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Younger vets entering ranks of the homeless

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Among the thousands of homeless people in Sonoma County is a small battalion of U.S. military veterans who lay down at night under bridges and in cars, on friends' couches and in crowded shelters.

"Here I am, living the vet's life," said Jake Saltzman, an Air Force medic who served in Iraq during what became known as the surge.

Saltzman, 24, is one of hundreds of homeless veterans in Sonoma County and one of a growing contingent of younger homeless veterans.

Separated from the Air Force since July 2007, Saltzman's been living in his sports car — which sports two "Support the Troops" ribbon magnets — on the back roads of Sonoma County for about two months.

Memories from the war — he was a surgical technician at Camp Anaconda, the giant U.S. military base near Baghdad — shadow his days and nights. Dogged by those memories, he's lost two civilian hospital jobs since 2007, most recently at Sutter Medical Center.

"When I was working, things were not good," he said.

Doctors with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs diagnosed Saltzman with post traumatic stress disorder. Now he gets \$1,600 a month in veterans disability benefits, he said.

"So I technically could rent a place. But I don't really want to, there's too much stress involved," he said. He doesn't usually stay with friends because, "I don't want to be a burden."

Marijuana helps him with the memories — which were forged in bloody operating rooms filled with "combat casualties and anything else, a lot of burn victims, amputees." Eighty percent of his patients, he said, were Iraqis, and many of those were children.



KENT PORTER / The Press Democrat
Jake Saltzman, an Air Force veteran of the Iraq war, lives in his car, parked here on Santa Rosa Avenue. The former medic says he has a 90 percent veterans disability because of post traumatic stress syndrome

In the war, he said, life's routines included throwing anything not needed into "the burn pit. Body parts, medical waste, fuel, wasted ammunition, old anything, all the garbage."

He's heard that burn pit "poisons" may be related to his loss of appetite. He knows his life here and now seems alien to his life there and then.

"I guess that's part of the problem," he said. "It's a different world here."

The world here is one where at least 400 of the roughly 35,000 veterans in Sonoma County are homeless, according to a 2009 census commissioned by the county's Task Force on Homelessness. That's about 12 percent of the county's estimated 3,247 homeless.

"That's just the tip of it," said Don Bridges, who was in the Air Force during the Persian Gulf War, managing inventory on C130 transports.

He's been homeless since 1997, brought low, he said, by a bipolar disorder that was triggered by his four years in the service, a divorce and subsequent drinking problems.

Bridges said he's been searching for work for eight months. He lives with a friend in Santa Rosa for now. Recently, he's been going to Sonoma County Vet Connect, a group that veterans started 18 months ago to help connect comrades to an array of public and private veteran-assistance agencies.

"It has no dignity to it whatsoever," Bridges, a soft-spoken 43-year-old, said about homelessness. He said he doesn't want special treatment, but his life today doesn't square with how he sees himself.

"I'm a veteran," he said. I've got skills. I really shouldn't be homeless."

Bridges and Saltzman are among about 131,000 of the nation's 24 million veterans who are homeless on any given day, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

There are 27,000 homeless veterans in California, according to a report released today by the National Alliance to End Homelessness. The report found that middle-aged veterans between 35- and 54-years-old — like Bridges — are the most likely to become homeless. While they make up just 26 percent of the veteran population, they are 61 percent of the homeless veterans population.

Meanwhile, a study by Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America found that veterans of the current wars — such as Saltzman — are becoming homeless more quickly than veterans from earlier wars.

VA figures, the report said, show that Vietnam veterans who became homeless did so from five to seven years after returning from that war. But Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who are ending up on the streets are arriving there as soon as 18 months after returning.

And in Sonoma County, research suggests that the percentage of homeless veterans from the Persian Gulf War, Iraq and Afghanistan is higher than that found nationwide.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness report said six percent of homeless veterans are in the 18 to 35 years old, putting them in the group most likely to have served since the Gulf War. In Sonoma County, though, 11 percent of homeless veterans are from that era, a Vet Connect survey of 166 veterans found.

The VA this month pledged \$3.2 billion over the next five years to getting veterans off the streets and preventing them from falling into homelessness. And bills working their way through Congress now would increase the number of housing vouchers for veterans and focus on helping veterans returning from current conflicts get into housing more quickly.

On Monday, 35 housing vouchers — issued through the VA and the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development — became available to Sonoma County veterans.

It was the first time veterans in Sonoma County have had access to the so-called VASH vouchers, said Kym Valadez, a social worker at the Santa Rosa VA Clinic. Vouchers were also released in Marin and Mendocino counties.

"These are going to move pretty quickly," said Valadez. A least 500 veterans in the county are eligible, she said.

The program extends beyond simply housing. Recipients are assigned case managers, who will help them with finding housing, with health care, financial and employment issues, with anything, Valadez said, "to get them into housing and to keep them housed."

Just as most of the nation's veterans are not homeless, many homeless veterans say they weren't in combat. Just 20 of 166 homeless veterans Vet Connect surveyed described themselves as combat vets.

But many homeless non-combat veterans believe that the military made them into men (no women were interviewed for this article) who were ill prepared for civilian life.

Bridges said the bipolar disorder that hampers him first appeared in the military; his application for VA service-related disability benefits is pending. In other ways too, he said, the service turned him into someone who struggles as a civilian.

The military taught him to "speak and write in bullet statements," he said. He's found that doesn't work so well in the larger world. He gets along less well with many people. He was written up at work for his abrupt manner with customers. Friends said he'd changed.

"It's a constant adjustment," he said.

It's a theme echoed by many homeless veterans.

"We have a lack of patience for disorganization, for what we see as stupidity," said ScotcqMalcolm, 41, an Air Force electronic warfare systems technician in the Persian Gulf War.

"They break you down, build you up and post you as a soldier," said Malcolm, one of about 20 veterans currently staying at the Sam Jones Hall, a 120-bed homeless shelter operated by Catholic Charities in southwest Santa Rosa.

In the service, "You've been part of your tribe," said Malcolm, on the streets for nearly two years. "You get out and you're an outsider."

Malcolm said he got a lot from the military, including the education he was promised. He blames his downward slide in great part on drugs and alcohol, on what he describes as "a tendency towards escapism."

But the dislocation he felt upon re-entering civilian life continues.

"It ties in," he said. "Once I got out I did have that culture shock," he said.

If he could, Malcolm said, he'd re-enlist to be a combat medic. "It can be gruesome, but it's a good job and you can use it on the outside, if you don't burn out," he said.

Saltzman, who's living in his car, said he's proud of what he and others did. Not of the war, he said — "Of all the things that don't make sense, that doesn't make the most" — but of the work they all tried to do.

"The crazy part is," he said, "I feel like I'd go back, to wherever, if they asked me to go."

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