

Opinion: Time to discuss the cost of war

By Jackie Speier

I know someone who worked 15 straight months without a vacation. This isn't that remarkable, perhaps, save for the fact that this person was a platoon sergeant in Iraq. He didn't want to leave his men, although some left him on a gurney. He says point-blank, "If I'd been over there for my country, I would have left sooner, but I stayed because of my men."

This attitude of protecting those who fight with you is an aspect of being a veteran that is not easily understood by the public. I sometimes get the impression that, viewing war from the comfort of a living room, people believe our troops are waving the flag while they search for terrorists in the desert. The reality is much different.

Our men and women in Iraq and Afghanistan were solidly committed to keeping each other alive. The same could be said for those who served in Vietnam.

Ari Sonnenberg is an Iraq platoon sergeant who says he excels at getting his unit out of an ambush. He left combat four years ago and the ambush-evasion skills are as strong as ever – it's the other coping skills (marriage, a job, sleeping) that remain a challenge. He's turned to artistic expression to help him regain his life.

Last month the Commonwealth Club of California hosted a public forum in San Francisco to share the experiences and views of those who have served in our military services. I put together the program for "The Art and Soul of Combat Veterans" because I firmly believe we need a stronger dialogue on the cost of war – not simply the dollars spent but the taxing of the human

soul.

We hear talk of limited wars and political pledges to avoid putting boots on the ground, but still our troops are killed or suffer lifelong injuries while the regions where we sacrificed lives – our troops' and those of innocents – often return to their lawless state after we leave.

The American public, especially Congress, should hear more about combat from those who aren't paid to represent a point of view. We need to hear directly from the unsung heroes.

Take Korean War veteran Pete McCloskey Jr., who served in Congress from 1967 to 1983. He is a former Marine, awarded the Silver Star for heroism and twice awarded a Purple Heart. He told me recently that if more members of Congress were military veterans, we'd be less likely to send our troops into harm's way.

But veterans are fading from Congress – in 1977 there were 412 in Congress compared with 104 today.

I've never served in the military, although I know violence, having been shot by a People's Temple cult member. I went to Afghanistan in 2010 to see the civil turmoil. The message I heard was simple and direct: the Afghan people wanted us out of their country.

It is unrealistic to expect our citizenry to witness the dialogue first-hand in war zones. But there are opportunities in our country to at least hear perspectives from those who have taken fire, seen death and destruction, and returned home to live with their memories.

Our program featured three veterans who have turned to art to deal with their struggles. Sonnenberg, the platoon sergeant, paints and takes photographs related to the burdens and the hope he brought home with him. His personal goal is to get through each day.

Michelle Wilmot was both an Army medic in Iraq and a member of an elite women's unit – Team Lioness – that conducted high-risk house raids and searches for explosives. But some of the hostile forces were women who served with her. She endured ridicule and harassment over her ethnicity – Pacific Islander. What she has to say is conveyed in her paintings and writings.

Drew Mendelson was an artillery officer in Vietnam. He's had more than 40 years to adjust to life at home, but Vietnam, at times, is still as vivid to him as yesterday. That comes through loud and clear in his new book, "Song Ba To." He teaches writing as a means to personal recovery for those seeking help at the Sacramento Vet Center.

The perspectives of these three combat veterans are but a few of the divergent views coming from our veteran community. I know that some who served might not agree with parts of the dialogue. And I expect dissent among the public, from those who fear more terrorist attacks and the continued threat of weapons of mass destruction, to those who think we've overstepped our role as global enforcers of peace.

But I trust there is strong agreement that there is a tragic cost to our engagement in global wars and that we, as a free society, must devote more resources to understanding the full ramifications of that cost. As we know, it will be with us for generations to come.

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