

Last Train to Coatesville

The New Face of Homeless Veterans

By Mark Jury

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After becoming homeless, Lula W. finally fled from an abusive relationship with her boyfriend, who was running a crack house, and took Amtrak to Coatesville, Pa., and the Mary E. Walker House.

When Marsha Four arrived at the 18th Surgical Hospital in Quang Tri as an Army nurse in July of 1969, she brought an M-16 rifle. Nurses weren't issued weapons, but there was no way she was going to be in a war zone without a way to protect herself. "One of the nurses was leaving and she sold me her M-16, two magazines and her refrigerator," Four recalled. "I paid her twenty dollars, I think. I kept the rifle in my hooch."

Now she's program director for Homeless Veterans Service & Education Center (PVMSEC) – a 501c(3) non-profit agency that exclusively serves veterans in need. She oversees the largest program in the country funded by the VA Homeless Grant and Per Diem Grant Program designed specifically to help homeless women veterans, along with a model transitional housing program for men.

Four and the other advocates for homeless veterans are facing new challenges as the newest generation of veterans and a growing number of middle-aged and elderly homeless veterans from Vietnam and other wars threaten to overwhelm the systems set up to help them.

One of the most chilling statistics for homeless veterans is that the percentage of women in the homeless veteran population is rising while the overall number of homeless veterans is decreasing. To understand the women behind the statistics, I visited the Mary E. Walker House (named after the Army doctor who served as a battlefield surgeon during the Civil War, the only

woman awarded the Medal of Honor), which opened in 2005. It's located on the grounds of the sprawling VA Medical Center in Coatesville, Pennsylvania, an hour's train ride from Philadelphia.

During my first visit to Walker House, I was invited into a room where several residents waited to talk to a reporter. I don't know what I expected to find, but I met a group of well-groomed, poised, articulate young women chatting among themselves. I blurted out, "I know you guys came from the streets and the homeless shelters, but I don't see any of that here."

Then, one by one, they told their stories.

Harriet C. served in the Army from October 1982 to November 1986. "I became homeless due to a drug addiction that lasted 22 years," she said. "When I came here, I was homeless, facing prostitution charges. You wouldn't have recognized me, drawn in the face, dirty clothes, and an unkempt, miserable soul hurting in every way. I'd lost my children, husband, and home. I had nothing else to lose."

After the session, Harriet came over to me and said, "There's another thing I forgot to tell you. My dad introduced me to crack."

Lula W. served on active duty in the Army from 1980-83 and in the Army reserve from 1984-94 as a medic and clerk. "I had been working many hours at an extended care facility. But when the owner passed away, I lost my job." Lula said. "When I started spending more time at our house, I learned that my boyfriend was running a crack house. I started using crack cocaine. There was violence in the house all the time. I became homeless and was going to kill myself. My therapist suggested Walker House."

Each woman, veterans of the Army, Marines, Navy, and Air Force, had an equally harrowing story. "With backgrounds like these, how do you decide which women are admitted to Walker House?" I asked Marsha Four. "What makes you think they can succeed?"

"Some decisions are more difficult than others," she answered. "We look very carefully at what the referring agencies have to say about the woman veteran. But in the end, it's a gut decision. The link is this: We've all been in the military, and we all know chain of command. We all know responsibility. We all served. There's a great pride and a great connection to having worn the uniform."



A group of residents at the Mary E. Walker House meet to talk about their past experiences and their new life at the transitional residence.

To learn how homeless men who wore the uniform are being helped at Coatesville requires a labyrinthine walk from Walker House through a network of corridors to reach LZ II, a 95-bed transitional housing program for men that opened in 1997 and is run by Sandy Miller, who's the chair of VVA's Homeless Veterans Committee. Marsha Four came to the world of homeless veterans through her work as executive director of Philadelphia's Stand Down program. Miller was introduced to the issue when she volunteered as a tent leader with the homeless in the field. Four wrote grants for PVMSEC to establish LZ II and a homeless veterans drop-in day service center in Philadelphia. Miller helped her write the LZ II expansion grant and the Walker House grant.

