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Iraq war vet works out anguish on the stage

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The day I met with two Iraq war vets at a Hollywood theater was even bloodier than most in Iraq. Two car bombs at a market killed 88 Iraqis Monday and wounded 168. Between Friday and Monday, 30 American troops were also killed.

Sean Huze, a vet, actor and playwright, can't help himself. He keeps checking the Internet for the latest, and every time he does, he sees the troop casualty count rise.

"Twenty-seven over the weekend," said Huze, who lives in Valley Village and doesn't go long without a cigarette. "It was 13 dead and then 16. I woke up the next day and it was already up to 25. And Lindsay Lohan's first day in rehab was still the most viewed story on Yahoo news."

That's part of what throws a returning vet, Huze said. You come home to a country where most people don't have a personal connection to the war in which you just risked your life, and the anger begins building.

Huze was in on the initial invasion of Iraq in 2003, a Marine corporal with the 2nd Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion. The Louisiana native had been living in Los Angeles, trying to make it as an actor, when he looked out the window of his Hollywood apartment on Sept. 11, 2001.

He was scanning the sky for airliners that might repeat what had happened in New York and Washington. The next day, he went to a Marine recruiting station at Sunset and La Brea and enlisted.

He came back after a year in the Middle East, including 4 1/2 months in Iraq, with a lot to work through, including one particularly haunting image of a young Iraqi boy he saw lying dead beside the road in Nasiriyah. He still believes in the Marines and has never counted himself a pacifist, but he had been sold on the claim that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and felt betrayed when it turned out to be nonsense. The anger became rage, which he tried to deal with creatively in his critically acclaimed 2005 play "The Sand Storm: Stories From the Front."

Now Huze, who just got back from shooting a Paul Haggis movie in New Mexico, has written a sequel called "The Wolf," set in a military psychiatric ward where soldiers are wrestling with post-traumatic stress disorder and worse. It's scheduled to open in March at VetStage, a fledgling enterprise in which Huze, whose battalion buddies called him "Hollywood," is hoping to give vets an outlet through writing and acting. He wants the cast to include returning vets.

After returning home from the war, Huze said, "I felt anger, rage, despair, guilt." He recalled how one day, upon learning that two soldiers he knew had just been killed, he nearly decked a guy who made a snide remark about the "Semper Fi" bumper sticker on Huze's Jeep. "For me personally, part of my stress coming back is that I do feel like I was part of something that was wrong."

He got counseling back then, and still sees a psychologist, but Huze thinks writing and acting are what

saved him.

"I feel like for me, this is infinitely better."

Jim Bright, a San Fernando Valley resident who lost a stepson in Iraq, is the one who told me about Huze's novel approach to post-traumatic stress disorder. Bright and his wife, Jane, are raising money in the memory of Sgt. Evan Ashcraft (www.evanashcraft.org) and referring troubled vets to programs that can help them.

"I believe the continued escalation of the war in Iraq is creating greater homelessness, alcoholism, abuse, joblessness and drug usage," says Bright, who points to studies that suggest one in five returning vets has some degree of psychological disorder.

Rep. Bob Filner (D-Chula Vista) has blasted the Department of Veterans Affairs for a lack of aggressiveness and a bureaucratic response to what he sees as a huge and growing problem.

"We made a big mistake with Vietnam," said the chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, who said the military discourages vets from admitting they have problems, particularly if they want to continue their careers and have a shot at a promotion. "Those kids had all the classic symptoms we didn't deal with at the time, and half of them are on the streets now as homeless vets."

When I told him about Huze and VetStage, he liked the sound of it.

"If we were smart," he said, criticizing the lack of creativity in reaching out to vets, "the VA should be funding this play."

Huze says VetStage isn't meant to be antiwar. Nor is he willing to join the call for a withdrawal from Iraq, fearing that would create as many problems as staying. He doesn't know what we should do and believes such conflicts are part of what make the transition to civilian life so difficult for some vets.

Soldiers return from their sacrifice to find the public turned against the war and Washington pols wringing their hands over a litany of mistakes. Huze plans to go on a tour of local community colleges to invite vets to express themselves in the company of people who understand what they've been through.

Who knows? Maybe they'll end up in a play. It may well happen to Brian Seuffert, who dropped by the theater while I was talking to Huze. Seuffert completed his second tour of duty with the Marines in Iraq in October and moved to Los Angeles. When Huze called him on a recent evening, he was asleep and the call startled him.

"I jumped out of bed and said, 'OK, let's go!' " It took a few seconds to realize he was no longer at war.

A Pittsburgh native, Seuffert, who loved jazz and tap dancing as a child, was enjoying modest success as a beginning actor in New York when he enlisted. This week, he's going to be reading for the part of a gung-ho Marine who serves as a guard in the psychiatric hospital and touts the company line while patients wrestle the demons of war.

Will that be a stretch?

"I'm going through some issues," Seuffert said, telling me he doesn't know whether he's got stress disorder, per se. "I voted for Bush both times. It made sense to me. It still does, in part. But I'm still trying to work it out."

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