

True stories of PTSD, brain-injury victims and those who try to help

By J. Ford Huffman

“Hidden Battles on Unseen Fronts,” a new book by Patricia Driscoll and Celia Straus, does not pretend that everybody dealing with traumatic brain injury or post-traumatic stress disorder is living happily ever after.

Twenty-one short chapters tell the story of 21 veterans of operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom — with nods to Desert Storm and Vietnam — and offer further proof that not all wounds are only skin deep.

The chapters are contributed by psychologists, psychiatrists, therapists, counselors and other health specialists, and all offer insight into what goes on behind closed office doors.

Unfortunately, the veterans’ quotes read as if the interviews were conducted in writing rather than in person. Eventually every service member seems to speak in the same style and structure.

But shop talk — “shrink rap” — from men and women who serve in white uniforms provides welcome transparency.

For example: “TBI has been described as the ‘signature injury’ of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; however, we suspect this perception may change,” write Kelly Petska, a psychologist, and Donald MacLennan, a pathologist. “We believe it is this combination of mild TBI with PTSD that will ultimately come to be seen as the signature injury.”

“Oddly” they add, “war has a way of advancing medical practice and forcing providers to make changes in health-care delivery.”

Obviously, war forces service members to change, and social worker Alice Psirakis writes that her patients often confided that their old civilian life seemed a distant memory to them.

She diagnoses a generation in one sentence: “I believe they mourned the loss of their old selves.”

One public forum that allows veterans to talk about themselves is the Veterans Education Project, which gets its own chapter.

“Everyone has a story,” says VEP board member Barbara J. Tiner. “And the least we can do is listen.”

“Hidden Battles” makes you want to listen to what the doctors say.

Driscoll heads the Armed Forces Foundation, and any proceeds from her and Straus’ book will be used to provide support services to the men and women who have served our country in uniform.

Even readers who initially might be skeptical about the objectivity of a book that has the official sanction of its subject can’t argue with that.

“Hidden Battles on Unseen Fronts: Stories of American Soldiers with Traumatic Brain Injury and PTSD” by Patricia Driscoll and Celia Straus for the Armed Forces Foundation, Casemate, \$27.50, 292 pages.

J. Ford Huffman is a Military Times book reviewer.