At LZ II, Miller introduced me to Tim B., who was born in Khocunez, Russia, and escaped Chechnya to come to America as a refugee in 1995. He joined the Army in 1999 and went to basic training at Fort Benning, Georgia, and then to duty stations in Kosovo, Korea, and two deployments in Iraq.

His first MOS was 11B, Infantry. After three years, he re-enlisted for four more years and "went to school, 15 Tango, to learn to fix Blackhawk helicopters," Tim said. During his second tour in Iraq, the problems began. His camp was being heavily rocketed; ironically, by old Russian rockets that Iraq had purchased during the Saddam regime. Casualties were a way of life. "One soldier eighteen years old from my unit went outside and exploded from a bomb," he said.

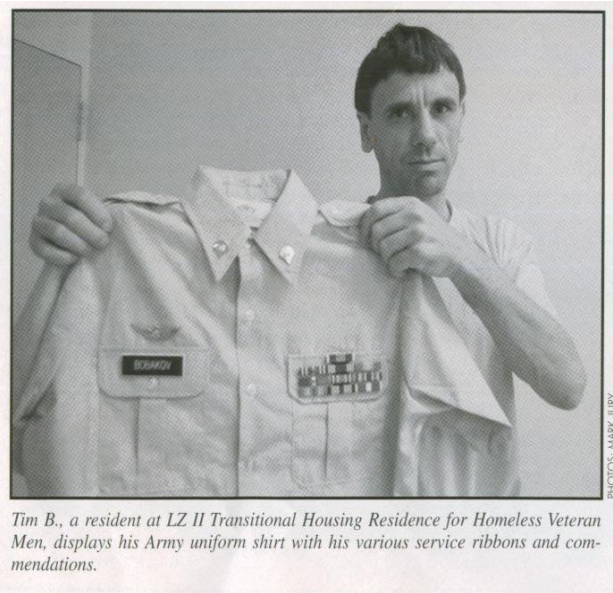
Tim worked for 12 hours on and 12 hours off, but found he was unable to sleep and was given medication for the problem. Matters worsened when he seriously injured his shoulder lifting helicopter blades. When he returned to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, he was still unable to sleep and was having flashbacks. His marriage was ending in an ugly way. The medical personnel at Fort Campbell told him to enroll in a VA Medical Center program, and he came to Coatesville to be near his sons who lived in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

"Tim couldn't go back to his house because of the divorce," Sandy Miller said. "When he arrived here, he only had his car. So he was homeless."

Today, he continues his PTSD counseling and sees his doctors. "Tim has come out of his shell," said Miller. "He smiles more, to be painfully honest. He's going to have "TSD for the rest of his life, and he has to use the VA system as it was established – to return those who are wounded to a productive life."

"I would like to go to school ultimately," added Tim. "Right now, I still have trouble with concentration and forgetting. I go to school in Philadelphia – Veterans Upward Bound – to help me get ready for college. I want to work with people, to be a social worker or a teacher."

"Tim is atypical only in that he was sent here from Kentucky," Miller said. "The Perimeter, PVMSEC's drop-in day center for veterans, is usually the first line for getting homeless veterans into a program. It's an extraordinary thing to see – a homeless veteran comes to The Perimeter and realizes that help is available, then comes to LZ II or Walker House and finally is able to get a job and become a productive member of society. It's so freakin' cool."



Tim B., a resident at LZ II Transitional Housing Residence for Homeless Veteran Men, displays his Army uniform shirt with his various service ribbons and commendations.

The Perimeter is located in PVMSEC's six-floor building in Center City Philadelphia, right under the Ben Franklin Bridge. Each morning, a group of homeless veterans waits in front of the building for The Perimeter to open, while an outreach van picks up other veterans at the city's homeless shelters and occasionally on the street. The Perimeter, which opened in 2000, provides scores of services – from meals and showers and haircuts to access to a mailing address, educational classes, job placement, VA benefits, and legal advice.

