

A National Newsletter for Veterans and their Health Care Providers

# WRIISC *Advantage*

DECEMBER 2010

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of Service to Veterans

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WRIISC

Improving the health of  
**GULF WAR VETERANS**

**WRIISC**  
War Related Illness & Injury Study Center

 Department of  
Veterans Affairs

# War Related Illness and Injury Study Center (WRIISC):

## MAKING PROGRESS ONE VETERAN AT A TIME

AS THE DEPARTMENT of Veterans Affairs (VA) continues to look for ways to provide Veterans with improved quality of care, the WRIISC (pronounced “risk”) is proud to be a part of that mission. Since our inception in 2001, the WRIISC National Program at our three locations in East Orange, New Jersey (NJ), Palo Alto, California (CA), and Washington, DC has seen over 2,500 Veterans. These Veterans have come to the WRIISC for comprehensive clinical evaluations and other services

that include environmental exposure assessments, neuropsychological examinations, and sleep studies among others. In addition, the WRIISC refers Veterans for consults in a number of areas and provides complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) services that support Veteran wellness and overall health.

**Since WRIISC’s inception in 2001, we have seen over 2,500 Veterans.**

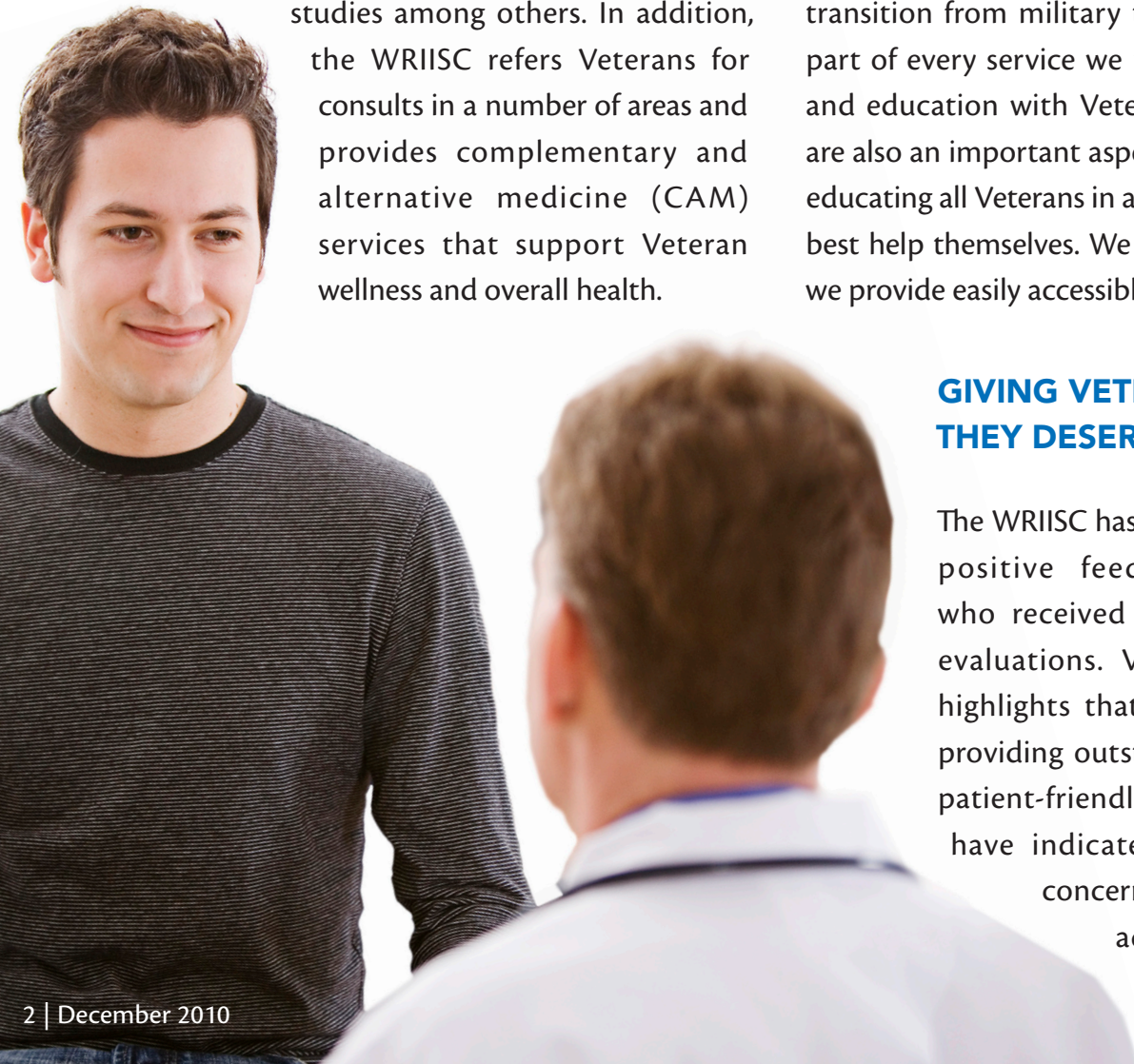
Since inception, the WRIISC has focused on evaluating and assisting Veterans of all eras with chronic, difficult to diagnose medical symptoms, also known as Medically Unexplained Symptoms or MUS. We have expertise in addressing conflict-specific concerns that range from Agent

