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Fighting the enemy within

Iraq war follows a Bryan officer home

The Long Road Home
A four-part series

TODAY: Byron Hancock, a respected Bryan police officer and Iraq war hero, never thought he'd suffer from PTSD. It would nearly destroy him.
MONDAY: In combat for the first time, Hancock carries a sniper's burden.
TUESDAY: Hancock faces a battle at home — against an overwhelmed, unyielding system.
WEDNESDAY: Back in Bryan, Hancock repairs his family life and reaches out to others like himself.

By CRAIG KAPITAN
Eagle Staff Writer

Byron Hancock's face was sweaty and flushed. The 12-year Bryan Police Department veteran looked as if he'd just finished a jog, except for the panicked look he was failing to mask from his wife.

"I've got to go!" he told Kristi Hancock, grabbing her arm as he demanded his truck keys, which she had hidden. "You don't want to be around if I don't have those keys."

When that tactic didn't work, the agitation in his voice quickly turned into a plea.

"You've got to get me those keys," he begged. "They're going to be here in a matter of minutes. I can't protect you if you're here."

Hancock had slit a man's throat — he was sure of it. And his colleagues

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Eagle photo/Stuart Villanueva

Kristi Hancock sits with her daughter, Phoebe Kate, 5, and her son Gus, 8, while listening to her husband, Byron, recount his experiences in Iraq.

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on the force that late February evening would soon catch on and come to arrest him. He needed to leave town immediately and leave his family behind, he said, to protect them. He didn't want them caught in a standoff.

Bewildered, Kristi Hancock looked around the house in which she and her husband had built their family and took a deep breath. At some point during the day — while her husband was reluctantly taking the day off from work and she was teaching her first-grade class at Johnson Elementary School — photos from Byron's tour of duty in Iraq had been pulled out and scattered around the kitchen and living room.

A war movie played loudly on the TV, and a new letter from the Department of Veterans Affairs lay on the kitchen counter. She didn't have to read it to guess its purpose — to announce more red tape. "We are still processing your claim," the letters said time and time again, often asking them for information they had already submitted.

She was afraid, but not for what her husband claimed to have done or what he might do. Two years after returning home from Iraq — and months of trying futilely to get help for mounting symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder — the respected police officer, father of four and Marine Reserve sniper had lost touch with reality.

Sh[illegible]yed up with him throu[illegible] the night, holding his hand and wondering what they would do next.

'The profession picks you'

By all accounts, Hancock's service as a scout sniper sergeant in Iraq and the nearly two decades of military service that preceded it were stellar.

He signed up for the Marine Corps Reserve against his parents' objections in 1988, while still a senior at Garrison High School near Nacogdoches, where his father was a prominent attorney and one-time district attorney.

The Reserve was a compromise with Kristi, whom he had been dating steadily since she was 14 and he was 17. This way, they could settle down in one place while she finished high school and college. In the meantime, he could work toward becoming a sniper — the stoic warrior often characterized in movies as having patience, unshakable nerves and an oversized burden to protect his men.

The movie version of a sniper isn't much of a stretch from reality. According to *Army Field Manual 23-10*, which offers a guide for sniper training, it's a burden not everybody is cut out to bear.

"The sniper must be able to calmly and deliberately kill targets that may not pose an immediate threat to him," the manual tells commanders trying to identify potential sniper candidates. "It is much easier to kill in self-defense or in the defense of others than it is to kill without apparent provocation.

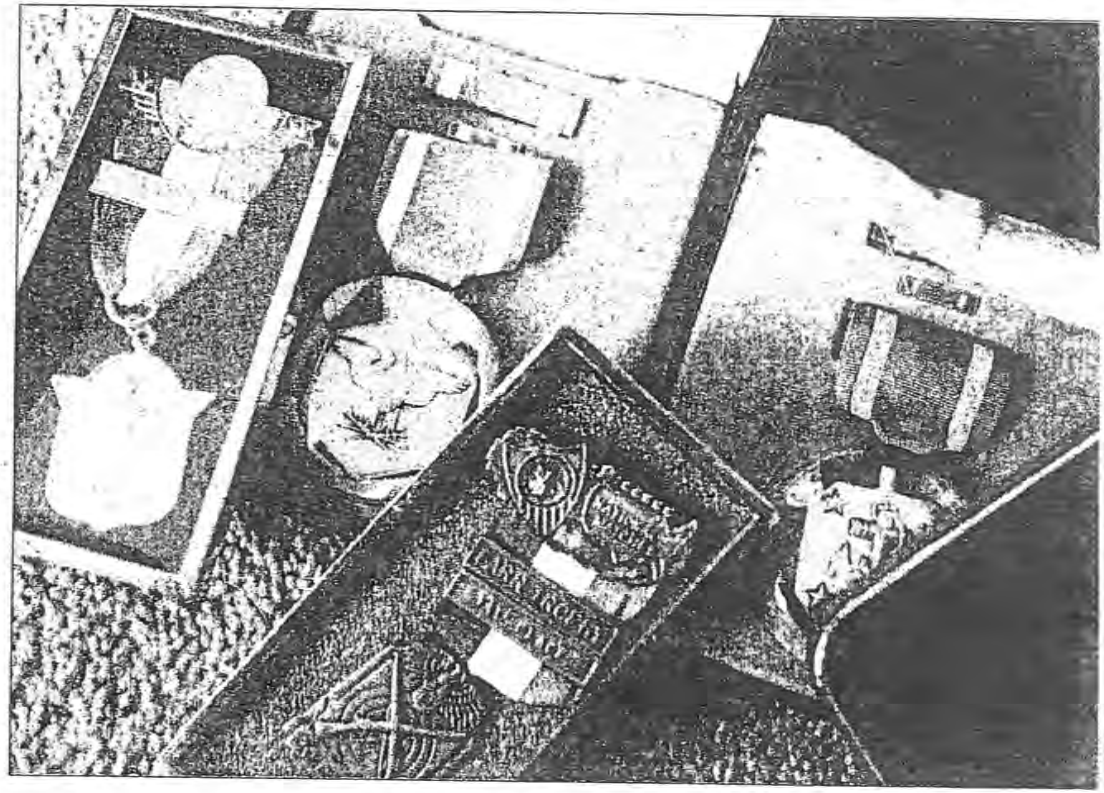
"The sniper must not be susceptible to emotions such as anxiety or remorse. Candidates whose motivation toward sniper training rests mainly in the desire for prestige may not be capable of the cold rationality that the sniper's job requires."

Hancock realized that he might excel at sniper service in boot camp, when he was named the top graduate of his platoon and received the marksmanship and physical fitness awards.

"In the Marine Corps, you've got to do your time first," Hancock, now 38, said of pursuing the goal, explaining that, like everyone else, he spent the first few years as a grunt.

But by 1992, Hancock was sent to Quantico, Va., to attend Marine Corps Scout Sniper School — considered one of the most difficult schools for enlisted personnel. Although it was a major step toward realizing his dream, statistically, his chances of succeeding in the endeavor were still slim.

For three months, he worked 18-hour days, seven days a week. After each test,



Above: Byron Hancock has earned numerous awards and commendations for his service as a Bryan police officer and as a sniper i[illegible] U.S. Marine Corps Rese[illegible].
Eagle photo/Stuart Villanueva

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more of hi. .llow students — Navy SEALS, Army Rangers, Special Forces members — would drop out.

The program was even tougher for him, he said, because "being in the Reserve, we didn't have any snipers." But he approached the instructors and asked for guidance, learning from the ground up.

Of the 32 who started the class, he was one of six who made it to graduation — second in his class and the first reservist to complete the program since the 1960s.

"Part of being a sniper, you have to want to do it, because it sounds cool but it's not all fun and glory," Hancock recalled recently. "They used to always call it the nature of the beast — you don't pick the profession; the profession picks you."

The profession had chosen him, and the next year he was asked to return to Quantico for the school's annual advanced course. He was the only reservist ever invited to the course, which was intended for those who had received the rank of sergeant or higher. He was a corporal.

During that time, the lessons became even more technical — learning what happens when a bullet travels through substances such as glass, water and bricks.

The course introduced Hancock to what sniper combat would be like in a war zone. He and his classmates would sometimes go a day or two without sleep as they ran counter-sniper drills against each other.

He also continued to learn everything he could about a ground combat unit. Although sharpshooting skills are important, snipers also need to develop "basic infantry skills to a high degree of perfection," according to the *Army Field Manual*.

"You're in support of grunts," Hancock explained. "You're kind of like their guardian angel."

The position requires traits such as reliability, initiative, loyalty, discipline and emotiona. .bility, according to the Army Field Manual. A candidate for the job shouldn't smoke, should have 20/20 vision and should be physically fit — prepared to go on operations with little food, sleep or water. A history of hunting and the confidence that comes with team sports help, commanders are told.

"The commander must determine if the [sniper] candidate will pull the trigger at the right time and place," the manual states. "A psychological evaluation of the candidate can aid the commander in the selection process."

By the late '90s, Hancock was traveling the country with the Marine Reserve Rifle Team — an elite 15-member competition group based in Virginia. At the National Rifle Matches in Ohio, he once finished in 14th place among 500 competitors for the 1,000-yard match. When not competing, the team tested ballistics in a controlled environment, and he learned other skills that would help him in the future, such as precision shooting in the wind.

After 10 years in the military, Hancock decided to return to full-time civilian life and continue to focus on his career with the Bryan Police Department, where he had already gained his fair share of experience dealing with stressful and dangerous situations.

In 1997, after two years in the job, he shot and killed a man who charged him and another officer with a knife outside a Bryan convenience store , according to police reports. That year, the Bryan Police Officers Association named him Officer of the Year.

He received the award again in 1998.

Hancock witnessed another death in December 2000. He and fellow officer Mark Hiatt were riding police motorcycles on their way to a funeral escort job when an oncoming truck swerved into their lane, killing Hiatt.

A year later, Hancock was the first officer to arrive at the Sanderson Farms chicken-processing plant in Bryan when a contractor for the company fatally shot a manager and wounded another before turning the gun on himself.

His recognitions from the police department include the Combat Award in 1997, a commendation in 2005 for his service in Iraq and a certificate of commendation last year, when he was one of several officers at an incident in which a man had threatened his estranged

Left: Kristy and Byron Hancock began dating when she was 14 and he was 17.
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wife and children with a knife.

Hancock's sniper skills have also been used by the Bryan Police Department's tactical response team, of which he was a member when not deployed. In fact, he was able to persuade the department to change the sniper rifle it used after he conducted a months-long study and determined that a lower-caliber bullet had less chance of traveling through an assailant and injuring bystanders.

The study, conducted while he was an instructor for a sniper class run by the Texas Engineering Extension Service, was published in *Texas Tactical Magazine* and eventually persuaded many other departments to change their sniper rifles as well.

Donnie Manry — who served as a sergeant in the Bryan Police Department until this year, when he retired because of partial paralysis caused by West Nile virus — described Hancock recently as always having been an "informal leader" among fellow officers.

Manry was Hancock's supervisor on and off throughout Hancock's career.

"He was topnotch, and you could always count on him," Manry said. "If you had a difficult situation, Byron was one of your guys that you'd pull in. You could place him in a supervisory role. If he needs to take care of business, he can."

Excelling as a police officer was natural for Hancock, his wife said, explaining that he had always been known as a straight arrow. While vacationing in Rio de Janeiro, Kristi Hancock recalled, he alerted authorities after he smelled marijuana while lounging on the beach.

"That's his personality," she said. "He wants to do the right thing, and he wants to help others, and he's done a good job of it."

Hancock had been out of the Marine Corps Reserve for two years when the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks occurred. Like many others moved by the event, he decided to re-enlist. He spent his first tour of duty in South America, teaching sniper tactics to various militaries.

Then, in May 2004, he was sent to California again to prepare for war. He had been activated for the 1991 Gulf War, which ended before his unit left California. This time, he would put his training to use on the ground in Iraq — earning accolades as he participated in some of the bloodiest battles of the war.

On a certificate accompanying his second Commendation Medal, he was lauded for his "initiative, perseverance and total dedication to duty" from Oct. 24, 2004, to March 5, 2005.

There was the hellish urban warfare in the battle to take Fallujah, where he made a record-setting long-distance kill. On the Internet, bloggers began comparing him to Carlos Hathcock, a Vietnam-era Marine sniper whose accomplishments have become legendary among war historians and shooting enthusiasts.

Then there was Operation Citadel, in which Hancock "exercised keen situational awareness and eliminated two insurgents attempting to emplace roadside bombs." During Operation River

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During the course of his role as a scout sniper for the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve in Iraq, Byron Hancock become a decorated war hero.

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Blitz, text accompanying the commendation states, Hancock helped secure the city of Hit.

"He scaled a rooftop position, identified and neutralized an enemy sniper who had engaged the company," the commendation states.

Gunnery Sgt. Timothy Dowd — commander of Hancock's sniper platoon, 1st Battalion, 23rd Marines — described Hancock in a report as an inspiration to other troops.

