MANY HAPPY RETURNS

MELANIE GRAHAM

> If you spend time in war zones or with the military, there's a sense that the United States is not at war. The U.S. military is at war. Go to a base like Fort Hood, there are blood drives, Gold Star Mothers who have lost a son, people on crutches all over the place. But once you leave the gate, you would not know that America is at war.
>
> —James Kitfield, *National Journal*

A Note to the Returning Service Member and Family: If the return home was easy, there would be no need for this guide. But we know that's not always the case.

> June 2002—The first veterans of the war in Afghanistan return to Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

However, knowing what to expect and preparing for it can make the process easier.

> June 11—Sergeant First Class Rigoberto Nieves fatally shoots his wife Teresa and then himself in their bedroom.

I. PREPARING FOR THE REUNION

Keep negative feelings to yourself for now. Time spent preparing will be time well spent.

> June 29—Sergeant William Wright strangles his wife Jennifer and buries her body in the woods.

Although you may be highly stressed from making the transition from one facet of life to the other, ironically, it is *you* that will need to guide the family through this adjustment period.

THE MAILER REVIEW, VOL. 6, NO. 1, FALL 2012. Copyright © 2012. The Norman Mailer Society. Published by The Norman Mailer Society.

First, remember

> July 19—s Sergeant Wright is being charged with the death of his wife, Sergeant First Class Brandon Floyd of Delta Force, shoots his wife Andrea and then kills himself.

you've changed.

> After returning from Iraq, between 2005 and 2008, nine members of the Fort Carson Colorado Fourth Brigade Combat team are charged with homicide.

II. PLAN FOR A SPECIAL DAY

Because of the emotions involved, the day rarely goes as planned.

> July 9—Sergeant Ramon Griffin stabs his estranged wife Marilyn fifty times or more and sets her house on fire.

You need to especially guard against jealousy.

> 2008—Private John Needham, who had received a medical discharge after a failed suicide attempt, beats his girlfriend to death.

Focus on the Positive.

Avoid too much talk about war-stories. What may be common, everyday chatter for the serviceperson may be disturbing to the family.

> Fort Carson Infantryman Specialist Robert H. Marko is evaluated three times for mental health and declared fit for combat, although according to his family, fellow platoon members, and official records, he believed that on his 21st birthday he would be transformed into the "Black Raptor"—half-man, half-dinosaur.
>
> 2008—He blindfolds and rapes a disabled woman, Judilianna Lawrence, 19, then slits her throat.

Children may behave unexpectedly. Be Prepared. The stress involved may make you more emotional than normal.

> The domestic violence prosecution of Sgt. Jared
> Terrasas is put on hold, as he is deployed to Iraq.
>
> Upon his return, after pleading guilty, he is pulled from his Marine Corps 16–week batterers intervention program and sent to Iraq again. While it is against Marine Corps policy to send anyone with

pending charges to war, leaders cite the need for 'bodies on the ground.'

2007—Terrasas bashes in the head of his 7–month-old son Alexander, and is charged with murder.

III. CIVILIAN LIFE

Getting frustrated and upset are choices. Although difficult, acceptance of the reality of the situation can help you stay composed.

2011—The Beneficiary Identification Records Locator Subsystem death file, an obscure government database, shows that the US Department of Veteran Affairs is aware that 4,194 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have died after leaving the military, just 260 fatalities less than in the entire Iraq War.

As the excitement of the return wears off, pre-deployment issues may resurface, or new problems come to light.

2010—Iraq veteran Matthew Magdzas commits suicide after murdering his wife April Oles-Magdzas and 13– month-old daughter Lila on the day April was set to give birth to the couple's second daughter.

Be Patient.

2007—Almost 90 percent of psychiatric staffs servicing veterans have no formal training in PTSD therapies.

Make Changes

2011—With veterans now accounting for one of every five suicides in the nation, the VA is under pressure from the courts and Congress to fix its mental health services in an attempt to curb the death toll.

April 2011—25 soldiers commit suicide, equal to about half the deaths in Afghanistan during the month.

Slowly.

Familial homicide by veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars remains collectively unaddressed by the media, the military, and the VA.

May 2011—The VA informs the parents of William Hamilton, an Iraq war veteran, that it was not responsible for his death.

Mr. Hamilton had been admitted nine times to a VA psychiatric ward. He saw demon women and talked to a man he had killed in Iraq. The VA turned away Mr. Hamilton—three days before he stepped in front of a train at the age of 26.

IV. WE WISH YOU THE BEST IN THIS HAPPY TIME