Orange to sandstorms to musculoskeletal injuries. The WRIISC has also been on the frontlines in responding to the health concerns of Veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom/

Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF). We recognize that all Veterans may need special attention as they transition from military to civilian life and this is part of every service we provide. Communication and education with Veterans who have concerns are also an important aspect of care so we focus on educating all Veterans in a way that enables them to best help themselves. We work hard to ensure that we provide easily accessible and useful information.

### GIVING VETERANS THE CARE THEY DESERVE

The WRIISC has received overwhelmingly positive feedback from Veterans who received comprehensive clinical evaluations. Veteran feedback often highlights that we have succeeded in providing outstanding clinical care in a patient-friendly atmosphere. Veterans have indicated that they feel their concerns also are appropriately addressed and that they



were listened to and cared for. Veterans who were seen at the WRIISC tell us they left with a clearer idea of next steps in terms of the “big picture” for managing and improving their health. Many Veterans were relieved to get a new diagnosis and perhaps different treatment suggestions for their health concerns. For some Veterans, we were unable to establish a clear diagnosis for their complex health concerns or make a link between an environmental exposure concern and health condition. For these Veterans, we were often still able to provide concrete steps and recommendations thus enabling them to improve their overall functioning and their quality of life. The positive feedback we have received lets the WRIISC team know that we are making a difference in Veterans’ lives. We welcome all feedback on our programs as it provides us with valuable information to continually strengthen our program and enable us to better serve the Veterans we see.

**We often hear surprise and praise for the extensive amount of individual attention Veterans receive.**

## **IMPROVING THE LIVES OF VETERANS THROUGH RESEARCH**

Since the WRIISC was established in 2001, our unique team of researchers, educators, risk communicators, and clinicians work together to use research, education, and proper communication tools to improve clinical care. We are dedicated to conducting research aimed at preventing and treating war related health problems. For example, we currently conduct a study of service members deploying to Iraq and Afghanistan to better understand how the deployment experience affects post-deployment health. We also have a variety of ongoing current research projects that focus on the



**WRIISC MILESTONE: SINCE INCEPTION IN 2001, THE WRIISC HAS SEEN OVER 2,500 VETERANS!**

treatment of MUS. Several

of these studies focus on CAM. In one pilot program, the WRIISC provides a therapy mind/body class to Veterans who suffer from pain and fatigue. We offer this program as a complement to their

ongoing traditional medical treatment.

## **THE FUTURE**

We are committed to continuing our mission to improve the lives of Veterans by providing post-deployment health expertise to Veterans and their health care providers. Through our clinical programs, research, education, and risk communication, we look forward to many more years of making a difference in Veterans’ individual lives by providing high quality services to the Veteran community. [↪](#)

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**CORRECTION:** In our Spring 2010 edition’s *Around the WRIISC News* feature, we introduced the NJ WRIISC Assistant Director for Outreach, Maria Falca-Dodson, as “Brigadier General.” Her correct title is “Major General.” We regret this error.

# Gulf War Veterans:

## Addressing the Past and Ensuring the Future

**IT HAS BEEN 20 YEARS** since the first Gulf War began. In addition to continually thanking the brave men and women who served, we must ensure that we address their health conditions, concerns, and impact of deployment on their lives. For the past decade, the WRIISC has been committed to improving the health of

Gulf War 1 (GW1) Veterans through our post-deployment services. From providing high quality medical care to addressing exposure concerns to conducting research, we are committed to playing an important role in understanding and improving the health outcomes of GW1 Veterans.