"When faced with intense fires from the enemy, he stood firm and undaunted," Dowd wrote.

A reporter with the national newspaper *The Christian Science Monitor* also took notice of Hancock while in Iraq, noting his "easygoing manner and competence that makes him seem like Bravo's Brett Favre." Hancock shrugged off the adulation of his comrades, reporter Dan Murphy wrote in the March 2005 article.

"My wife, Kristi, deserves more recognition in this whole thing than I do," Hancock was reported to have responded. "She's home, she sees the kids with their fathers around, whole families. That's tough. The one thing I've learned is to appreciate my family even more."

Hancock didn't realize it then, but in coming months, as he tried to readjust to civilian life back in Texas, he would put his family and his marriage to the test more than ever before. The man who was once described as a magnet for neighborhood children — always outside playing with his sons and daughters — would nearly lose the battle at home as he teetered on the brink of losing his family.

What's real

On the night of his breakdown, Byron Hancock snapped at his family after his wife asked him about the letter from the VA that lay on the kitchen counter. The yelling and cursing was uncharacteristic of the prewar Byron, and it scared his oldest daughter enough that she called his mother-in-law, asking her to pick them up.

His family retreated to the mother-in-law's house, blocks away, to wait out the episode.

"Look, Dad's just under a lot of stress," Kristi Hancock told her children.

During an interview months later, she described his demeanor that night as "very erratic, nervous, afraid and agitated." She never believed he would hurt anybody. But after months of mounting PTSD symptoms, she was worried for him.

Soon after arriving at her mother's house, Kristi heard a knock on the door. Byron had followed them on a bicycle.

"You have to give me those keys," her husband again implored, refusing to explain his urgency.

"I already told you, I can't give you those keys," she responded. "You're in no condition to drive."

Looking back on the incident, Kristi Hancock said she imagines being able to see her husband's heart pulsing out of his chest — he was that intensely frightened.

Seeing no other options, Byron leveled with her.

"I killed someone," he said. "I need time to get out of town. I slit his throat."

His wife was skeptical. If that was the case, where was the blood, she asked him. There doesn't have to be blood, he responded. "Not if you know how to do it."

He pleaded again.

"I don't want to get you and the kids involved," he said. "I can't protect you if I stay here."

Not knowing what else to do, Kristi Hancock lied. She made up a place where the keys were hidden.

"Thank you," he said calmly, slipping off his wedding ring as he began to leave on the bicycle. "I want you to hold this for me."

The gesture meant a lot to Kristi Hancock. It horrified her. After 16 years of marriage, she was confronted with the thought that she might not see her husband again. She had to follow him home and talk him down from whatever was going on in his head, she realized.

Kristi Hancock's mother was afraid for her safety, but she left anyway — leaving the children at her mother's as she rushed to beat him home, not sure what she would do or say when she got there.

"Well, honey, what are you doing here?" Byron Hancock asked almost nonchalantly as he returned home to find his wife there.

"Let's just spend some time together before you go," she told him, trying to ignore the adrenaline and act as if she hadn't notice the disheveled living room and unpacked suitcase recently pulled from the attic. "I really don't think you've hurt somebody. I think you have some time."

She heated up some soup.

"I want to know what your plan is," she said, trying to sound as if she were discussing an upcoming business trip. "What am I going to say to the kids?"

They sat down, and she kept touching his face, hoping she was connecting as she repeated little terms of affection they had shared over the years.

"I love you a whole big bunch.

"You know I'm your girl. You can't get rid of me."

She popped in a tape of *Grey's Anatomy*, continuing to sit with him on the couch.

Every once in a while, Byron would object.

"This is what I'm going to do, and you can't go with me," he would say.

The semi-coherent conversation went back and forth for hours, but with his wife by his side, Byron didn't go looking for the keys again.

Around 2 a.m., tears formed in his eyes and Kristi could tell he finally realized what was going on.

"I need to tell you that I'm sorry," he finally said. "I need to thank you for showing me what was real."

She coaxed him into the shower and he went to bed, immediately falling asleep and looking as if he had just run a marathon.

His father drove in from Kenedy, and he and Kristi Hancock sat up the rest of the night, watching over Byron and trying to figure out what to do next.

The next morning, Byron Hancock got up as if nothing had happened and went to a training seminar at the Bryan Police Department — the one refuge, he had found,

> "My wife, Kristi, deserves more recognition in this whole thing than I do. She's home, she sees the kids with their fathers around, whole families. That's tough. The one thing I've learned is to appreciate my family even more."
>
> BYRON HANCOCK
> *In a 2005 interview with The Christian Science Monitor*

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where he could keep his mind busy enough to keep the flashbacks and anger at bay.

"I'm fine," he told his wife. "Look at me. I'm fine."

Later that day, his father went to the VA outpatient clinic in College Station, where he said a social worker dismissed his son as an angry drunk and said his wife and children needed to leave him.

Herb Hancock, the tough ex-district attorney and one-time Department of Public Safety officer, struggled to choke back tears. That's when Pat Patterson — a counselor with the Texas Veterans Commission whose office is at the clinic — stepped in.

His job with the commission, which sometimes takes an adversarial stance against the VA on behalf of veterans, is to cut through the red tape and help veterans navigate the system. He knew the right people to call and the right buttons to push.

He took the day off work and drove with Byron Hancock to Temple.

After months of hitting brick walls, the VA finally agreed to admit him — although the family soon learned that it would take much more fighting and rattling the system before they'd receive the help they needed. They also ran into problems with the police department, which had been so helpful in the past.

But for now, at least, he had a plan for getting better.

'People need to know'

Kristi Hancock recalled "that evening" to a reporter this sum[illegible] as her husband sat next t[illegible]er in their living room, quietly listening while on a one-night leave from a VA facility in Temple.

Looking back, the symptoms of PTSD started manifesting themselves immediately after he got home, they said. He was edgy and couldn't sleep. He began taking as many off-duty security jobs as he could to fill the time, and when that didn't pan out, he would stay up late, watching TV to avoid having to go to bed — where night terrors often ensued.

The U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs' National Center for PTSD estimates that between 12 percent and 20 percent of troops returning home from Iraq develop symptoms of PTSD, an anxiety problem that can occur after any disturbing, frightening or life-threatening event.

Other studies cite much higher figures.

Triggers can include sexual assaults, natural disasters and car wrecks, but they also include combat exposure, according to the National Institutes of Health.

In fact, a national task force recently reported, PTSD has become more and more a "signature injury" of the Iraq war.

"During this type of event, you think that your life or others' lives are in danger," states a fact sheet produced by the VA's National Center for PTSD. "You may feel afraid or feel that you have no control over what is happening.

"Strong emotions caused by the event create changes in the brain that may result in PTSD."

The condition — which can take months or years to manifest and often gets worse without treatment — can result in depression, drinking and drug problems, employment problems, physical symptoms and divorce or violence against a spouse.

The VA recognized PTSD as a psychiatric diagnosis in the 1980s, but it has been around since the days of the Spartans, said Ron Lewis, a Vietnam helicopter pilot and professional counselor who teaches at Blinn College in Bryan. During the Civil War, it was called "soldier's heart." During World War I, it was called "shell shock," and during World War II, they called it "combat fatigue."

"Not everybody who comes back from combat suffers post-traumatic stress syndrome," Lewis said recently while speaking to a local chapter of Vietnam Veterans of America. "But anybody who's been in combat is going to be forever changed.

"With the kind of fighting going on over there [in Iraq], it's likely we may see some difficulties with them coming in. They are going to need some support."

According to a recent study by the Department of Defense's Task Force on Mental Health, "stigma in the military remains pervasive and often prevents service members from seeking needed care." In one survey cited by the group, nearly half of Marines said they expected to be treated differently if they sought counseling.

The task force recently lambasted the current system, calling it strained and unprepared to meet the needs of the troops coming home from Iraq. Psychological assessment procedures need to become "an effective, efficient and normal part of military life," the report

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The Hancock family, from left, Madison, Sawyer, Gu[illegible]sti, Byron and Phoebe Kate. Byron Hancock is trying to put his family life back together as he recovers from post-traumatic stress disorder after serving as a Ma[illegible] Reserve sniper in Iraq.

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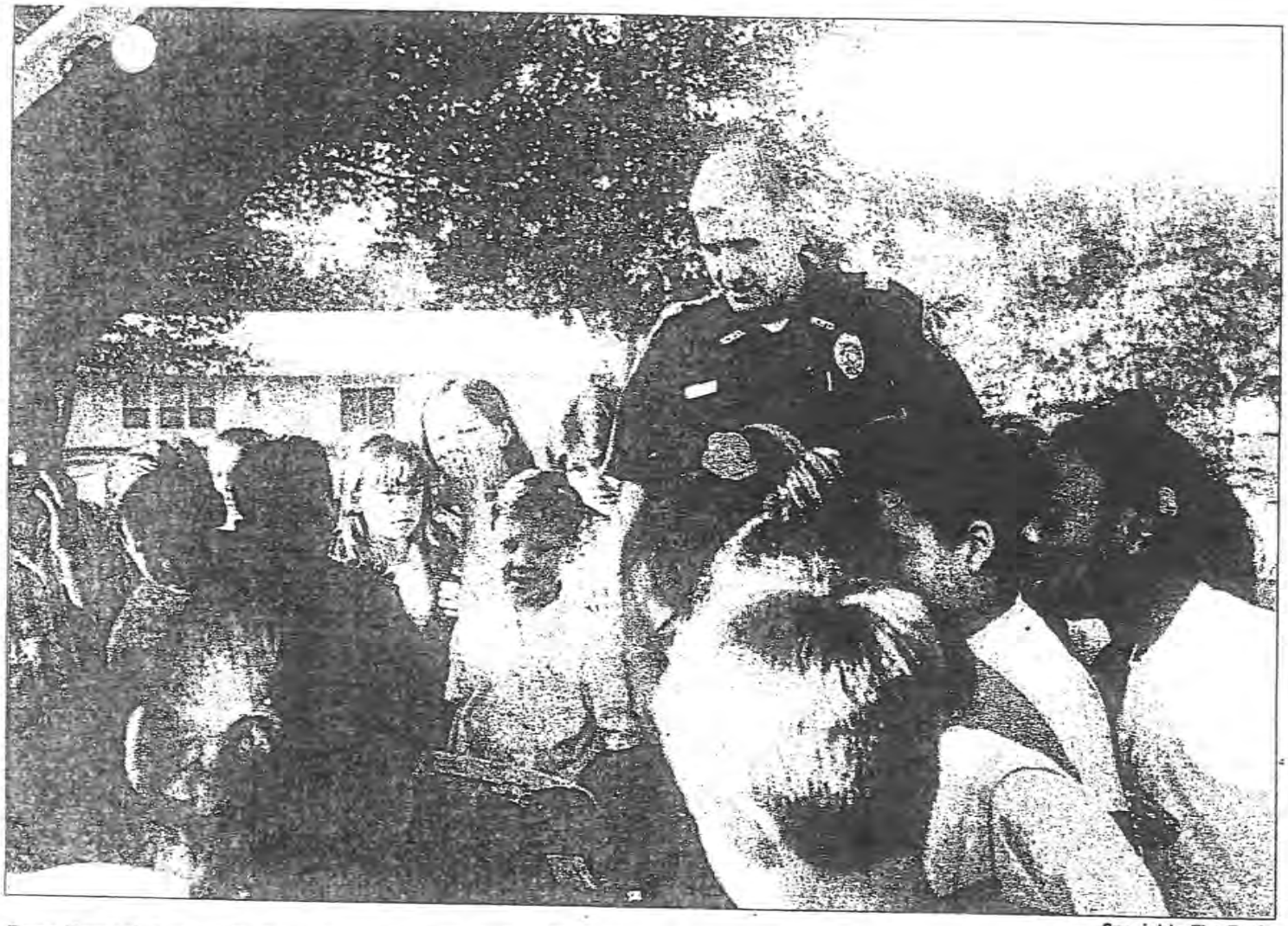

Byron Hancock has received many awards during his 12 years with the Bryan Police Department.

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states.

"Involvement in combat imposes a psychological burden that affects all combatants, not only those vulnerable to emotional disorders or those who sustain physical wounds," the task force reported. "Combat is a life-changing experience, imposing long-lasting emotional challenges for combatants."

It can wound the minds and disrupt the behavior of even the best service members, the group said.

Stigma is something Hancock said he dealt with personally. It took him about a year of denial to realize that he had a problem. He had always thought of post-traumatic stress sufferers as ranting homeless men unable to function in society.

"Hell, I never thought I'd have a problem," he said.

But he did.

His own story is embarrassing at times, he and his family acknowledge. But he wants it to be known — if only to inspire fellow troops to recognize their symptoms and get help. People also need to know about the inadequacies of the system.

"Most of us guys didn't even know there's a PTSD program," Hancock said of coming home from Iraq. "If people in the community can identify those signs of PTSD, at least they can maybe help a veteran get help.

"That's why I want this PTSD stuff to come out. People need to know if they're going to change things about it."

