



Clubs at local colleges help veterans make transition to classroom

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STAMFORD -- After returning to civilian life from his service in the U.S. Army as an airborne combat engineer, including a 15-month deployment in Iraq, William Fuscaldo enrolled at the University of Connecticut in Stamford.

Combat engineers work with explosives. Fuscaldo said his job involved driving designated routes through Baghdad scanning for something out of the ordinary, such as freshly dug dirt.

He was deployed from October 2006 to December 2007, when the situation in the city was "pretty bad."

"It's definitely another world," he said. "It's very stressful, but you get used to it."

Though Fuscaldo was a UConn student before joining the military in 2005, coming back last spring required an adjustment.

"Going from the military, where everybody is disciplined and you come into school and there is no discipline, it's hard to explain, the smallest things would get to me, like people talking in class," he said.

Veterans returning from service in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere face a challenging transition from the military to civilian life and school. Not only are veterans generally older than their classmates, but they have experiences beyond those of others in the classroom. In addition, they may be grappling with the physical and psychological aftermath of combat that require an adjustment for them as well as for the schools.

At UConn-Stamford, Fuscaldo is a member of the Veterans' Association, a student club which began meeting this fall. The Military Veterans' Club at Norwalk Community College also became fully active this semester and has organized a series of Veterans Day activities, including a theater performance and care package drive.

These clubs are part of a national trend. The advocacy group, Student Veterans of America, was founded in January of 2008 and has grown to 226 chapters, said Derek Blumke, executive director.

Going back to class after more than four years was the biggest concern for Gero Caponera, president of NCC's club. Caponera said he deliberately choose the community college after returning from service in the U.S. Army, which included a deployment to Iraq in 2005, because he knew he would receive more attention than a larger school offered.

"It really didn't bother me that I was older than the other students because I was so busy with school work and working," he said.

There is speculation the Post 9-11 GI Bill, implemented in August, could bring more veterans back to school because it offers more generous benefits than its predecessor, the Montgomery GI Bill.

Between delays in processing the new benefits, and the complexities of claiming benefits, available at the state and federal level, both clubs focus on sharing information with members.

At UConn-Stamford, Michael Zacchea, a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Marines and master of business administration student, has used his own experience and connections with national veterans' organizations to help his fellow students sort out their benefits.

Zacchea was commissioned as an officer in 1990, and served in Somali and Haiti before going to Iraq, where he as an adviser to what was then known as the Fifth Battalion, the first Iraqi Army Battalion trained by the U.S. military. He received two bronze stars and a purple heart for his service. Since returning to the United States in March 2005, he has spoken out about suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and a Traumatic Brain Injury.

While Zacchea said there is an expectation that former soldiers should suffer in silence, he has made a point of being open about the repercussions of his service.

Zacchea sees working with the Veterans' Association as a way to combat isolation veterans can retreat into.

"We understand each other," he said. "But we also need to present this population to the rest of the university."

On Thursday evening, the Veterans' Association and the Psychology Club will co-host a screening of a documentary on combat stress featuring Zacchea, followed by a discussion.

Asked how non-veterans can help veterans acclimate to life on campus, Zacchea said, "For me it's about asking. I find just personally, I am far better off talking about it than not talking about it."

Blumke, a University of Michigan student who served in the U.S. Air Force, advised caution, saying certain questions, like "Have you seen people die?" can make veterans feel more isolated.

"For a veteran that was in Iraq who was an infantryman and may have seen these things, he may have an answer he doesn't want to provide, and frankly, the student doesn't want the answer."

Instead, he recommended less intrusive questions, and, "just reaching out and saying thank you for your service."

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The UConn-Stamford Veterans' Association and the Psychology Club are co-hosting a screening of a documentary about combat stress, featuring association member and MBA student Michael Zacchea, who served with the U.S. Marines in Iraq. A discussion will follow the screening, scheduled for 7 p.m. Thursday in room 215 of University of Connecticut's Stamford campus on Broad Street and Washington Boulevard. NCC's Military Veterans' Club is holding a care package drive through Dec. 10. They are seeking beef jerky, coffee, certain toiletries and other reminders of home, which can be dropped off at collection points in the lobbies of the East and West campuses. Call 857-7015 or email ckruzshak@ncc.commnet.edu for more information.