

PRESS RELEASE

PRESS RELEASE

PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

Event: Friday Rally and March Marks Second Anniversary of Bush's War in Iraq, Turns Focus on Casualties Hidden by Pentagon and Complicit Commercial News Media.

Contacts: (503) 344-5078
pprcnews@yahoo.com
www.pprc-news.org

Date: Friday, March 18th, 2005

Time: 5:00 p.m.

Place: Pioneer Courthouse Square

Friday Rally and March Marks Second Anniversary of Bush's War in Iraq, Turns Focus on Casualties Hidden by Pentagon and Complicit Commercial News Media.

The *Portland Peaceful Response Coalition's* Friday rally and march mark two years of war and occupation in Iraq, turning once again to the most hidden cost of the war, the returning injured US soldiers. "Up to 25,000 so far,¹ these young men and women who have often suffered horrifically and will be living with these injuries for the rest of their lives, are flown home only at night as part of an Administration policy to shield the US public from the sight,"² said William Seaman, a volunteer with the PPRC. "With rare exception, the plight of these returning soldiers is ignored by the commercial news media, and as a consequence all too many of them are receiving substandard care, their injuries being compounded by a pro-war administration that doesn't care and doesn't want the public to know."

This Friday's rally and march comes on the eve of the second anniversary of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq. Along with several other local anti-war organizations, the PPRC will be taking part in a public teach-in on the wars and occupations of the Bush Administration, convening this Saturday, March 19th, at 10:00 am, at the Koinonia House campus ministries at 633 SW Montgomery, downtown Portland.

"The most important reporting on the plight of the returning injured US soldiers is being done by Mark Benjamin, and his articles ought to be required reading for every US citizen," said Seaman. Commenting on the practice of restricting the arrival of the injured soldiers to nighttime flights, Paul Rieckhoff explained that "They do it so nobody sees [the wounded]," Rieckhoff said. "In their mind-set, this is going to demoralize the American people. The overall cost of this war has been ... continuously hidden throughout. As the costs get higher, their efforts to conceal those costs also increase."³ Rieckhoff is executive director of Operation Truth, an organization that works on behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans.

One of the more disturbing issues uncovered by Benjamin in his reporting is the apparent effort by the Pentagon to classify injuries as non-combat-related so that the injured soldiers will not receive disability pay. "Indeed, the Army's system for allocating disability pay to traumatized vets is another source of their frustration and anger," writes Benjamin. "An Army panel at Walter Reed, called the Physical Evaluation Board, decides what percentage of income each soldier should get from the military to compensate him if he is too ill to serve any longer," he continues in the article posted at Salon.com, "The doctors decide whether wounds are combat related, and then the board decides how much disability the Army will pay." Benjamin reports that "The board's decision is critical for soldiers trying to make a living after leaving the Army with what can be a debilitating mental condition," and that "Fighting with the hospital about disability pay is a source of considerable stress just as these soldiers are trying to heal their minds."

Benjamin provides a heart-breaking account of one soldier, Spc. Alexis Soto-Ramirez, severely traumatized by his experiences in Iraq, who ultimately took his own life.⁴ In a February report, Benjamin described the fate of this soldier:

A copy of Soto-Ramirez's medical records, reviewed by Salon, show that a doctor who treated him in Puerto Rico upon his return from Iraq believed his mental problems were probably caused by the war and that his future was in the Army's hands. "Clearly, the psychiatric symptoms are combat related," a clinical psychologist at Roosevelt Roads Naval Hospital wrote on Nov. 24, 2003. The entry says, "Outcome will depend on adequacy and appropriateness of treatment." Doctors in Puerto Rico sent Soto-Ramirez to Walter Reed in Washington, D.C., to get the best care the Army had to offer. There, he was put in Ward 54, Walter Reed's "lockdown," or inpatient psychiatric ward, where the most troubled patients are supposed to have constant supervision.

But less than a month after leaving Puerto Rico, on Jan. 12, 2004, Soto-Ramirez was found dead, hanging in Ward 54. Army buddies who visited him in the days before his death said Soto-Ramirez was increasingly angry and despondent. "He was real upset with the treatment he was getting," said René Negron, a former Walter Reed psychiatric patient and a friend of Soto-Ramirez's. "He said: 'These people are giving me the runaround ... These people think I'm crazy, and I'm not crazy, Negron. I'm getting more crazy being up here.'"

"Those people in Ward 54 were responsible for him. Their responsibility was to have a 24-hour watch on him," Negron said in a telephone interview from his home in Puerto Rico. While Soto-Ramirez's death was by his own hand, Negron and other soldiers say the hospital shares the blame.

1. Democracy Now!, March 15, 2005, Interview with Mark Benjamin.
2. "The Invisible Wounded", by Mark Benjamin, Salon.com, March 8, 2005, http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2005/03/08/night_flights/print.html
3. "The Invisible Wounded", by Mark Benjamin
4. "Behind the walls of Ward 54", Mark Benjamin, Salon.com, February 18, 2005