■ Craig Kapitan's e-mail address is craig.kapitan@theeagle.com.

Facts about PTSD

■ In any year, 5.2 million Americans have PTSD.

— *National Institutes of Health*

■ An estimated 7.8 percent of Americans will experience PTSD at some point in their lives.

— *National Center for PTSD fact sheet*

■ About half of people who develop PTSD get better at some time. But about one-third of people who develop PTSD always will have some symptoms.

— *National Center for PTSD fact sheet*

■ One in five people with PTSD-like symptoms say they might not get help because of what other people might think.

— *National Center for PTSD fact sheet*

■ One in three Iraq veterans and one in nine Afghanistan veterans will face a mental health issue like depression, anxiety or PTSD.

— *Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America report*

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Time in Iraq tests a Marine's limits

By CRAIG KAPITAN
Eagle Staff Writer

For six days, Sgt. Byron Hancock hunched on his belly, motionless in the shallow, soggy trench he and his partner had spent eight hours digging under the cover of night — surviving with little food and almost no sleep as he directed his focus through the high-powered scope of his M40A3 sniper rifle.

He tried not to think about the surprisingly cold winter that had hit Iraq's Al Anbar province — a dangerous region teeming with insurgents who had fled the battle of Fallujah a month earlier.

At night, it would be cold enough to freeze the rain that seeped into his hole. Go figure, the lifelong hunter thought when he allowed his mind to wander: Stuck in the middle of a desert with water up to my neck and experiencing the most bone-chilling weather of my life.

Hancock had fought in Fallujah, too, earning a war hero's reputation outside the battlefield when he made a 1,050-yard kill — touted by the military as the longest successful sniper [illegible] of the Iraq war. Now it was the

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Special to The Eagle photos

Top: Sgt. Byron Hancock walks on patrol outside Ramadi, Iraq. The patrols, up and down a series of villages next to the Euphrate[illegible]iver, would often last two or three days at a tim[illegible]
Above: In Iraq, Hancock was hurt once when an explosive was set off near his vehicle. Hancock did not immediately appear to be seriously hurt, although he and his family now wonder if it — and other explosions — could have contributed to traumatic brain injury.

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Burden

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Marine reservist's duty to patrol the countryside, finding suspected insurgents and gathering probable cause just like his days back home on the Bryan police force.

But this was different. It wasn't Texas.

The stakes were higher and the judgment — whether someone deserved to live or die — needed to be lightning quick. If he didn't strike, it could mean his own life or the lives of other troops. He'd seen it happen before. It gets to the point where, faced with constant danger, you accept your own potential death. But you never accept letting your fellow troops down.

In this case, the suspect was a teenager — 14, 15, 16 ... who knows — who had ridden his motorcycle day after day down a road commonly used by U.S. forces, always pausing suspiciously for a moment at the same spot before moving on. Hancock — positioned in his camouflaged nest roughly four football field lengths away — knew something was amiss, but he needed proof.

So he waited, motionless as the days passed, watching "the kid" develop a pattern.

Hancock had to get permission to extend his stay at his crude post. Eventually his commanders issued him an ultimatum — gather enough evidence to take action by the sixth day or head back. Then, at last, the suspect returned again. This time, Hancock watched through his scope as the boy dismounted his motorcycle and reached for what appeared to be a wire on the ground.

"That was it," Hancock recalled two years later.

Within seconds, the boy, whose face he had gotten to know, was dead with a gunshot wound to the head. Hancock began to pack up.

"I don't regret what I did," the 38-year-old father of four said of his service in Iraq as he sat outside a Veterans Affairs facility in Waco, where he was attending an intensive in-patient program for veterans struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder. "The hard part is putting all that behind you.

"One thing about it — it changes you forever."

Hours later, heavily armed U.S. forces would arrive at the spot where the boy lay to confirm the kill and sweep the road for mines. They found multiple improvised explosive devices — two on a bridge and several more about 300 yards back, where the insurgents had figured troops would fall back to before getting out of their vehicles, becoming more vulnerable.

"It would have been bad — that's for sure," Hancock said. "It would have killed a lot."

Hit: Baptism of fire

... At the start of operations in the city of Hit, Iraq, Sgt. Hancock observed more than 100 enemy insurgents occupying the key road intersection and engaged them with precision fires. He kept continuous observation on the enemy, reporting on enemy activity on the west side of the city.

Spotting 20 insurgents moving toward his left, attempting a flanking maneuver to dislodge the snipers, he engaged the insurgents, eliminating several while directing air support on the remaining enemy and disrupting their attack.

Later, he observed an enemy forward observer calling in mortar fire on the platoon's position. He engaged the insurgent with one round, striking him in the head and eliminating the enemy. As the team maneuvered under fire, he stayed in position to engage enemy machine gun positions raking his position with effective and sustained fire.

His timely tactical reporting inflicted numerous casualties on the enemy and shaped the battlefield for the fight into the city ...

—Text accompanying a Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal

Herbert "Byron" Hancock had little time to take in his surroundings when he and the fellow Marine reservists in 1st Battalion, 23rd Regiment "stepped foot on sand" in Iraq in August 2004 — 17 months into the ongoing conflict.

The respected Bryan police officer had re-enlisted in the Marine Corps Reserve after Sept. 11 and had already left his family and job behind once before to serve a tour of duty training snipers in South America. In 13 years of military service, he had garnered a reputation as an elite military sharpshooter, but he hadn't seen any real combat action.

Things might not be much different this time around, he initially thought.

"Going over there, you hear stories about how you're not going to be doing much of anything because you're a reservist," he explained. "That wasn't the case at all."

The Marines were at first sent to Al Asad Air Base — the largest U.S. encampment in western Iraq's predominantly Sunni Al Anbar province. The region shares borders with Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia and includes the Euphrates River, which has served as a route for foreign insurgents to hot spots such as Fallujah and Ramadi.

The province also includes Hit, a city of about 29,000 the company would soon become familiar with. That's where he was sent in early September and where he would eventually see his first action, after about 30 days of relatively quiet raids on homes and patrols along main supply routes outside the city.

Generally, Hancock recalled, the raids would be about a day late. And the roads they patrolled were relatively quiet because the insurgents knew they were there. But that didn't mean things were peaceful.

Suspected al-Qaida leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was rumored to be in the area at the time and U.S. forces stayed out of the city itself. When a caravan did get lost, roaming into the city on accident, it usually got pretty battered, Hancock recalled.

Then, in early October, a commander's convoy took a wrong turn and was hit with IEDs, killing several Marines. The commander decided it was time to find out what was going on inside the city.

"So they sent us in to investigate, and it turned out to be a hornet's nest," Hancock recalled. "It was just like a beehive."

As chief scout sniper, Hancock led four two-man sniper teams to the western edge of the city at about 5 a.m. on Oct. 10. The group thought they were going to be observing about 100 insurgents near Hit Traffic Circle One. Instead, he said, they encountered 800 to 1,000.

During the first morning, the snipers did what they had been doing all along — observed. But then they saw insurgents open fire on another lost convoy. At that point, Hancock realized, his team had to start engaging.

So began their first battle.

'You hear stories about how you're not going to be doing much ... because you're a reservist. That wasn't the case at all.'

Byron Hancock

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'I don't regret what I did. The hard part is putting all that behind you.'

Byron Hancock, Marine sniper

"This caught them by surprise," Hancock recalled of the exchange, explaining that the result of the fire was a "six-day battle that wasn't ever supposed to happen" in which "they hit us with everything they had."

It was the first time the group had met the enemy face to face, and they were pinned down with bullets whizzing by — "anxious, nervous, scared to death" and fighting off the shakes as they aimed their rifles. Hancock was no different, he admits.

"We're too spread out!" the troops were yelling at first in near-panicked voices. "We're too spread out!"

A corpsman further back would later compare the initial mayhem to the bombing of Baghdad. All hell was breaking loose, and it was Hancock's job to keep everybody on the battlefield calm.

"It was unnerving at the time, but I had to concentrate on what my job was," Hancock said. "You're just thinking about the men to your left and to your right."

Two days later, two Marines would be shot in the face during the engagement. But everybody made it out that day.

"We left over there [to Iraq] and I saw boys that were laughing and playing — they looked like high school kids," Hancock said, the camaraderie and fondness for his troops evident in his voice. "But after that first baptism of fire, they were young men — that's for sure. I tell you what, I was proud of them."

Marine officials had similar praise for Hancock.

Gunnery Sgt. Timothy Dowd, the platoon commander, described the battle in a Department of Defense document months later.

"From the start of the operation, I relied on Sgt. Hancock's recommendations bef[illegible] making any final tactical moves,' [illegible] wrote. "His knowledge and experience was an enormous asset and assisted the platoon in carrying the day."

After five days of "little rest and continued engagement," Hancock was the first to volunteer his team to redeploy to the front line," Dowd wrote.

"Sgt. Hancock's demeanor under intense fire was undaunted; he remained calm at a critical moment," he said. "Other teams relied on his example. I know that his actions inspired the teams on the line to remain calm and continue engaging the enemy."

Following the battle, Hancock had one day to rest and clean his gear back at Al Asad Air Base. The next day he was on a truck headed to a small Army base "about 10 clicks" — or kilometers — outside Fallujah.

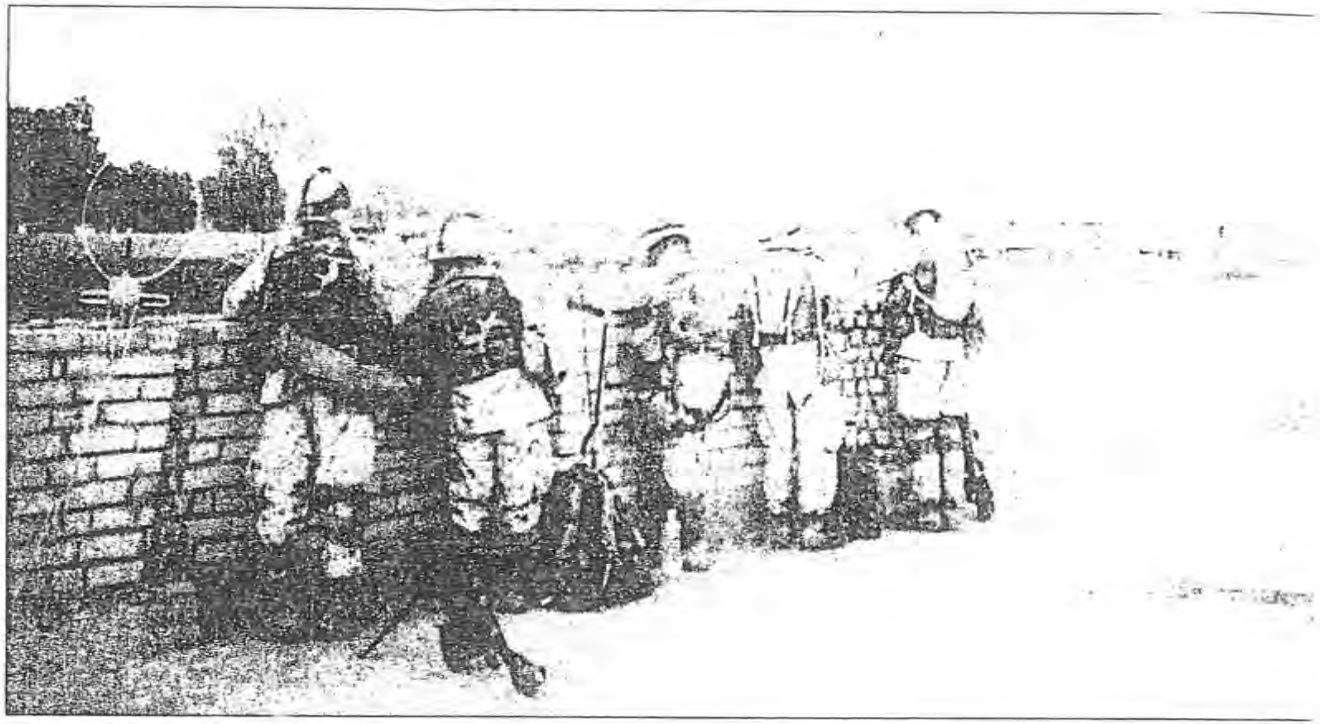
He was joining up with Task Force Wolf Pack, whose job it was to clear outlying villages — looking for insurgents and "basically closing the ring on them" as the military prepared for the invasion of Fallujah.

Every time they'd set up a vehicle checkpoint, they knew they'd have less than 40 minutes before insurgents would hone in on them and start firing mortars. Hancock recalls four or five times that mortars started dropping where they had been moments earlier.

Then, in early November, the battle for Fallujah formally began with Hancock's team serving as a "feint" — trying to attract insurgents' attention and aggression while other groups entered the city from another direction.

"This was the biggest operation I would have ever dreamed of," he said of Fallujah.

For 36 hours, the team was surrounded on all sides, fulfilling their duty as a decoy as they were mortared nonstop. Only half would be left by the time the operation was over.



