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EDITOR'S NOTE: *The following opinion piece is written by Dr. Raymond Scurfield, professor and director of the Katrina Research Center at The University of Southern Mississippi. An accompanying photo of Scurfield is available for download online at:*

http://www.usm.edu/pr/cms/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1056&Itemid=2.

Surviving the Shards of Wars and Hurricanes

By Raymond M. Scurfield

GULFPORT, Miss. -- Besides the Vietnam War, I am a Hurricane Katrina survivor -- the Mississippi Gulf Coast and The University of Southern Mississippi Gulf Park campus were devastated. So many Americans continue to be deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, stressed not only by exposure to combat but also perhaps by having their families at home facing the threat of new tropical storms, hurricanes and floods. While deployed, military personnel *always* feel helpless and inadequate, if not guilty and angry, when any serious problems confront their families back home. In turn, family members can be extremely upset at their deployed partner, who is absent, or at the military or the government.

The issues are compounded for the National Guard; its historic mission includes being available stateside in times of emergencies — and yet many Guard units and their equipment are overseas. I have heard active duty personnel and their families express their *angst* time and again at the protracted and repeated deployment policies and the resulting absences following the destruction of Hurricane Katrina, the inept response of too many federal programs that were overwhelmed by the demands, and how providing adequate federal funds for post-Katrina relief and recovery has been pitted against funding the massive war costs. These are yet more unacknowledged costs of the war.

Like many veterans on the Gulf Coast, from Florida through Texas, both the Iraq War and another hurricane season have propelled me back to poignant memories related to the war I survived. This is what can happen when current media coverage of the Iraq War or the threat of hurricanes might trigger memories of past combat or of past hurricanes like George or Andrew. Now, over 1.5 million American troops are having their own traumatic war experiences brought home — perhaps exacerbated by having family in harm's way here from natural disasters or family crises while they have been or are deployed, or while facing yet another deployment.

I am propelled back to 1968, sitting on an airplane between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia en route to Vietnam. The plane is full -- except for the aisle seat next to me. Then, entering last, is a Vietnam veteran — a patch over his eye and using two forearm crutches. I watch, mesmerized, noticing the prostheses where his legs used to be, as he shuffles slowly down the aisle. Suddenly I realize, "Oh, no, he is going to sit next to me." And he does. I awkwardly say hello and find myself preoccupied with self-centered thoughts about sitting next to this severely injured veteran while I am en route to Vietnam.

Eventually, he begins talking -- a conversation I will remember forever. "You know, it was really hard the last time I went home on convalescent leave from the hospital. A couple of my high school friends told me it was a

shame that I lost my legs and eye *for nothing* . . ." Today I fear the same for many returning troops faced with the growing specter of no honorable way out of Iraq and the increasing divisiveness of the war. Will many troops be told by others, or tell themselves now or later, that their sacrifices had been for nothing? *That* would be *very hard to live with*.

Conversely, I derive solace still from that wounded soldier's last words to me. "You know, sir. I was the lucky one. No one else in our foxhole survived." I was amazed at his glass-half-full celebration of living. I find myself praying that decades later he still feels the same, rather than dwelling on what was irreparably damaged and lost -- and that thousands of severely injured and mental health casualties from Iraq and their families will feel similarly decades from now.

However, many of us know all too well that war is unforgettable and that the memories and the impact -- both the good and the bad -- are lifelong. An unlearned lesson is that time does *not* heal all wounds. Furthermore, salt is being poured into veterans' wounds from revelations uncovered by the exposé at Walter Reed Army Hospital and investigations of the Department of Veterans Affairs. Will anything *really* change ultimately? One hopeful sign is the wave of concern and advocacy from veterans of prior wars and civilian activists determined *not* to let this current generation of warriors be *forgotten* like Korean War veterans, or *mistreated and forgotten* like many Vietnam vets were.

And a silver lining even exists related to the massive destruction and continuing hardships post-Katrina. A palpable spirit of caring and resolve persists that we will not let our nation's worst natural disaster keep us down. I find people here are more sensitive and reach out to others more than before Katrina (and this always has been a friendly place). Tens of thousands of volunteers continue to offer assistance and caring, many with faith-based organizations, uniquely filling a desperate need that exceeds the inability of cumbersome federal programs to provide.

Should not this powerful post-Katrina spirit of appreciation and responsiveness to the inter-connectedness among us all, further illustrated by the massive national response to the mass murders at Virginia Tech, be channeled similarly into paying proper homage, respect and attention, not just now but for decades to come, to our nation's finest who are suffering the price of having served in harm's way, many with lifelong disabilities and hurt?

And yet, soon after the end of this ever-lengthening war, the metallic ribbons and bumper stickers will be gone, the war casualties increasingly distant from the front pages. Similarly, Katrina (other than New Orleans-related news) is seldom mentioned now, Rita is a non-existent afterthought and to most of the country George, Andrew and Camille are simply three people's names. Are we moving along, inexorably, to have collective amnesia again about yet another era of veterans and their families, abandoning them to struggle with their personal demons resulting from having served in harm's way? This is similar to how too often we forget about or dismiss the hurt and challenges that continue to face many survivors of devastating hurricanes like Katrina, Rita, and Andrew -- or from a new hurricane yet to be named.

Dr. Raymond Scurfield, recognized internationally for his expertise in war-related trauma, has written a trilogy of books about war's impact. The most recent is "War Trauma. Lessons Unlearned From Vietnam to Iraq." He also has several writings about the impact of Hurricane Katrina. He is an associate professor and director of the Katrina Research Center at The University of Southern Mississippi Gulf Coast and can be contacted at raymond.scurfield@usm.edu . More information about Scurfield is found online at <http://www.usm.edu/gc/qchealth/scurfield/index.html>.