

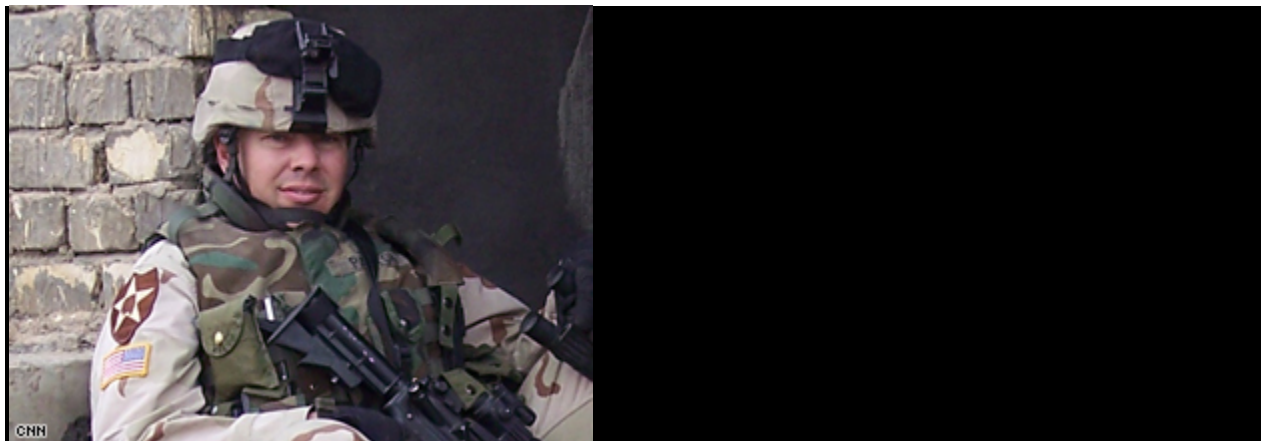
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March 6, 2009 -- Updated 0321 GMT (1121 HKT)
By Larry Shaughnessy and Barbara Starr

Generals share their experience with PTSD

- **STORY HIGHLIGHTS**
- Memory of soldier who died before his eyes stays with one general
- Another still questions himself over suicide bomb attack that killed 22
- By sharing stories, they hope to ease stigma attached to stress
- Military should have different view of post-traumatic stress disorder, they say

WASHINGTON (CNN) -- Army generals aren't known for talking about their feelings.



Brig. Gen. Gary S. Patton says he wants the military to change the way it views post-traumatic stress disorder.

But two high-ranking officers are doing just that, hoping that by going public they can remove the stigma that many soldiers say keeps them from getting help for post-traumatic stress disorder.

Brig. General Gary S. Patton and Gen. Carter Ham have both sought counseling for the emotional trauma of their time in the Iraq war.

"One of our soldiers in that unit, Spec. Robert Unruh, took a gunshot wound to the torso, I was involved in medevacating him off the battlefield. And in a short period of time, he died before my eyes," Patton told CNN in an exclusive interview. "That's a memory [that] will stay with me the rest of my life."

Ham was the commander in Mosul when a suicide bomber blew up a mess tent. Twenty-two people died.

"The 21st of December, 2004, worst day of my life. Ever," Ham said. "To this day I still ask myself what should I have done differently, what could I have done as the commander responsible that would have perhaps saved the lives of those soldiers, sailors, civilians."

Both generals have been back from Iraq for years, but still deal with some of the symptoms of the stress they experienced.

"I felt like that what I was doing was not important because I had soldiers who were killed and a mission that had not yet been accomplished," Ham said. "It took a very amazingly supportive wife and in my case a great chaplain to kind of help me work my way through that."

Ham and his wife drove from Washington State to the District of Columbia right after he returned from combat.

"I probably said three words to her the whole way across the country. And it was 'Do you want to stop and get something to eat?' I mean, no discussion, no sharing of what happened," he explained.

Ham still can't talk to his wife about much of what he saw.

For Patton the stress hits him in the middle of the night.

"I've had sleep interruptions from loud noises. Of course there's no IEDs or rockets going off in my bedroom, but the brain has a funny way of remembering those things," Patton said. "Not only recreating the exact sound, but also the smell of the battlefield and the metallic taste you get in your mouth when you have that same incident on the battlefield."

Both acknowledge that in [military](#) circles, there is still a stigma attached to admitting mental health problems.

"If you go ask for help somehow you believe it or you might believe others think it of you, that you're somehow weak. That's wrong and intellectually we all know it's wrong, but it's still there. It's still palpable in some communities," Ham said.

Patton wants to see a change in the way [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) is viewed by the military.

"We need all our soldiers and leaders to approach mental health like we do physical health. No one would ever question or ever even hesitate in seeking a physician to take care of their broken limb or gunshot wound, or shrapnel or something of that order. You know, we need to take the same approach towards mental health," Patton said.

Having two generals talk publicly about their own battles with stress and how counseling helped should help remove some of that. Patton said he wants servicemen and women to know that they can come forward.

"Know absolutely that your chain of command and your leadership in the military at our highest levels recognize this issue and want to encourage our soldiers to seek out that mental health assistance," Patton said.

Ham agreed. "I think, frankly, I think I'm a better general because I got some help."

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Gen. Carter Ham says PTSD is stigmatized, although "intellectually we all know it's wrong."