Special to The Eag

Sgt. Byron Hancock (far right) and Cpl. Geoffrey Flowers, his spotter (second from right), look for targets and call in air strikes while positioned "across the [illegible]" from Fallujah. Th Euphrates River marks the city limits.

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Fallujah: [illegible] and death

... During [illegible]ration Al Fajr in Fallujah, Iraq, on 11 November 2004, while conducting combat operations to secure the Fallujah peninsula, Sgt. Hancock distinguished himself by neutralizing an enemy 120 mm mortar team preparing to fire at the company's command post and defensive positions.

This same mortar team was suspected of wounding four Marines with its persistent indirect fires the previous day. Demonstrating superb marksmanship skills, Sgt. Hancock engaged and killed two enemy mortarmen at ranges greater than 1,000 meters.

He then began suppressing two additional insurgents attempting to fire mortar. With the enemy suppressed, the company's 60 mm mortar section was able to effectively destroy the mortar tube and kill the remaining insurgents ...

— text accompanying a Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal

As a scout sniper, Hancock was trained to be a troop's "guardian angel" — looking out for ambushes with his 10-power rifle scope and firing off precision shots to intercede "before they got to the grunts."

During Fallujah, his role became more vital than ever.

"Our job was to bring the insurgents to attack us," he said of his unit's mission during the opening hours for the battle of Fallujah.

The city, known for being a hotbed of insurgent activity, had become infamous the previous spring when four U.S. contractors were killed and mutilated as a crowd watched. The military initially responded with Operation Vigilant Resolve, but troops were pulled back after engaging in intense urban warfare.

With the country's first elections scheduled for January 2005 — just two months away — U.S. commanders decided it was time to clear out the city of insurgents for good. Most of the approximately 300,000 residents evacuated the city, leaving an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 troops to move back into the city and battle anyone who stayed behind.

Above left: The battle for control of Fallujah began to wind down toward the end of November 2004. The first time children came out into the open, Hancock posed for a picture with them.

Special to The Eagle photos

Hancock was initially told his company would be there less than a week. But 18 days later, they were still fighting, he said. Those initial days were the most intense — surrounded on all sides and depending on adrenaline to stay awake.

"Scared shitless for six days," he put it bluntly while sitting outside the VA facility, explaining that he didn't have one wink of sleep during those initial days. "Yeah, it was intense. It was up close. It wasn't 900 yards away."

During the fight, Hancock recalled facing off against "every kind of Mus-

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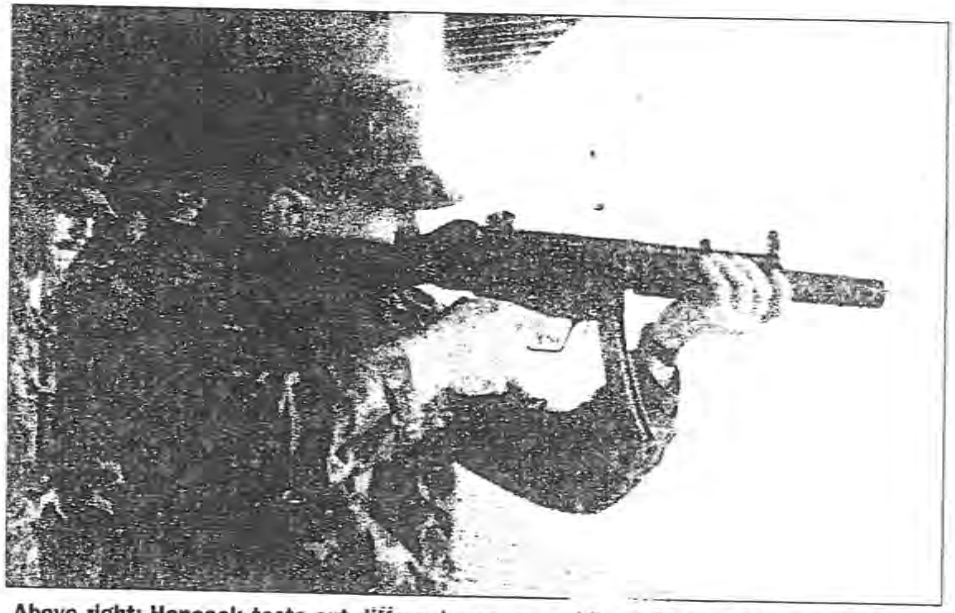

Above right: Hancock tests out different weapons while at Marine Sniper School in Quantico, Va.

Burden

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lim you could think of" — including a band of about 150 Chechens, indistinguishable in appearance from himself, who tried at one point to cut his unit off. Muslim countries from around the world sent their "freedom fighters" into the city, he said.

It was confusing guerrilla warfare, where an insurgent would shoot from a house filled with children, he said.

"It's kind of hard to fight against that," he said. "We didn't get a lot of time to rehearse. If you did something more than twice, they were going to adapt to it."

But his company pressed on day after day, "wreaking havoc" even as casualties caused their group to dwindle from four platoons to two. The responsibilities stayed the same, so as the numbers decreased, each remaining troop's duties increased. Hancock would accompany the men on nearly every patrol.

Throughout the hardships were moments of inspiration, Hancock pointed out when prodded to discuss his time in Fallujah.

Not getting reinforcements after casualties brought out the best in troops, he said. He recalled one Marine who found his way back to the battle — without even a weapon — two days after an IED blasted him what seemed like 40 feet in the air.

As the medical evacuation team was hauling him away on the helicopter, the Marine stopped breathing and everybody thought he was dead, Hancock recalled. But after waking up in the hospital, he went AWOL so he could return to do his part.

"It was just amazing," Hancock said of the young Marines. "If they could still walk, then they stayed with the unit."

Although Hancock likes to direct attention to the feats of others, it was a single [illegible] yard shot he took while on a Fallujah rooftop that is likely to be ingrained into the history of the

Described by the Marines as "one for the history books," it was deemed the longest-range kill of the war. *Army Field Manual 3-06.11* describes the "typical range" for a sniper attack as 300 to 600 meters with medium-caliber rifles. It states that shots from 800 to 1,000 meters are the exception. No mention is made of targets hit farther than that.

The shot had been one among many kills during the battle, Hancock and Cpl. Geoffrey Flowers, his spotter, recalled to an enlisted writer in December 2004. They had spent much of their time looking for insurgents who were firing mortars from across the Euphrates River, and during a one-day period they were able to take out seven spotters, they said.

Later in the fight, after the Iraqis had held elections, it would be necessary to gather as much probable cause as possible before engaging an enemy. But in Fallujah, circumstances were different. There, it was known that if someone was hanging around watching you, they were up to something that would probably put your life in danger.

"It seemed like everybody was shooting at us," Hancock told the military writer, who noted his "syrupy Texas drawl." "If they fired at us we just dropped them."

It didn't take long to track down and eliminate the unlucky group of insurgents who would end up on the wrong end of his record shot. The group had been slinging mortars at troops for about two days, so with orders to track them down, the duo found a building top and began scanning an area across the river.

"I shot and [the first insurgent] dropped," Hancock recalled to the military writer. "Right in front of him another got up on his knees looking to try and find out where we were, so I dropped him, too. After that, our mortars just hammered the position, so we moved around in on them."

After his shots, the jarring blasts ceased — at least from that location.

When they finally left the tattere city, Hancock slept for two day straight. But as was common during

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At Scout Sniper School in Quantico, Va., Byron Hancock was taught the sniper skills that a decade later would help him survive his tour of duty in Iraq.

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'When a man goes to war, you get exposed to a lot of things. ... It messes with you mentally.'

Arthur Bettis, Vietnam veteran

tle time for rest. On the third day, he was sent to Ramadi.

"They wanted to keep pressure on the insurgents," he said. "After Fallujah, that's when it became a game of cat and mouse."

A warrior's burden

Looking back on his experience in Iraq, Hancock said Fallujah is the point where he started to become "numb to any feelings."

"It just didn't matter anymore," he said. "I had a job to do and I was going to do it."

In a way, he said, the motions became comfortable. It was what he was trained to do. And even though they didn't talk about their stresses on the battlefield, Hancock got support from his comrades in the form of respect for a job well done.

"Then you're back here and you don't have that support and you're by yourself," he said, explaining that in a strange way, the hell of combat had morphed into his comfort zone.

It's a feeling of despair many veterans know well.

Bryan resident Arthur Bettis, who served as an Army construction engineer and mine sweeper during Vietnam, realized he had a problem during the 1970s when he divorced his second wife.

His first marriage had lasted about a year after combat. His second, 3½ years.

"This is not normal," the then-Washington, D.C., police officer told himself after an 83-year-old man talked him out of killing his second wife. He was bitter and didn't know how to control his feelings, and if it wasn't for that man he'd probably be in prison today, he said.

Bettis counted every minute of his one-year, one-month and seven-day tour of duty. But then for many years after he made it out alive, he didn't care if he lived or died.

"When a man goes to war, you get exposed to a lot of things you've never seen in your life. It messes with you mentally," he said. "You sleep, you constantly think about Vietnam."

These days, the 60-year-old grandfather attends three PTSD classes a week that are offered by the VA's College Station outpatient clinic — at 11 a.m., 1 p.m. and 3:30 p.m. every Thursday. He attends an additional group session hosted once a month at the local Veterans of Foreign Wars post.

As a service officer for the American Legion and vice president of the local Vietnam Veterans of America chapter, he does what he can to reach out to other veterans who he suspects might be wrestling with PTSD. And he speaks out for increasing the number of classes that are offered.

The group at the VA — mostly Korean War and Vietnam veterans, but some troops who have returned from Iraq and Afghanistan — varies in number from session to session. Sometimes there's 15. Other times there's 40. Many people don't speak up, he said. But it helps to listen.

"When you're in a group, they know what you've experienced," he explained. "It sort of eases your mind when you discuss it with people who know where you're coming from."

Pat Patterson also works with veterans — as a counselor for the Texas Veterans Commission — and he also knows what it means to cope with PTSD. He dropped out of the ninth grade to join the Marine Corps — where he spent 10 years as an enlisted man and 10 as an officer — and now has a shadow-box hanging in his office full of combat action and other type ribbons to show for it.

When Patterson left the military and got a degree from Texas A&M University in 2004, he initially intended to start his civilian life as a teacher. He found the Veterans Commission after realizing his teaching aspirations didn't mesh with his short temper and other post-traumatic stress symptoms.

"We service people are warriors — we do what we are told to do," he explained. "If we're told to go out and take someone out, that's fine. I do not know if politically we are doing the right thing. I know that my country says, 'Go here and do this,' so that's what I do."

In combat, he said, it's easier to go about one's job, reminding oneself: "That's the enemy."

"But in those quiet moments of the night, you think that guy was certainly somebody's son, possibly somebody's husband and possibly somebody's father," he said. "As someone who is a son, a husband and a father, it makes you pause and think.

"That child doesn't know the political environment. The only thing that child knows is someone murdered that father, and you're the murderer. We're still friggin' human. We're not robots. We still think of these things. And some people can deal with it better than others."

During his service, Patterson was an artillery officer, where he said his bombs were long-distance. But for Hancock and other snipers, he pointed out, it's "up close and personal."

"You know that you've just killed that man — that son, father, husband — and he's not going back home," he said. "We're not asking for accolades or medals or ribbons. The only thing that vets who come back who have problems dealing with the emotional issues ask for is a little bit of assistance."

For Hancock, the psychological stresses of war were already starting to manifest themselves.

What killed him, he said, was having to go back to the rear for a day — relatively out of danger but where he could think about his family and what he had at stake. There were times he wouldn't call home for a week, because it was tougher talking to his loved ones than not talking at all.

"At first, I was so scared of getting shot or killed," he said. "After awhile, you become accustomed to getting mortared, shot at. You come back [home] and everything's still the same as when you left, but you're not the same.

"I'm not looking for a handout. I just want to function again like I used to. That's the big thing."

Ramadi: Cat and mouse

For three months, Hancock kept to the outskirts of Ramadi — a city of about 400,000 that neighbors Fallujah in a path carved out of the desert by the Euphrates River — and began to hunt.

His quick reaction force, which had taken over for an Army brigade twice its size, was tasked with sweeping through a 14-mile stretch along the river that contained about six outlying villages. They were to clear the area of insurgents who had mixed with the population after fleeing the battle for Fallujah.

"They would just move in and take over a village," Hancock said of the enemy fighters. "They blended right in. The only way you could tell they were insurgents was the way they'd

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look at you. They'd just stare at you."

Detecting them and gathering enough probable cause to use force became a matter of constant patrols — sometimes all-day runs with grunts to get the feel of a village, then nighttime outings in which just he and Flowers would find a proper spot to set up a nest, blending into the landscape. He probably patrolled 50 miles on foot with Flowers in December alone, he estimates.

If townspeople wouldn't greet the troops during the daytime patrols, Hancock knew something was amiss and he needed to come back, he said. The insurgents would use terror tactics to control the village, he said, explaining that no one would come forward to say the town had been infiltrated.

"If you were patient, you could find them pretty easy," he said of the hiding insurgents.

