

Whenever ships are attacked, damaged compartments seal themselves off so as to prevent the entire ship from flooding and sinking. This man's engine repair duties also included being among the first to open those compartments and to assist in the recovery of the decomposing, bloated, floating bodies of young Navy seamen who had drowned in service aboard their own ships.

In an earlier column for this newspaper, I recounted similar stories I'd heard from veterans of other American wars. Entitled "Veterans: Sacrifices for Our Nation," the article is posted on the Archives page at www.emo-ed.com.

One of those veterans is a taxi driver who lives and works in a major city. After that column was published, he was diagnosed with a form of leukemia known to be related to exposure to herbicides like Agent Orange, which was widely used by our military to defoliate dense jungles areas in Viet Nam.

He also became homeless during the past year and lives now in a shelter.

The World War II veteran also became homeless for a brief period of time this spring due to the recession and may face that same bleak prospect again.

Contrary to assumptions often made about homeless individuals, neither one of these veterans has ever been a drug or alcohol addict. Each is a productive, tax paying citizen who worked hard his entire life.

Their situations are not unusual. Many veterans become homeless over time.

Recent news reports describing the drastic measures some public officials are taking now with respect to their cities' homeless people are troubling.

In Los Angeles, police have started to enforce obscure jaywalking and loitering statutes in a campaign to harass homeless individuals and thereby evict them from certain areas.

New York City, taking a different approach, is offering homeless families a one-way ticket back home if a relative there agrees to take them in.

Homeless advocates know that relocation arrangements involving a relative rarely last for more than a few months. The very definition of homelessness includes placements like those as well as temporary transfers wherein people are housed in a hotel or motel in another revolving door type of settlement.

Our nation's banking crisis has generated a large and ever growing number of foreclosed houses. My proposal is that we begin to envision bold, creative plans to acquire, restore and permanently relocate our homeless veterans in those vacant houses. Funds would come from diverting billions of dollars in bonuses now paid to greedy bankers and directing them to worthy veterans.

In our great country, America, "...the land of the free and the home of the brave..." the brave should never be homeless while the very financiers and bankers who devastated our nation's financial systems are richly rewarded.