While many men come to The Perimeter just for the meals, most seem to be actively pursuing some kind of strategy to return to a productive life. Mark B., who served in the Army from 1983-86 at the Pentagon in

intelligence and cryptographic telecommunications, is getting a haircut. He's currently in a homeless program but is working on his job skills and resume. He looks forward to returning to the workforce.

The men in the computer hardware class are involved in a rigorous program of lectures, hands-on training, and test preparation that will give them an A+ COMPTIA certification. Computer assistant instructor Michael Brogan works with Vietnam veterans Joe W. and Leonard V. "A+ certification is the first step in getting a job in IT," Brogan said. "Fortunately, there are still jobs in that field."

"Everything from copy machines to refrigerators have computer chips in them," added Pat Pomroy, director of client services and business manager at PVMSEC, "and to get into that field you have to be certified."

While the staff at the Philadelphia Veterans Multi-service & Education Center struggles to keep their programs going in an era of severe funding cutbacks, the thought on everyone's mind is, "What comes next?" All indications point to an impending wave of new veterans that many worry will overwhelm the system.

"There was a time, during the Vietnam Era, when it took about ten to fifteen years for veterans to end up on the streets," said Ed Lowry, founder and executive director of PVMSEC. "But Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are bottoming out at a much quicker rate. An Army report estimates that more than 30% of soldiers returning from Iraq are now reporting symptoms of PTSD or other mental health issues. [For Vietnam veterans, the number was 10-12%] We're dealing with a whole different category of vets."

What makes the new generation of veterans so susceptible to ending up homeless? After spending a week in Philadelphia and Coatesville and talking with homeless experts, as well as the veterans themselves, certain patterns emerged.

Multiple deployments and extensions of tours:

During the Vietnam War, one of the most important acronyms was DEROS (Date of Estimated Return from Overseas). Unlike previous wars, every individual serving in Vietnam, except general officers, knew before leaving the States when he or she was scheduled to return home – prompting the Vietnam "short-timers syndrome" with elaborate short-time calendars and ornate short-time sticks. The troops knew once they boarded the Freedom Bird, for them the war was over.

For today's newest veterans, there is no DEROS. Tours are extended, sometimes inexplicably, and multiple deployments have become the norm for many serving in Iraq. Sandy Miller told of one resident at LZ II who walked into her office, fell to his knees, and started crying, saying "My unit is being deployed." "It was his third deployment to Iraq," Miller said. "Before coming to LZ II, he was living homeless on the streets of Philadelphia, but he never missed a drill with

his Reserve unit. Nobody cared about him or could find him when he was living on the streets, but they found him here when he was being deployed. And he did go back to Iraq."

The changing role of the National Guard and

Reserves: Unlike Vietnam, at one point National Guard and Reserve units made up almost 40% of the force deployed in Iraq. The downside of activating so many Guard and Reserve units was vividly conveyed by one of the men at The Perimeter. He didn't want his photograph taken or his name used because of some issues with arrest warrants, but his story rang true.

"I played golf with three of my buddies almost every weekend," he said, "and during one game, one of the guys had some literature and said, 'Let's join the Reserves and become weekend warriors. We'll get more exercise running through the woods one weekend a month, and we can get away from the wife and the kids for a couple of days, and we'll make a few extra bucks.'"

The weekend warriors got turned upside down. No one had thought about the possibility of fierce, extended combat. Or that one of the foursome would be killed. Now, after two tours in Iraq, this veteran had lost his family and his job, due to PTSD and booze. He's homeless, eating turkey at The Perimeter, and grateful for a hot meal.

The influx of women in the military: With one of every ten soldiers serving in Iraq a woman, the female homeless population will only grow. More facilities dedicated to women are vital. "Of the 134 women who have been residents at Walker House, 83% have had sexual trauma in their lives," Marsha Four said, "and 60% of these also experienced military sexual trauma. Some women, because of this trauma and past physical violence, find that they can't be in the programs with men." Sandy Miller added, "Women don't want to spill their guts to someone who is seen as the perpetrator."