Easy can be a subjective word, though. Like the stakeout of the teenage motorcyclist, for Hancock that sometimes meant days of motionless observation.

He was happy it was winter, even though they had to weather "hellacious storms" that left them wet for days straight, freezing rain and the worst cold of his life. At least it was better than the summer, he said, when the staggering 140-degree heat made it necessary to cut missions shorter to avoid dehydration.

In some places they would find five insurgents. Other times there would be 20 to 30. It wasn't like Fallujah, he said, recalling a five-person cell he encountered during that time period. He ended up eliminating four of them, but slowly — over a period of three weeks.

"Basically, what we were doing is hunting them," he said. "Go out, sit four or five days trying to find out where they're shooting mortars from and take them out. We went out and started hunting."

It was during that time period when he first started noticing insurgents sending o enagers to do the dirty work.

But there are happy memories as well, he said, explaining that once insurgents were cleared from an area the mood would instantly change among residents. As someone who became a police officer because he liked helping people, these occasions are some of his best memories, he said.

"They'd invite us into their home, give us dinner, slap us on the back," he said.

Several weeks after the Jan. 30, 2005, elections that U.S. officials declared a success, Hancock and fellow task force troops were put on a truck. Surely, they thought, they were finally going to get a break from the front lines before their tour in Iraq ended in March.

But the truck instead turned back toward Hit, where they were sure to encounter more resistance.

"Damn," Hancock remembered thinking, exhausted.

One more job (back in Hit)

During his first assignment outside Hit, when he was still untested in combat, Hancock recalled "taking a couple potshots" from an insurgent who he could tell had some kind of sniper training.

"I told everybody, 'Look, we've got a trained sniper embedded in the city,'" he said. "But I never saw him. We couldn't ever find him."

Now Hancock was back, and two Marines had been killed by the sniper.

Byron Hancock lays in a soggy sniper hole dug during the cold winter in Iraq's Al Anbar province. "I've never been so miserable in my life," Hancock would later recall, explaining that he had to buy his own gloves at t post exchange.

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Things were different now. He had seen plenty of action since then, including the day they returned to Hit — this time forgoing the outskirts for the center of the city. They arrived in the middle of the night, with insurgents unknowingly sleeping in buildings next to them.

"When they woke up the next morning, we were there," Hancock recalled with slight grin. "RPGs flying everywhere — it was crazy."

They started at one end of the city and worked their way to the other. The idea, he said, was to clear the city of insurgent activity before handing control over to the unit that would replace them.

Hancock estimated the enemy sniper and about 15 or 20 of his "insurgent buddies" were able to control the city through fear and random shootings. He was causing more damage than anybody else. Military intelligence knew he had been trained in Syria, but that was about it.

It was one of the first times an insurgent sniper had felt confident enough to come after Marine snipers, Hancock said.

After about a day back in Hit, Hancock heard a single shot in the distance. He knew what it was.

"It's the dag-gum sniper," he told himself.

The best weapon against a sniper is another sniper. So Hancock went to work.

"Once I figured out who it was ... my job was to hunt him down and reduce that threat," he said. "He was hunting me and I was hunting him."

It was obvious to Hancock and his new observer when the enemy sniper was going to come out. The streets would suddenly be barren of pedestrians.

The two were trying to "smoke him out" and finally they had a bit of luck — they lured him into taking a shot at them. They had his position. The next morning at about 8 a.m., Hancock spotted a glimmer of light. He recognized the glint — the sniper's scope. One shot was fired at a Marine and that's when Hancock squeezed his own trigger.

About an hour later, he watched from afar as six men in black garb dragged the body away.

It would be his last of nine confirmed kills and roughly 30 "possible kills" during his eight months in Iraq.

After that, he said, "people came out in the street, treating us like kings, just happy to see us."

"It was like night and day," he said, recalling one townsperson who told him the whole city was rejoicing. "We didn't have any trouble after that. They told us where all the ammo caches were."

One such cache, buried in a backyard, consisted of 3,000 rounds of artillery shells, often used to make IEDs, and anti-aircraft guns.

That joy and celebration of the townspeople is the way Hancock wants to remember Iraq. Sometimes, when he's able to keep the nightmares at bay, it actually is the way he remembers it.

"Your average Iraqi — they're just normal people," he said, blaming the troubles on outsiders from places like Syria and Iran. "They want the same thing as us.

"They just want to live free."

Craig Kapitan's e-mail address is craig.kapitan@theeagle.com.

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A new challenge awaits Hancock

The Long Road Home
A four-part series

SUNDAY: Byron Hancock, a respected Bryan police officer and Iraq war hero, never thought he'd suffer from PTSD. It would nearly destroy him.
MONDAY: In combat for the first time, Hancock carries a sniper's burden.
TODAY: Hancock faces a battle at home — against an overwhelmed, unyielding system.
WEDNESDAY: Back in Bryan, Hancock repairs his family life and reaches out to others like himself.

By CRAIG KAPITAN
Eagle Staff Writer

Two weeks after suffering an intense flashback in which he was convinced he slit a man's throat, Bryan police Officer Byron Hancock was missing — sleeping on the side of the road and afraid to go home.

He wasn't on the run. The murder had been a figment of his imagination — he knew that now — and administrators at the Waco-based Veterans Affairs lockdown facility that he willingly checked himself into had let him go.

Return to the Temple facility in a week, they told him, if you want to stay on the waiting list for the intensive post-traumatic stress disorder program.

Ashamed, frightened and embarrassed by what he had put his family through, the former Marine Reserve sniper thought he was doing his wife and four children a favor by hitting the road — spending the week in solitude as he traveled to Carson City, Nev., and back on his Harley-Davidson motorcycle.

This way they wouldn't even know he was gone, he thought. They'd be better off.

But his wife did find out. And she was frantic.

"How could you do this?" Kristi Hancock asked workers at the facility, reminding them that just weeks earlier her husband experienced an episode in which he had lost touch with reality — making what she described to them as suicidal and homicidal statements. Furthermore, the Iraq war hero was a weapons expert who had

Eagle photos/Stuart Villanueva

Decorated Marine sniper Byron Hancock has faced an uphill battle with post-traumatic stress disorder since returning from Iraq. Just dealing with Veterans Affairs paperwork is an arduous task.

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'If I'm not the same when I get back, you need to tell me.'

Byron Hancock, to his wife, Kristi, before he left for Iraq

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Home

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easy access to firearms.

Did they not even care about helping him get better?

Begrudgingly, it seemed to Kristi, officials eventually saw her point and reported Byron Hancock's disappearance to VA police, who in turn put the word out to other agencies across Texas.

He showed up at the Temple facility a week later, as instructed — bewildered as to why workers there seemed to be mad at him.

His family was angry, too, but not at Byron. They were disgusted with a bureaucracy that at every turn seemed to not have the slightest interest in helping their husband, father and son get the help he had finally summoned the courage to request.

It had been two years since he came home from Iraq — almost a year since he realized he needed help — and it seemed he had yet to catch a break from the system.

'Complacency kills'

A large portion of troops returning from war zones encounter problems acclimating back to society, according to various studies. The Department of Veteran Affairs' National Center for PTSD estimates the percentage of Iraq war veterans coping with the disorder to be between 12 and 20 percent.

A recent report by a Department of Defense task force states that 38 percent of soldiers and 31 percent of Marines reported PTSD symptoms during another study. In the National Guard, 49 percent reported problems.

For many of those people, the symptoms — which can include jumping at loud noises such as car backfires, feeling the need to carry a gun at all times and nightmares — fade within weeks or months.

But for others, like Hancock, the symptoms only get worse if not addressed with therapy. In worst-case scenarios, they can lead to broken families, homelessness or suicide.

Hancock's last of 40 or so kills was an insurgent sniper who had engaged him in a deadly game of cat-and-mouse — as anxious to eliminate Hancock as the Marine was to kill him.

"Complacency kills," he would read over and over again on warning signs posted at military bases there.

Days after the cat-and-mouse game, he was back at a military staging area in Twentynine Palms, Calif. — no longer in danger and not quite sure how to handle himself.

"In combat, your survival depends on being aware at all times of your surroundings and reacting immediately to sudden changes," U.S. Army Lt. Col. Carl Castro explains in *Battlemind*, a training video by the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research intended for troops who have just returned from combat.

"Back home, you may continue to be hypervigilant, and even though there's no longer a patrol to go on, you may still feel keyed up or anxious," Castro says. "It takes some time for your body and mind to settle back down. It takes time for you to learn to relax."

In one of the video's re-enactments, "Jake" has been staying up night after night, watching TV instead of going to bed and then drinking to help him sleep. When he does fall asleep, he wakes up in a sweaty panic, remembering a friend who died in combat. If this is you, the video warns, you might need help.

Although a fictional generalized character, Jake's experience could have been a mirror to Hancock's own homecoming.

Returning to California wasn't too bad, Hancock said.

"The problem was when I came home [to Texas], they didn't teach us how to sit in your living room two weeks later," he said. "I felt more in control in those high-tension situations.

"At first you're just so glad to be here and be alive. Then, after awhile — it took about two months — it got to where I couldn't sleep."

'Just angry'

It started with headaches. Then, the nightmares followed.

Byron Hancock went back to work with the police department in July 2005 and soon found himself waking up seven, eight, sometimes 10 times a night.

"He didn't tell me for a long time he was having the nightmares," said his wife.

But she knew, she said, explaining that he would toss and turn and call out in his sleep.

Soon, Hancock began sleeping in his recliner while watching war movies. Kristi would complain. To appease her, he'd stay in bed until she fell asleep. Then he'd move to the floor.

It was more comfortable for his back, he'd tell his wife in the morning. He had gotten used to sleeping on the hard ground while deployed, he'd say. But Kristi knew part of the reason was wanting to stay uncomfortable so that he could wake up more easily from the nightmares.

He also would go days just snacking. He was afraid if he ate a big meal he would get tired.

Before Byron Hancock departed for Iraq in August 2004, he left an instruction with his wife: "If I'm not the same when I come back here, then you need to tell me." While he was deployed, Kristi Hancock had read about post-traumatic stress disorder.

She thought she was prepared. But despite what seems obvious in hindsight, she didn't initially catch the signs. Like many veterans coping with PTSD, Byron also wasn't ready to admit it yet.

"You feel so stupid when you finally realize it — that he was keeping himself awake," Kristi said. "It wasn't sudden. In hoping for the best, you let a lot of signs go past you before you know what they are."

Byron Hancock was having trouble in the daytime, too.

At his job, he was able to put on a front as he focused all his energy on being a good police officer. He stayed busy, and it kept the symptoms at bay.

But he hated days off.

"Eventually, I just poured everything I was into work," he said, explaining that he even started taking more and more off-duty security jobs — not so much for the money but as a way to fill the time. On his days off, though, he couldn't avoid his situation.

"I would just sit here in this living room," he said. "Just sit, all day long. I didn't care if I took a bath or did the dishes or clothes — it didn't matter.

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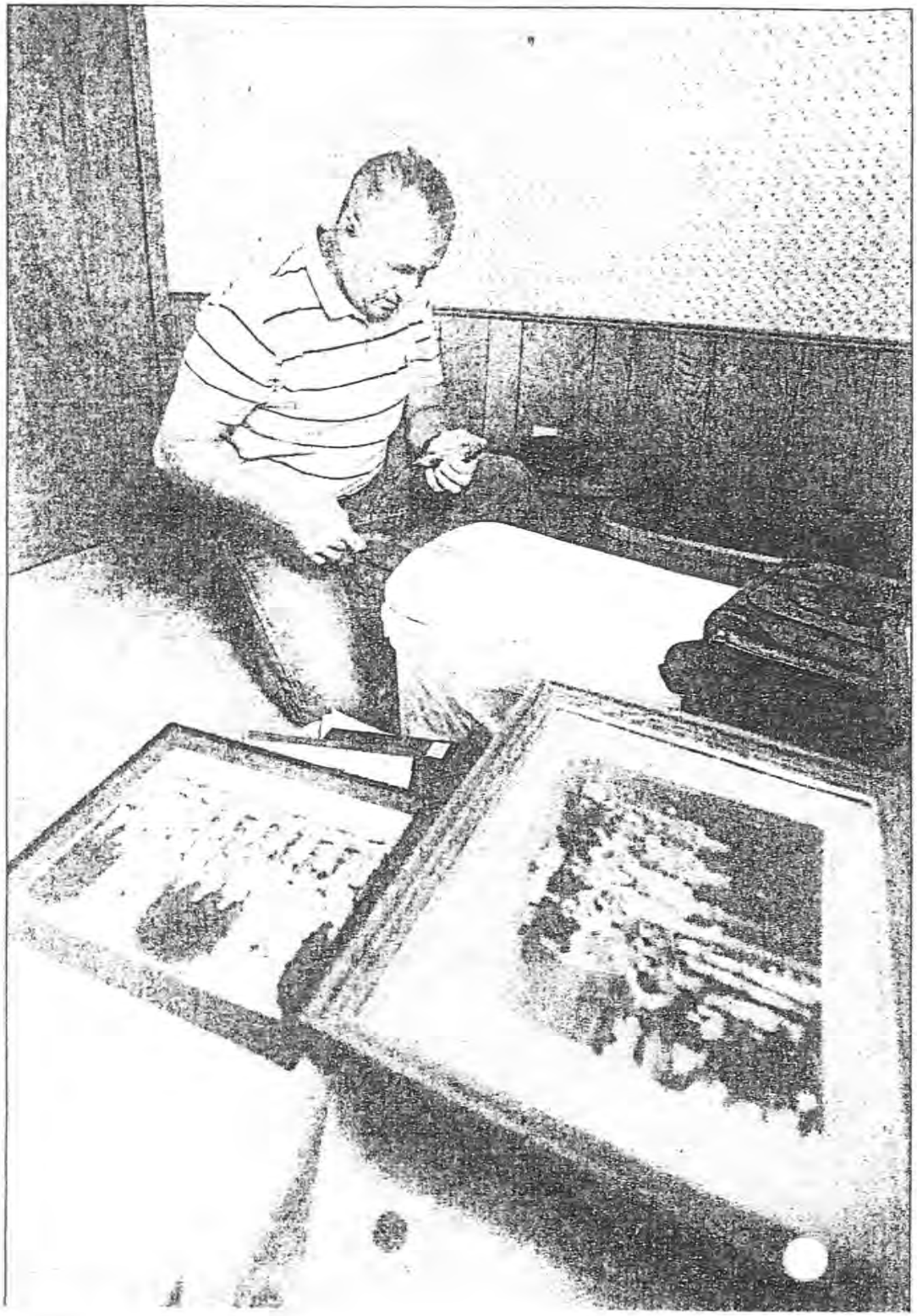

Left: Decorated war hero Byron Hancock started seeking help for post-traumatic stress disorder in January 2006 — 10 months after returning from Iraq. He, along with his family, still are coming to terms with the disease.

