

NIGHTMARE: Cameron (right) and Gary Tonkin say their flashbacks have worsened since the Iraq war

# Battlefield Flashbacks

For many Vietnam veterans, the Iraq war is a trauma trigger.

BY DAN EPHRON

**S**COTT CAMERON AND DENNIS Kanke had a lot in common. Residents of Duluth, Minn., both fought in Vietnam and returned home with traumas that lingered for decades. Both clawed their way out of the pit with the help of therapy and medication. And both fell back into it when the Iraq invasion began more than three years ago, with war scenes on television triggering nightmares and flashbacks. "It all came rushing back," says Cameron, a sinewy 56-year-old who took a bullet in the spine in 1969 and went on to have more than 40 operations. When the depression got really bad, Cameron checked himself into a trauma clinic in 2004, where he spent nine weeks with other war veterans affected by Iraq. Kanke, by contrast, coped by shutting off TV news and occasionally reaching out for help from friends. In August of that year, Cameron got a call from Kanke, who wanted company on his boat. "I'd been on the road for two hours and couldn't drive anymore. I told him to go to sleep and I'd see him in the morning," Cameron recalls. Instead, Kanke poured a can of gasoline over himself and lit a match, dying in a hospital three days later.

Psychologists have long known that new wars can reopen old wounds for veterans. When U.S. troops fought in Iraq in 1991, clinics of the government's Veterans Affairs (VA) administration were flooded with calls from distressed former soldiers. But some researchers now believe the current Iraq war is particularly vexing for Vietnam veterans because of the ways it is similar to the conflict they fought 40 years ago: the grinding guerrilla warfare, the constant brush with civilians and the political debate back home. Max Cleland, the former senator and Vietnam War veteran, gave the phenomenon a public face when he disclosed last month that scenes from Iraq had made him depressed. His chief of staff told NEWSWEEK that Cleland has been getting trauma counseling at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington since the start of the war. He's clearly not alone. In a small study conducted at Cleveland State University earlier this year, half of the Vietnam veterans surveyed said they felt emotional distress over Iraq. And figures put out by the VA show a 36 percent rise since 2003 in the

number of Vietnam vets seeking help for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Veterans and their therapists say watching coverage of Iraq or reading about it can make some former soldiers feel like they're back in battle, and can trigger some of the old sensations—the deep anxiety and the hypervigilance. Jim Doyle, of Fresno, Calif., says his anxieties are set off by news of the casualties in Iraq. "When I see a headline—two Marines killed, three soldiers wounded—I see the faces of the guys I was with 36 years ago."

Some therapists have been coaching veterans to tune out. Thomas Bennett, who counsels former soldiers at a VA center on Martha's Vineyard, says watching TV "becomes overstimulating for them and then they have trouble sleeping." Bennett says some of his patients have required more medication to cope with Iraq-related stress. The VA has also adopted the switch-it-off treatment. Earlier this summer the VA explicitly told veterans suffering from PTSD not to watch

"Baghdad ER," a documentary that follows the wrenching events in an American combat-support hospital in Iraq.

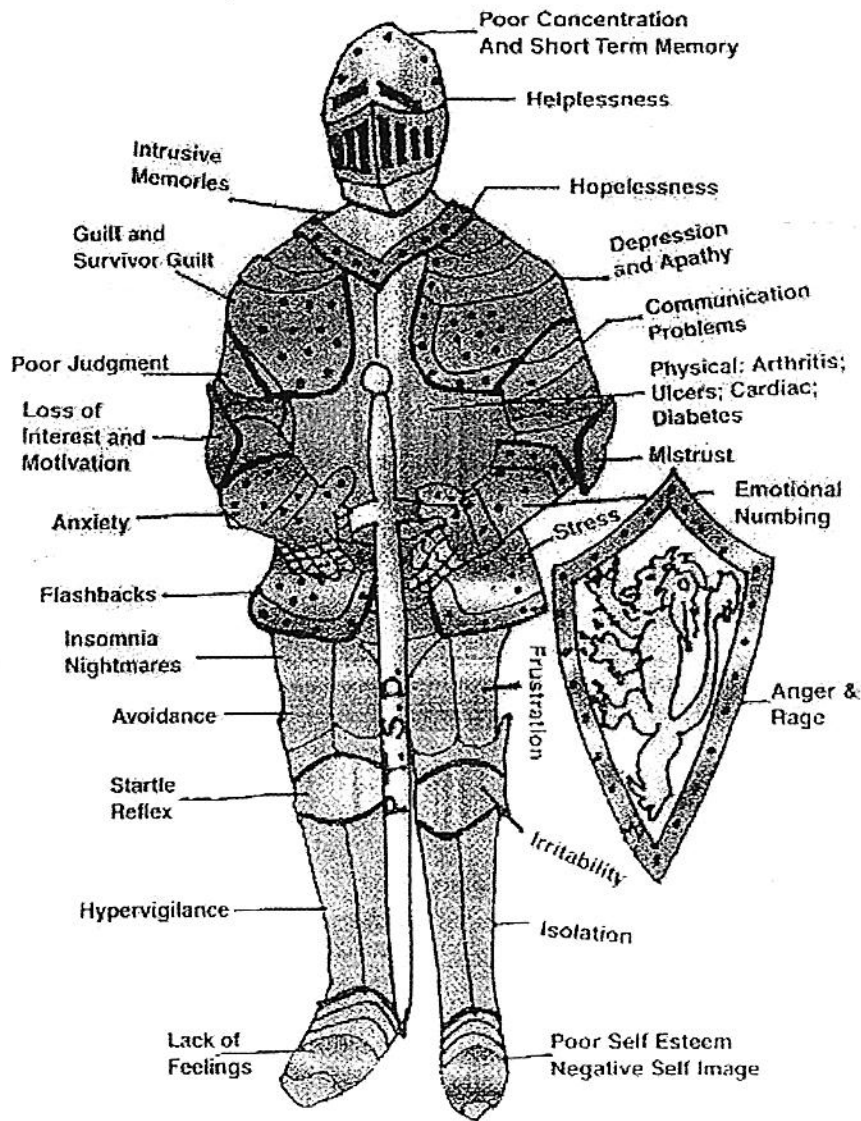
Kanke, the Duluth veteran, had been a Marine photographer, which meant he was regularly taking shots of bodies and battle

zones. After the war, doctors diagnosed him as 100 percent disabled due to PTSD. His widow, Carol, says her husband suffered from depression long before Iraq but had been improving. The war put him off course. He grew distant from loved ones, including his children and grandchildren, and he dropped weight, she says. On the night of his suicide, after talking by phone to Cameron, Kanke roused Carol and pushed her out of the house before setting himself on fire. She says she watched the fire from the outside, then tried to douse her husband with a garden hose. "We had a wonderful life. But when the war started, he just got more and more depressed. He didn't handle things going wrong very well," she says. Now she's hoping her husband's story will help other veterans spot the symptoms and avoid his fate.



Increase in Vietnam vets who have sought help for PTSD since 2003

# PTSD



R. GROVER 2002

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