

America's Wounded Soldiers

Curriculum links: Current events, civics, health, critical thinking

Briefing: The Center for the Intrepid is a state-of-the-art rehabilitation center in San Antonio for American soldiers injured in Iraq or Afghanistan. Novelist and veteran Tim O'Brien recently visited the center for PARADE and spoke to troops recovering from wounds there. Despite losing a leg from stepping on a mortar round in Baghdad, Maj. Jason Waggoner, 39, of Puyallup, Wash., says he has no regrets. He lost his leg "in support of the soldiers on my left and right," he says. "I'd do it a hundred times over." With his family's support, Waggoner has made rapid progress and hopes to rejoin his unit in Iraq: "My mission right now is to get well." The \$50 million facility was built with private donations and then turned over to the government. It treats amputees, burn patients, and others, with some of the medical world's most cutting-edge technology. At any one time, about 150 severely injured young men and women take advantage of the center, spending long hours relearning to walk, drive, and handle the most basic elements of daily living. One of them, Staff Sgt. Shilo Harris, 33, of Coleman, Tex., was severely burned when his vehicle rolled over an improvised explosive device. "The fireball was like a tornado," he says. "I looked down and saw my body smoking." He lost his ears and several fingers, and he faces further skin surgery. "For a long time," Harris says, "I couldn't feed myself, couldn't blow my nose, couldn't go to the bathroom alone. My wife, Kathreyn, had to help me do almost everything—my wife is my hero." Like Waggoner, though, Harris has no regrets about serving in an increasingly unpopular war. "I was trying to get the job done," he says. "I might want to stay a soldier." Col. Jennifer Menetrez, the Army doctor who runs the center, says of her patients, "These are driven, athletic risk takers, and we try to expose them to new challenges," such as the facility's swimming pool, which features elaborate wave-riding equipment. The center also has an in-house prosthetics lab, where new "legs" can be custom-made, and are sometimes inscribed with the names of fallen comrades. Staff Sgt. Nick McCoy, 24, of Reading, Pa., who had both legs amputated below the knee, offers this advice to civilians who want to show their support: "Our country has mixed feelings about the war, but regardless of your opinion, if you see a wounded soldier, we appreciate it when you say, 'Thank you.'"

Classroom Debates

Do Americans show enough support for soldiers returning from Iraq?
Does the government do enough to help soldiers injured in battle? What do teens or others in your community do to support the troops? Are you surprised that some injured soldiers say they're eager to return to duty?

Newspaper activity: Scan the paper for articles about injured veterans, including their struggles, their successes, and the ways they are supported by their communities. Do the articles give you ideas for ways you and your peers can get involved?

Resources: Books: Michael Weisskopf's *Blood Brothers: Among the Soldiers of Ward 57* (Holt, 2007) and Trish Wood's *What Was Asked of Us: An Oral History of the Iraq War* (Back Bay Books, 2007). Websites: Learn more from the U.S. Army, the U.S. Dept. of Defense, the USO, and *The Washington Post*.