Eagle photo
Stuart Villanueva

It got to where I didn't want to leave the house. And I never knew there was anything wrong with me."

He also began drinking. At first, it was because he realized a drink would help him sleep a little longer — maybe a couple of hours — without dreaming. But then it got to the point, he said, when he would drink all day while at home just to keep the flashbacks at bay.

It was undoubtedly the nighttime — trapped in his own mind as he slept — that was the worst. Once, when Kristi tried to wake him from a nightmare, he instinctively grabbed for her neck, yelling, before realizing where he was and quickly letting go. He would usually wake up the next day more tired and depressed than before, his wife said.

"No sleep. Angry all the time," Byron Hancock said. "I didn't know what I was ever angry about — just angry."

He also continued to feel "keyed up," which he compared to the uneasy adrenaline rush one has after nearly avoiding an auto accident. For him, however, the adrenaline rush didn't subside.

Kristi Hancock viewed her husband's behavior a little differently.

"He doesn't believe anybody's completely safe," she said. "He worried constantly about what everybody was doing. He just lived in fear.

"He says anger, but if you'd see his face, you'd see fear."

And it wasn't just anger and fear that were heightened, she said. Her husband had always been kind and gentle and slow to get angry. He was also the stereotypical stoic Texan — never one to wear his emotions on his sleeve. Now the Marine was suddenly responding to sappy movies.

"He'd be incredibly almost giddy at times," she said. "Every emotion he had seemed to be way over the top."

Within the first few months back home, Byron Hancock's frustation got to the point where he wanted to go back to Iraq.

"I couldn't function here," he said.

Three unmarried men in his platoon had done just that, each telling him, "Byron, I just can't make it here."

"Good guys. Good Marines," he said of the men. "[They] came back here and just couldn't."

Meanwhile, he said, at least five friends from Task Force Wolf Pack — a unit in which he served during part of his tour of duty — had committed suicide. Almost everybody had divorced and most, it seemed, had developed alcohol dependencies.

Sometimes Hancock wondered if it would have been better for his family if he had died in Iraq "in a blaze of glory" — a war hero and the father they once remembered.

But he had once promised his children he wouldn't go back, so when his enlistment ended, he agreed he was done.

Kristi Hancock compared the transformation of her husband to a time when she was forced to watch a relative slowly die of cancer.

"It was like we e watching him waste away," si. said. "He was killing the person that he used to be."

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Every o[illegible]n awhile, though, she would see the old Byron peek through, and it would give her hope.

'Grasping at straws'

"I'm having some stress," Byron Hancock finally conceded to his wife in January 2006, 10 months after returning home from Iraq and four months before his enlistment with the Marine Reserve was to end.

He was still dismissive of the idea that the stress had anything to do with PTSD — but the medical care was free so why not get it checked out, he said.

Their first interactions with Veterans Affairs would be indicative of the year that was to follow, they said.

Hancock was directed to a VA facility in Houston. Two months and two trips later, he was told there had been a mistake. Most men in his unit were from the Houston area, and so an assumption had been made somewhere along the line that he was as well. But in reality, he was told, he belonged at the College Station VA Outpatient Clinic.

He had been going to the wrong place.

Hancock's issues weren't just anxiety. His eyes would crack and bleed, he had irritable bowel syndrome, he now needed hearing aids and he had problems with his feet and knees — all conditions that developed while fighting in Iraq. They were ailments he initially ignored, figuring they would eventually fade.

But when they were brought to the VA's attention, it became a waiting game as the Hancocks were told to fill out forms and then more forms.

"They just kind of glaze over the top unless someone says they're going to kill themselves or someone else," Kristi said.

With still no progress by April 2006, the couple decided to take matters into their own hands — using their civilian health insurance to start addressing some of the physical problems with their doctor at Scott & White Hospital.

By this time, Kristi said, she suspected PTSD and began discussing it with Byron's father. But Byron's gut instinct was to blame everybody else for his bad moods, she said.

With still no help in sight for his "stress" issues, Hancock began making a three-hour drive to San Antonio on a weekly basis to see a private psychologist for $150 an hour. The VA had offered to pay for a psychologist of his choosing, but not until his claim was processed and he was labeled "disabled."

It didn't take long for the psychologist to break it down for him: This was post-traumatic stress and he needed to begin working toward coping with it.

Finally, with her convincing, Hancock agreed. But the weekly visits to San Antonio were too infrequent and too expensive. After about six months, he gave up. He needed daily therapy, the psychologist said.

Meanwhile, he was still attempting to work within the VA system — meeting once in September with a

Below: Byron Hancock receives his certificate during the police academy graduation ceremony.

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primary-care physician from Waco via a 15-minute teleconference. The doctor prescribed three medications and said he needed a follow-up visit in two weeks to check on his progress. But when Hancock went to sign up for the next appointment, VA officials told him the waiting list was three months long.

The anxiety pills didn't work, he said, but they did succeed in making him drowsy, which was still one of his worst fears. Soon after, their own doctor would express dismay that he had been put on multiple anxiety and depression medications while unsupervised. If the VA wasn't going to do it, the doctor said, he insisted that Byron meet with him on a weekly basis to monitor the drugs' effects.

The Hancocks paid for the pills out of their own pocket, still waiting for the official government disability designation.

"We were just keeping our heads above water, basically," Kristi Hancock recalled, explaining that by November 2006 things started to get even worse. "That's when everything really came to a head. His attitude and his depression were so bad."

"Maybe I have a brain tumor," Byron wondered aloud to his wife, trying to come up with an explanation for his radical change in personality.

Later, Kristi would realize that November was the anniversary of the battle for Fallujah — one of the most intense fights of the war, which Hancock was involved in from the beginning. It was also the month that Marines celebrated the Corps' birthday, and he was getting calls from old buddies, dredging up memories he had tried to bury.

Eventually, Byron Hancock began to wonder if alcohol might be the problem.

"I think we wanted it to be alcoholism," Kristi said. "This is a lot more difficult."

With the police department's blessing, he took sick leave for all of December and booked himself at the Starlight Recovery Center in the Hill Country, which his private-practice therapist helped pick out. The 12-step program for alcoholics has plenty of introspection, and at the facility he might be able to use the down time to deal with his stress, they figured. Without help from Veterans Affairs, it might be the next-best option.

"We were grasping at straws at that point," Kristi said. "Any facility that would take him and care for him is what he needed. I think it bought us some time — that was the most important thing."

In the end, Byron Hancock had no complaints about the program. He started to feel like he was addressing some issues and was finding people he could relate to. But he was still waking up in the middle of the night — once running down the stairs at the facility in the middle of an intense dream.

They were treating the symptom and not the real problem, and a short time after returning home in January, things were the same.

"We're still processing your

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claim," the frequent letters from the VA said.

And then, at the end of February, it all came to a screeching halt. His attempts to cope with the condition on his own had failed.

Broken system

Unfortunately, the Hancocks' frustrations with an overburdened system are not unique, politicians, advocacy groups and even a commission appointed by the president have said.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs is a massive entity with a $73.2 billion annual budget and nearly 250,000 employees that in 2006 served 5.5 million veterans. In 2005, 370,000 veterans received PTSD-related services and treatment from the system.

Only the Department of Defense — charged with providing PTSD treatment and other medical care to active duty troops — is bigger when it comes to government agencies.

"Under the best circumstances, the entire system smoothly joins forces to provide exactly what is needed, precisely when it is needed," stated the President's Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors — a group headed by former Kansas Sen. Bob Dole and former health and human services secretary Donna Shalala.

But the group, which issued its report last month, also said the Defense Department and VA health systems are "sometimes overly complex," they can "impede efficient care" and "frustrate some service members and their families."

The group recommended "fundamental changes in care management" — including making medical files more accessible between the two departments, rushing to hire more mental health workers and revising the "complicated disability rating processes" that have left veterans like Hancock in a stalling pattern for months as they wait for treatment.

If a veteran's disability rating decision is appealed, the commission pointed out, it takes the VA an average of 657 days to resolve the case.

The suggested changes require "a sense of urgency and strong leadership," the group said, echoing the sentiments of a Department of Defense task force that had issued a report on mental health care a month earlier.

"The Task Force arrived at a single finding underpinning all others: The Military Health System lacks the fiscal resources and the fully-trained personnel to fulfill its mission to support psychological health," it said in a report issued in June.

That has been true during times of peace, but it rings especially true now, the group said, when two "signature injuries" have emerged from the war in Iraq — PTSD and traumatic brain injury.

One of the main obstacles to fixing the system in recent years has been funding, U.S. Rep. Chet Edwards said. Congress, he said, has now placed a priority on changing that.

In a recent radio address, Edwards blamed the Bush administration and Republican congressional budgets for letting veterans' health care slide as a priority in recent years. However, both sides of the aisle in the House overwhelmingly voted recently to approve $6.7 billion in additional funding for next fiscal year — the largest funding increase the VA has seen in its 77-year history.

The budget still is pending in the Senate.

The Waco-based Democrat — who serves as chairman of the House Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Subcommittee, which assembled the budget — represented the sprawling Fort Hood military base before his district was redrawn to include the Bryan-College Station area instead. His support of veterans has been a linchpin of his bids for re-election.

If approved by the Senate, the new budget should add more than 1,100 case workers as well as a $71 million additional investment in substance abuse services and $604 million more for new mental health initiatives.

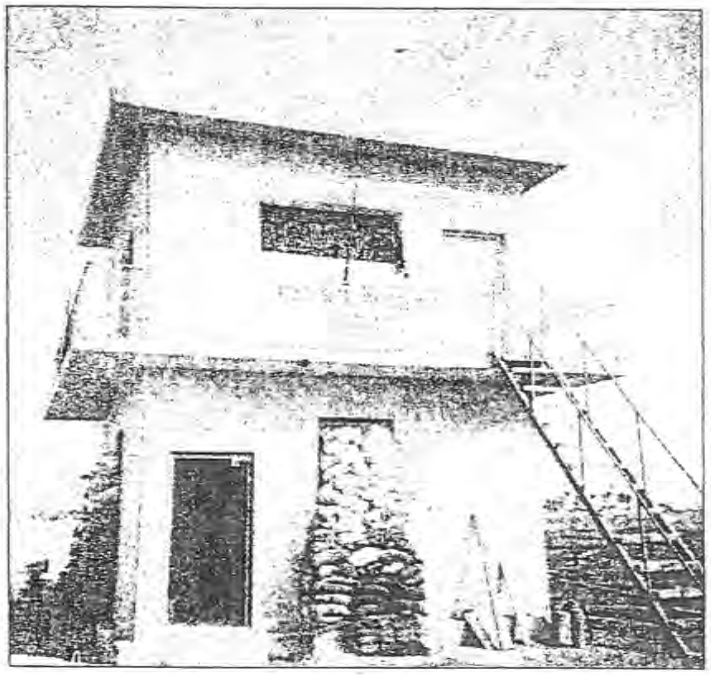
"Veterans shouldn't have to wait six months to have their cases completed," Edwards said, referring to the average wait time. "That's intolerable."

Generally, Edwards added, the VA workforce is "very dedicated and hard-working." But it is overwhelmed, he said, and shortages in funding and staff are to blame.

