



At the U of M, helping soldiers move from combat to the classroom

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University of Minnesota students who are also Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have set out to help other returning soldiers make the sometimes difficult transition from combat to college. They've opened a Veterans Transition Center on the U of M campus which, they say, is the first of its kind in the nation. Students and university administrators hope the center will help returning GI's stay in school at a time when there are indications drop-out rates are rising.

Minneapolis, Minn. — University of Minnesota freshman Ross Holtan's memories of Iraq loom large less than a year after leaving the war zone.

Summer thunderstorms outside of his south Minneapolis apartment have jolted him awake, leaving him fumbling for the gun and armor which have not been at his bedside for months.

There are nightmares.

Even in the serenity of Minnesota, Holtan has had difficulty leaving behind the high-speed, survival-style driving he learned in Iraq. His military training as a Russian linguist was of little value in Baghdad, so he was assigned convoy security along the Baghdad to airport highway.

"I have to make sure I am not going as fast as I can and watching out for over-passes," Holtan says. "That was a big deal over there, stuff dropped off of over-passes. We'd swerve back and forth and you know sometimes I catch myself kind of doing that. That's kind of the big thing, driving."

Holtan comes across as friendly as he sits at his kitchen table, but he says since Iraq, he's had a tendency to be aggressive. Friends tell him he's different than he was before the Army and Iraq.

"People have told me that I am more serious than I was," Holtan says. "I was the big joker I guess, and now I'm a little more melancholy."

Holtan says he sometimes feels uncomfortable in crowds. Like many young men and women, Holtan, who grew up in south Minneapolis, enlisted in high school to earn money for college. That was 1998. He was 17 years-old.

Holtan is one of about 435 veterans who are attending the University of Minnesota with GI Bill benefits.

He says he's happy to be at the university, but that it is not what he expected. He feels

like an outsider.

"I figured I would go in and I would meet all kinds of people, you know. And, I'm like I'm 24. I've done a lot of things that these other guys haven't, so I haven't interacted with very many people very much," Holtan says. "Then like homework, writing assignments and tests and planning way ahead -- that's pretty difficult."

Those tasks are difficult because, for the past several years, Holtan has been accustomed to following orders, not plotting his own course.

Holtan says getting a handle on civilian life has also been a challenge. There are so many details he did not have to worry about in the Army.

"Just having an apartment, paying the rent, deciding if you want cable and electricity bills and picking roommates," Holtan says. "All of that is really different. Really different. Instead of just getting put in a room and having a chow hall and you eat whatever they serve you. That's a really big change."

U of M Junior Andrew Davis has two Army tours in Afghanistan and one in Iraq behind him. When he came back from the war and started college last year he found the transition difficult.

Davis is one of the students who decided to try to help other returning soldiers by organizing the new Veterans Transition Center.

"First and foremost, it's a safe haven and a resource center for veterans to get together with each other and to kind of, not necessarily hide, but to kind of get away from some of the stress they might be feeling on campus," Davis says. "The mental adjustment is so huge."

Davis says the center will also link veterans with assistance that's available to them, but sometimes is difficult to secure from government bureaucracies. Davis says for some returning soldiers, just getting the promised college money takes months and numerous problems that can arise.

"We had an example last week with me personally. I went to go check if my GI Bill money had come through and it hadn't and so I called VA and asked 'why?'" explains Davis. "I haven't had that problem in a year and they said, 'the U of M entered your enrollment and then they took it back', which was news to me since I had been in school for the last month. But you know things like that happen."

The Deputy Director for Education Services at the Department of Veterans Affairs, Dennis Douglass, acknowledges the complexities of getting college money into the hands of vets. Douglass says 90 percent of eligible applicants get their checks within 60-days of applying.

Still, he says the VA has had some trouble keeping up.

"We have struggled to keep pace with being timely and getting that application processed and getting the resources started," says Douglass. "It kind of ebbs and flows."

Beyond the money, Douglass says the VA does not offer any programming to ease soldiers into campus life. He applauds the efforts of the U of M students to help returning soldiers

So does U of M Vice Provost for Student Affairs Jerry Rinehart. Rinehart says it's sadly ironic that some veterans give up on college, given what they went through to get their tuition. The U of M has provided office space for the transition center. Rinehart says he hopes the center will help reverse the increasing drop out rates among GI's.

"We did go back and look at our retention-graduation rates for vets versus non vets and it was clear, while up until 9/11 they have tracked pretty closely. After 9/11 the retention-graduation for our vets began to drop off. Again, this is very early sign and we want to pay attention to that data," Reinhart says.

VA officials say they don't track retention rates or know exactly how many veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan are currently using GI Bill benefits to attend college.

Ross Holtan, the south Minneapolis vet who's now a freshman studying journalism and Russian at the U of M, says he intends to stay in school. For some vets who trying to cash-in on their college money, he suspects the stresses of college life are just too much.

"A lot of the veterans feel kind of alone in what they're doing. I know I do a little bit. You just feel separated from everything else that's going on. I still haven't got any of my VA benefits," Holtan says. "So, I am trying to navigate the system, figure out when do I get this money? Who do I talk to about this? So I would imagine that people just kind of feel like they're floundering. Maybe that's what they're dropping out."

Holtan says he's optimistic the new veterans center will become a place where people like him can share their war experiences and help each other get through school.