After time at The Perimeter, I needed to go back to Walker House and LZ II. When I arrived at the 30th Street Station in Philadelphia, I asked the ticket agent, "When is the last train to Coatesville?" At that moment, as a Vietnam veteran, the Monkees' 1966 smash hit "Last Train to Clarksville" leaped into my head. The song tells the story of a young man who's been drafted and is waiting for the train that will take him to an army base. The song was enormously popular in Vietnam, with its plaintive refrain: "I don't know if I'm ever coming home."

As the R5 train fumbled through the Pennsylvania countryside, I thought that someone should write an anthem called "Last Train to Coatesville" to the workers and homeless veterans who are struggling together so that veterans can find their way home. There's Harriet, who was addicted for 22 years, but is now "doing fine" at Walker House, working as a resident assistant and part time in the kitchen.

I remembered Lula, one of the women at the Walker House discussion group, who left the crack house in Baltimore and boarded an Amtrak train. Hours later, at 6:00 a.m., she disembarked at the tiny deserted train station in Coatesville. "I was petrified," she said.

She carried four heavy suitcases down to the corner, only to discover that the cab company had gone out of business. So she waited for the bus to take her to the VA Medical Center. For Lula, taking the train to Coatesville saved her life.

Homeless Veterans:

By Marc Leepson, from the same

The exact number is all but impossible to determine, but the Department of Veterans Affairs' best guess is that some 154,000 veterans are homeless on any given night in this country and that perhaps twice that number experience homelessness over the course of a year. That means that about one of every three homeless men on the streets of our cities and rural communities has served in the nation's armed forces.

The VA also estimates that more than 95 percent of the nation's homeless veterans are males, that the vast majority are single and come from the lower economic strata of society, that about 45 percent suffer from mental illness, and that more than 70 percent have alcohol or drug problems. A little more than half of the homeless veterans are African American or Hispanic.

Nearly half – about 47 percent, according to the VA – of homeless veterans served during the Vietnam War era, and about a third are in-country Vietnam veterans. A large percentage of homeless Vietnam veterans have post-traumatic stress disorder accompanied by substance abuse. Many wind up on the streets for those reasons or because they have inadequate or no family or social support networks.

The National Coalition of Homeless Veterans in Washington has played a crucial role in homeless veterans advocacy since it was formed in 1990. NCHV works closely with a national network of some 250 community-based homeless veterans groups. The Coalition also works with local, state, and federal agencies (including the VA) that provide housing, food, health services, job training and placement assistance, and legal aid to hundreds of thousands of homeless veterans each year.

When she transitions out of Walker House, she plans to stay in the area. She knows what she wants to do: start a business that includes a cab company. She even has a name picked out: "Holla Back Cab Company and Southern Cuisine." For future homeless veterans who take the last train to Coatesville, she wants to be the one to "run them up the hill" to a safe environment where – as the Walker House Mission Statement says – "they can re-establish themselves as members of a community and regain ownership of their lives".

The Big Picture

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"Our network includes big and small service providers, ones that have anywhere from ten beds to a hundred and fifty," Cheryl Beversdorf, NCHV's President and CEO, said in a recent interview. "Many provide services in transitional housing, and more and more are looking to put homeless in permanent housing."

NCHV has found that community-based homeless organizations are most successful when they work in collaboration with federal, state and local government agencies, other homeless providers, and VSOs. Veterans who participate in these programs have a higher chance of becoming tax-paying, productive citizens again, Beversdorf said.

Another dividend: The number of homeless veterans has decreased significantly in recent years. "The numbers are going down," Beversdorf said. "They have decreased by about 38 percent in the last five years. This has been largely a result of the partnership of the VA and community-based groups."

For more information about NCHV, go to:

www.nchv.org

For info on the VA's homeless veteran programs, go to:

www.va.gov/homeless

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