Now that Congress is working to do its part, he said, "the VA has to make the system simpler and more veteran-friendly so that families don't have to struggle so hard to obtain the benefits they've earned."

Congress has taken a huge step, but until the Senate passes it, "it's just funding in words, basically," said Todd Bowers, who serves as director of government affairs for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America — which bills itself as the largest group for veterans of the two conflicts.

More attention also needs to be focused on suicide prevention, he said, pointing to a recent study on suicides among active service members. There have been 118 suicides involving troops in Iraq. That's about 2.7 percent of all troops who have been killed as a result of the war, he said.



Above, left: Signs constantly remind troops in Iraq that "complacency kills. When they return home, however, they are expected to set aside the vigilance an "learn to relax" again.

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"If there was a weapon the enemy was using in Iraq that claimed 118 lives, we would be pulling out every effort to combat that threat," he said. "I don't think we've seen the same reaction."

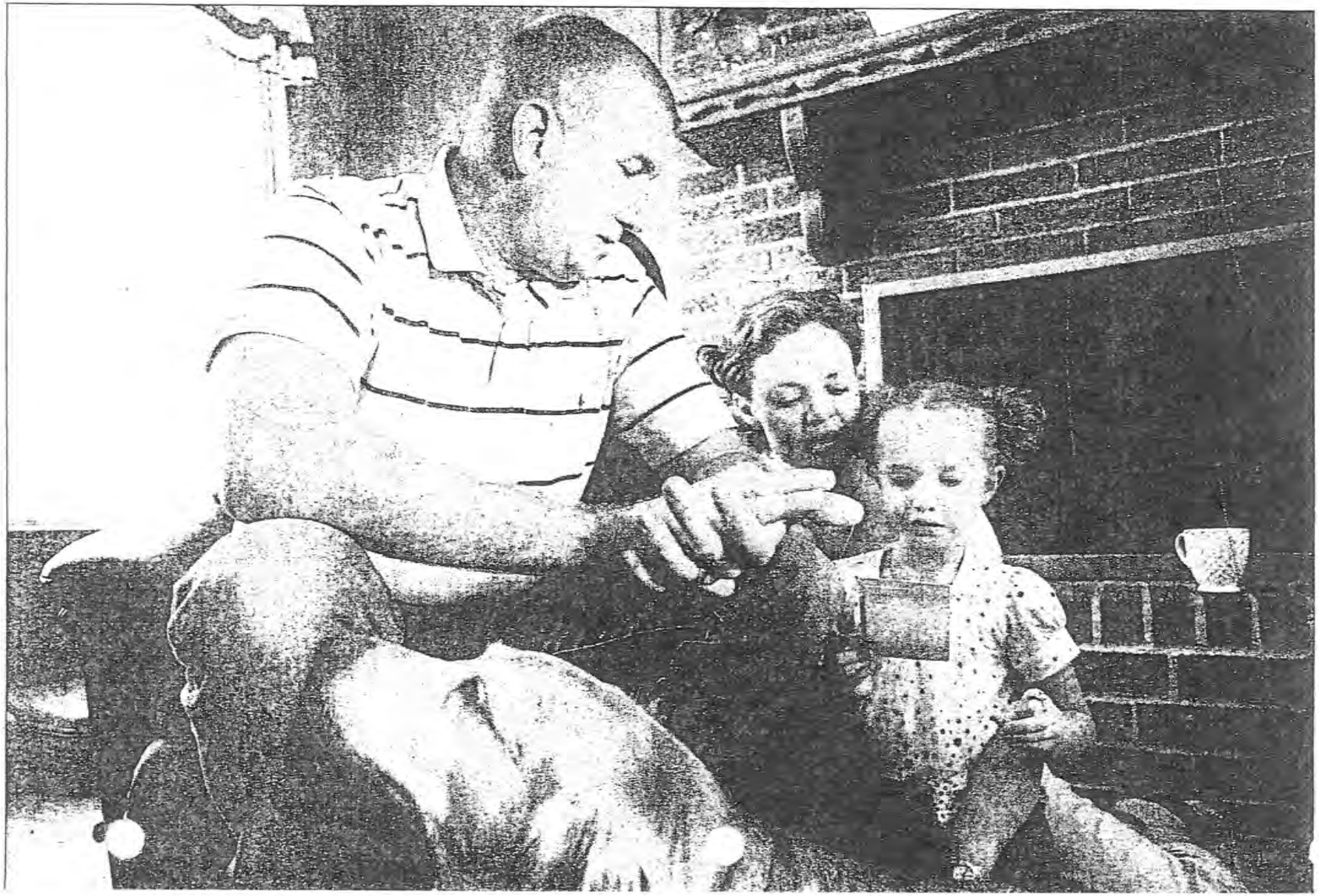
So far, he said, no study has been done to determine the suicide rate of those who are no longer on active duty, but it's undoubtedly a serious problem.

"These are things that are unlike stray bullets in combat," Bowers said. "These are things we can avoid, and we can do that with proper mental health counseling."

Waiting

It was 2 p.m. and Byron Hancock's father was waiting for him in the parking lot. Standing alongside Herb Hancock outside the Bryan Police

Top: Byron Hancock's daughter, Phoebe Kate, 5, looks at a photograph of her father in Iraq while sitting with her mother, Kristi, at the family home Friday.
Eagle photo/Stuart Villanueva



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'Everybody knows it's a broken system.'

Kristi Hancock, on the Department of Veterans Affairs

Department training seminar was Pat Patterson, whom he had met earlier that day while on the verge of tears.

The longtime prosecutor had visited the College Station VA Outpatient Clinic early that morning, pleading again for help for his son — the once-loving family man whose battle coping with memories of Iraq had crescendoed the night before with a flashback in which he was sure he had committed murder.

It had scared Byron's wife and children. And Herb Hancock, who had driven three hours in the middle of the night to be there, was scared, too. Byron needed intensive PTSD treatment, they had all long since concluded.

At the clinic, a social worker dismissed the episode as that of an angry drunk, Herb Hancock and Patterson have both recalled. Byron is an alcoholic who needs to hit rock bottom, she told the elder Hancock. He needs to lose his job and his wife and children need to leave him, she said.

That's when Patterson, whose office also is at the College Station facility, stepped in.

A "self-proclaimed expert on compensation and pension," Patterson actually worked for the Texas Veterans Commission — an agency formed in 1927 because of the "growing complexity of veterans' claims" after World War I.

"It is my job to worry about the red tape," Patterson told a group of veterans recently, his enthusiasm hard to ignore as he handed out his cards. "That's why I'm bald-headed. I fight that bureaucracy and really enjoy it. I fight on a regular basis, and I get down and dirty."

After hearing Herb Hancock's story, Patterson told his supervisor he was taking the rest of the day off. The family had his help if they wanted it.

"Byron, we've got to go," the two men told him when he emerged from the building. Byron understood. It had gotten out of control. And so he agreed to travel with Patterson to the VA in Temple.

Hours later, they were in the emergency room at the facility, and once again frustrated as they hit another roadblock. It was after-hours, and the workers who deal with PTSD weren't there, they were told. Byron would have to come back another day.

That's when Patterson, who spent 20 years in the Marine Corps, said his own PTSD kicked in.

Furious, he requested to speak with the doctor on duty privately as Byron stayed in the waiting room. He got in the doctor's face, looking for a moment like the drill instructor he had once been.

"He is homicidal. He is suicidal," he said. "Tell me that you are sending us away, and write it down, and sign it."

A short time later, Byron was on an ambulance to a lockdown VA psychiatric facility in Waco.

After months of unsuccessful attempts, it took less than 24 hours to process him for an intensive 11-week live-in program based in Waco tailored specifically to veterans suffering PTSD. But with only 40 beds available, he was put on a months-long waiting list.

In the meantime, he waited for a couple of weeks in Waco and then, after his weeklong release, back at the Temple facility. There, he took classes for issues such as substance and alcohol abuse, dealing with triggers, anxiety and anger management. There was even a leather-working class.

But mostly, he said, he just waited.

Weekends were especially bad, sitting in his hospital room with nothing to do. With too much time for his mind to wander, things initially got worse. He began withdrawing from family and friends, stopped caring for personal appearance and seemed to give up hope, his wife said.

"I'm more [angry] now than when I went," Hancock said in May, about two months into his stay at the facility.

Relentless efforts

His wife — whose ire over perceived incompetence became well known among VA officials when her husband disappeared for a week — was about to let people there know how she felt again.

"If your worst enemy is your mind, you don't want to be left with nothing to do," she explained angrily.

Byron and Kristi Hancock have been married for 16 years. They've been a steady couple since she was 14 — when she was a cheerleader for the high school football team he played on — and since then they have raised four children together. A first-grade teacher known for introducing things such as aroma therapy into her classroom, she often jokingly refers to their relationship as "the tree hugger and the Marine."

She never agreed with the war in Iraq, and he always felt it was necessary. But all that was irrelevant. In trying to get her old husband back, she had become an expert on PTSD and its treatments. He had been wronged in the way he was being treated by the government, she believed, and it became her mission to create as much ruckus as possible to get him the help he deserved.

"Everybody knows it's a broken system," she said, explaining that one of the problems is veterans aren't told about all their options when seeking help.

Kristi called the VA's Office of the Medical Inspector in Washington, D.C., asking officials there to investigate the Temple facility for security issues, lack of care and no one knowing what the other person was doing when it came to treating a patient.

She also met with Bruce Gordon, the head of Texas VA facilities.

A spokesperson for the Central Texas Veterans Healthcare System confirmed last week that an investigation has been launched. Because of the investigation, she said, officials can't discuss details of the case or even broad complaints the Hancocks have made about the system.

"We are committed to providing the best care possible to all of our veterans," said JoAnn Greenwood, the spokeswoman. "We always work hard, but we really, really worked extra hard to help this particular veteran, and we will continue to work very, very hard."

After the meeting with Gordon, Kristi said in June, administrators did start "jumping through hoops for Byron."

Staff at the Temple facility began checking on him often, and they eliminated much of the downtime by keeping him busy with extra-curricular activities such as golf at a nearby course. His attitude started improv-

ing again — at least, he said, to the point where he was before he was admitted to the facility.

But the care he began receiving after that meeting is something all veterans should get, Kristi Hancock said, explaining that many suffering PTSD no longer have a wife to fight for them.

Byron Hancock stuck with the system despite the hard times at the facility because, had he left, he would have been kicked off the waiting list for the intensive program. Out of the 25 men who were at the Temple hospital awaiting treatment alongside him, he was the only one who made it to the end, he said.

The others, who broke rules such as drinking, were told they weren't allowed to come back for two years.

It's a policy that baffles the Hancocks, seeing as many of the patients are veterans of the Vietnam War who have been battling demons for decades. Almost every one of them had been in jail, is an alcoholic or has been homeless at one point, he said.

According to a study by the Institute of Medicine, four out of five

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Above, right: After spending hours digging a sniper hole under the cover of night, Byron Hancock and his spotter realized just before daylight they had chosen a place in the middle of a goat herding trail. Herders were often used by the insurgents to spot troops, he said, so they had to move at the last minute to this space — where his feet were submerged in an irrigation canal for the duration of the mission.

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PTSD sufferers have some other sort of psychiatric condition, such as substance abuse. As recently as 2004, the VA's own Special Committee on PTSD has recommended that substance abuse problems be integrated into PTSD therapies.

"We're talking about people who don't ask for help — this is the toughest of the tough," Byron Hancock said. "If they're finally at a point where they ask for help, they need it."

One friend he met while in Temple lived in the woods across the street from the hospital for four days while waiting for a bed to open. He had a beer one night and was kicked out, and now he's living in the woods again, Byron said.

Other friends who got kicked out for substance-abuse problems will end up killing themselves, he said matter-of-factly.

"It doesn't seem like the system is there for the veteran," Byron Hancock said. "If they get anything done, they're doing you a favor. It just takes forever.

"It's like they put things off in hopes you'll kill yourself or quit."

'A powerless situation'

When Byron Hancock finally was admitted at the VA facilities to await intensive treatment for PTSD, his initial concern was his job.

He had put the past 12 years of his life into the Bryan Police Department and planned to retire there. When things started getting difficult after returning home, his work became his refuge.

"I don't know what to say to the police department," he told his wife after agreeing he needed treatment immediately.

"Don't worry about that," she told him. "I'll take care of it."

It would end up the most publicized aspect of the family's ordeal, spurring angry letters to the editor and a rebuttal by Bryan's city manager.

Kristi Hancock called Byron's supervisor to inform him of what happened. When she never heard back from department officials she assumed everything was fine, she said.

Then, in the middle of his stay in Temple, the department essentially decided to fire Byron, she said. The family was dumbfounded. His position had been held open for two years as he served a tour of duty in South America then fought in Iraq. And now he was working to get better — a direct result of his service to his country — and the department was telling him he was out of sick leave.

"I have received your request for an unpaid leave of absence. I am informing you that I will not be approving your request," Interim Chief Bobby Whitmire wrote in an April 23 letter to Hancock. "If you are not able to return to full duty status by Friday, May 4, 2007, you will be separated from employment."

Hancock's insurance coverage would continue through May, the letter stated, and if he got better he would be eligible for an expedited reapplication process at a later date.

"I wish you the very best in your recovery and hope you are able to one day return to the Bryan Police Department," Whitmire wrote.

Luckily, Kristi said, Byron's friends on the force came up to Temple and delivered the news in person. Throughout the ordeal, his co-workers have been extremely supportive, but what management did was simply cruel, she said.

"He felt completely let down, stabbed in the back. That was a huge turning point," she said, explaining that it sent her husband into a downward spiral of worsening depression. "It was like pulling the rug out from someone who was barely standing."

The family was already careful about the information they were giving him. When this happened, he wanted to leave the facility and come back to work so he could keep his job, which would have disqualified him for future treatment. Luckily, she said, she and other family members were able to talk him out of it.

Work was the only place Byron Hancock felt like he still managed to do well.

"The problem is they didn't know what PTSD is, and they never saw it because when I went to work, I went to work," he explained. "I would never show it to anybody outside this house that I had a problem."

Now he asked himself, "What's the point?" as he realized that work, too, had become a failure.

A week later, after Kristi Hancock met with the chief — raising more hell and offering legal research suggesting that the termination could possibly be illegal — the decision was reversed.

"After considering your situation and the medical problems that arose during your service to our country, I am rescinding my decision," Whitmire wrote in a follow-up letter, explaining that Hancock would be placed on unpaid leave until Aug. 15.

As far as the city of Bryan was concerned, the issue seemed to be resolved with that letter. Since then, City Manager David Watkins has written an open letter to Bryan residents explaining that Hancock seemed appreciative for the extension and had not filed any informal or formal complaints.

But the damage had already been done, Kristi Hancock said. She wanted an apology, or at least some acknowledgment that the way the department went about it was wrong.

"We would have been perfectly OK if they came to us and said, 'We have some concerns [about how he'll han-

Right: Hancock stands with his father, Kenedy-based attorney Herb Hancock, outside the Brazos Center on the day he graduated the police academy in 1995.

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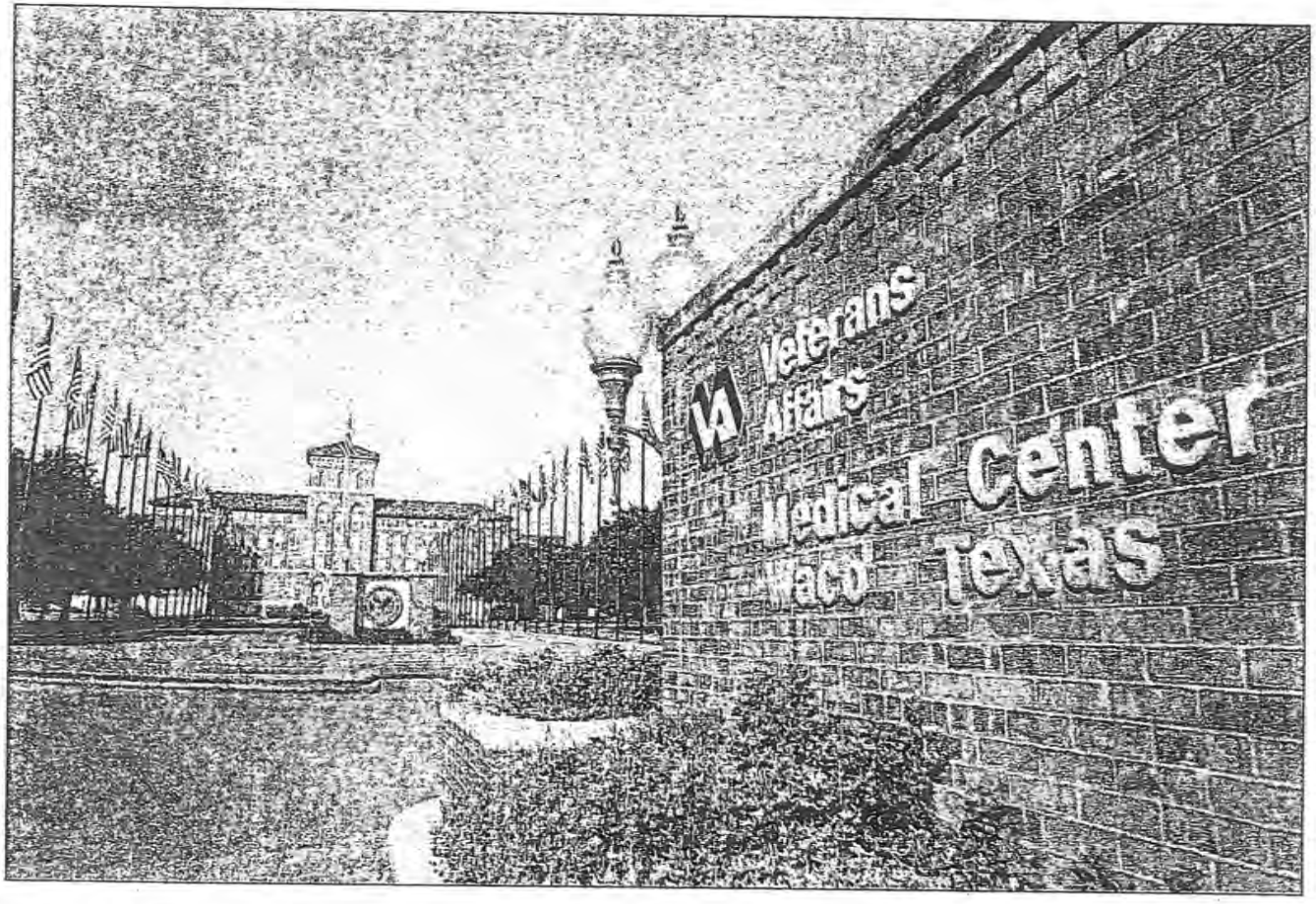
'If I can do anything to put the word out there, I will.'

Byron Hancock



Above: At the urging of family members, Bryan police Officer and Marine sniper Byron Hancock voluntarily checked himself into the Waco VA Medical Center — one of six centers in Texas — earlier this year after losing touch with reality and wrongly believing he killed someone in his Bryan home.

Waco Tribune-Herald photo

dle the job with the condition],'" Kristi said. "That's something we have to decide when he comes to the end of this treatment."

In fact, she said in June, Byron might end up deciding the job causes too much stress. He's the type of person that if he feels he can't do the job to the best of his ability, he won't want to do it, she explained.

"I don't want to do something that would jeopardize another person," Hancock had said earlier. "That's the reason I voluntarily went [to get treatment]. I don't want to hurt anybody, and I don't want to make anybody nervous."

But he needed something to look forward to, Kristi added, and it wouldn't have hurt the police department to approve the leave since they were asking that it be unpaid.

'ed about the process earlier th. veek, Interim Chief Whitmire said he followed department and city procedures. He said he couldn't comment on Kristi Hancock's opinion of how the situation was handled.

"Could things have been done better? I don't know that it could, based on the circumstances," he said. "We did what we thought was right for Mr. Hancock."

Before the dispute could be resolved, the Hancocks garnered backing of angry veterans and a local politician known for often taking adversarial stances to city decisions. Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 937 couldn't be held back, Kristi Hancock said. With the help of City Councilman Mike Southerland — a member who once served as a helicopter pilot in Vietnam — the group decided to hold a press conference with or without her participation.

"It has come to our attention that Byron Hancock ... has had a great injustice inflicted upon him by the city of Bryan," a press release from the Vietnam Veterans group stated.

At that point, the city had already agreed to approve the leave. But the rally helped her and the veterans "feel powerful in a powerless situation," she said, explaining that many of them felt they also had encountered injustices when returning home from war decades earlier.

It was the principle of the matter, she said.

"If someone serves his country and comes back and is sick and needs to seek treatment, it's already hard enough to get treatment in the first place," she said, explaining that if veterans think they're going to lose their job they won't ask for p. "Byron would not have gone. He would have had to get a whole lot

worse.

"It's just another obstacle."

The idea of the press conference was to bring PTSD to the forefront of conversation, she said.

"If they can do this to Byron, they can do this to anybody," Kristi said as she stood with members of the group.

'A bigger fight'

Byron Hancock was in a good mood one afternoon late in June, as he sat in the shade at a picnic bench outside a quiet Veterans Affairs hospital in Waco.

Building 90, his temporary home, was one of dozens of red-brick World War II-era facilities on the sprawling complex. Men nearby — one young, wearing a gray Army T-shirt, another older, with tattoos covering his forearms — sat on aluminum benches. A small tabby kitten lounged on the steps of a sidewalk leading inside.

After all the obstacles, he had finally made it into the intensive 11-week PTSD treatment program he had sought for more than a year as his life deteriorated around him.

It was his third week there, and he had been visited that day by two fellow Marines — one a medic who, like him, had troubles once he came home. They had experienced their first battle together before he went up north and Hancock went south, to Fallujah.

"The same thing happened to him — the exact same thing," Hancock said, the "can-you-believe-that?" tone of incredulousness evident in his voice.

The other visitor was Master Sgt. Neil Morris, a former Marine Sniper School instructor whom he described as his hero "because he was a tough son-of-a-gun."

"I didn't even know they've been through it," he said of the PTSD symptoms. "I never would have expected them to go through that. To hear that from somebody like that — it's really enlightening."

The duo told him that he was on the right track. Going through the VA program was the first step. Don't lose hope, they said.

On that day, Kristi Hancock had made the hour-and-a-half drive from their Bryan home to raise some more hell with his case worker. But it wasn't like before, they both said.

This was closer to a real medical facility than the last place, which reminded her of a nursing home. Here, Kristi Hancock said as she drove to the hospital, his case worker is more communicative and "you can actually speak to a warm body when you call." They finally processed some of his physical disabilities, which had allowed him to get hearing aids.

And, perhaps most important, Byron Hancock had started talking.

"It's all talk all day," she said, explaining that he finally was starting to open up about his experiences.

"They have a way of pulling it out of you," Byron later added. "Some days are worse than others," he said, explaining that he sometimes gets "exhausted having to think about stuff."

"But it's good," he said. "It's good helping to put these things behind me."

The program has 40 beds, but only 25 of them are filled — many of them with Vietnam veterans who spent decades trying, often unsuccessfully, to bury the recollections they're now prodded to talk about.

But somehow it's OK, Hancock said, explaining that it's easier to talk to those who have also seen combat. They understand. Among other things, the program helps you realize you're not the only one, he said.

Each person there has his own story of adversity — divorce, job loss, homelessness.

"It was tough, man, and it still is," Hancock said of his own story. "There for a while, I didn't know if I was going to make it or not."

But lately he's learned to take a deep breath when the stress floods in, and he can remind himself he's not in Iraq anymore.

"You're still going to have flashbacks. You're still going to have all at crap," he said. "They're not ing to go away. I found that out. You're just going to have to make peace with them.

"Life does still go on."

When he finishes the program, Hancock said, he wants to share what he has learned with the police department. Officers are often going to be the ones having to deal with veterans suffering the most extreme cases of PTSD.

But he was no longer sure that he'd still be a police officer. It had been one of the most difficult realizations he'd come to during the rehabilitation process.

Hancock — who had become an officer because he enjoyed helping others — also began thinking about how his new life experience could continue that mission. He realized he wanted to start a group to seek out local vets feeling the same way he did when he came home.

"The ones who go through trauma, the behavior patterns are the same," he said. "If people out there can recognize that pattern, they can take steps to intervene. I never assumed I had a problem at all, but it is a big ol' burden and it will drag you down.

"If I can do anything to put the word out there, I will."

That includes telling his own story, which — as dark as it was at times — is overall a happy one.

In many ways, he was lucky, he and his wife agree. Many veterans succeed in pushing away friends and loved ones before they're forced to confront their demons, if they ever do.

"If it can happen to Byron, with such a pushy wife and a dad who's an attorney and a family who will bend over backward, what in the hell is happening to people who don't have a support network?" Kristi Hancock asked. "There has to be something in place for these people. It takes so long for the system to work.

"It's come to the point where we're taking on a bigger fight than the fight for ourselves."

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Facts about PTSD

60 to 80 percent of Vietnam veterans seeking PTSD treatment have alcohol use disorders. War veterans diagnosed with PTSD and alcohol use tend to be binge drinkers.

— *National Center for PTSD fact sheet*

Almost half of all male Vietnam veterans currently suffering PTSD had been arrested or in jail at least once — 34.2 percent more than once — and 11.5 had been convicted of a felony.

— *Findings from the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Survey, 1990*

The number of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans going to Vet Centers has more than doubled over the course of the Iraq War, but staff has only increased by 10 percent.

—*USA Today investigation cited by Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America*

The average veteran with psychiatric troubles gets about 1/3 fewer visits with specialists than he would have received a decade ago.

— *McClatchy Newspapers investigation cited by Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America*