### CLINICAL CARE

A number of GW1 Veterans who come to the WRIISC have multiple unexplained symptoms, diagnosed complex health problems, concerns about how exposures might have negatively impacted their health, psychological conditions, and social hardships. Many have previously seen providers and have had numerous work ups for their symptoms but are still struggling for answers to their questions. GW1 Veterans who come to the WRIISC receive a comprehensive clinical evaluation conducted over several days by our multidisciplinary team of specialists. At the end of their comprehensive

*"I am an absolute firm believer that the WRIISC was instrumental in changing my life for the better. Through the knowledge about my own health and the suggestions for healthy coping skills I gained from the WRIISC team I have gone on to do things in life I never thought possible." —GW1 Veteran evaluated at the NJ WRIISC*

clinical evaluations, Veterans get the opportunity to sit down with the entire team of specialists to discuss findings and to receive an individualized recommendation plan or "road map" to assist them in addressing their health concerns. These plans usually combine next steps to take for diagnosed conditions including those

which we may have discovered during evaluation, as well as recommendations to improve psychological or social health. The WRIISC has provided more than 300 of these specialized comprehensive evaluations to GW1 Veterans.

Over the years, feedback from GW1 Veterans about the WRIISC clinical evaluation highlights their satisfaction with:

- ✓ the individualized assessment,
- ✓ attention received,
- ✓ meeting face to face with the entire clinical team "at the same time," and especially
- ✓ the opportunity to have time to ask questions and be heard.

## ADDRESSING EXPOSURE CONCERNS

Many GW1 Veterans have concerns that military exposures may have negatively impacted their current health or could in the future. **Over the years, the WRIISC has evaluated over 450 Gulf War Veterans with exposure concerns related to their service.** In a majority of the cases, we have been able to address health concerns related to exposure. In others, we have recommended further steps to investigate the possible impact of an exposure on a Veteran's health.

## RESEARCH

While providing GW1 Veterans with clinical care is job one, focusing on what we still do not know and better methods of treatment are critically important. WRIISC researchers and clinicians have worked closely together with the common goal of using research to improve clinical care for GW1 Veterans. Studies completed at the WRIISC focused on everything from physiological and behavioral studies to neuroimaging studies and health services research. Findings from these studies provided insight into the health of GW1 Veterans and created a foundation for future research studies. Circulating research findings within VA and the wider scientific community is an essential part of improving care for Veterans. WRIISC staff members have published over 45 research papers related to the health of GW1 Veterans. In spite of these accomplishments, the need for research related to GW1 Veterans remains great. Currently, seven ongoing WRIISC studies relate to GW1 Veterans while four new proposals are planned.


The WRIISC mission is to address post-deployment health concerns. GW1 Veterans remain at the heart of this mission. We welcome the opportunity to have more GW1 Veterans referred to our center for comprehensive clinical evaluations, assistance with exposure concerns, and research study participation. 



PHOTO ATTRIBUTION: JIM GORDON, JAMES DALE100@YAHOO.COM, U.S. GOVERNMENT PHOTOGRAPHER

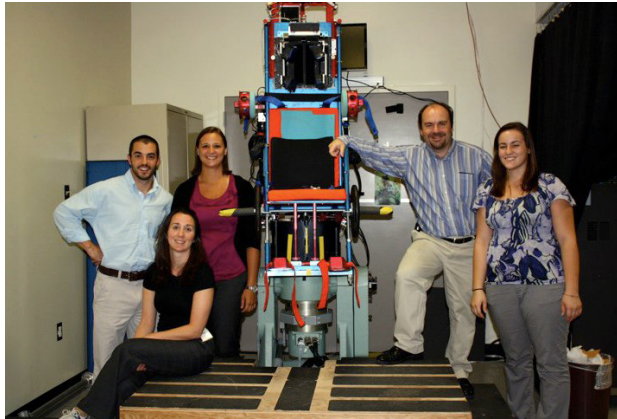
The WRIISC was proud to acknowledge the service of GW1 Veterans on this 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. The Director of NJ WRIISC, Gudrun Lange, PhD, traveled to Dallas in August to attend the Gulf War Veterans Reunion and help commence the anniversary by giving a presentation on WRIISC services and how Veterans can get the help they need and deserve from our program. According to Dr. Lange, "I was honored to go to this event to represent the WRIISC Program - to show our respect for those Veterans who served in the Gulf War and to demonstrate our commitment to continuously improve the health of Gulf War 1 Veterans nationwide through our efforts."

# NEW NJ Associate Director of Research

**EVERY WRIISC** location has staff dedicated to conducting research on post-deployment health issues. NJ WRIISC is pleased to announce that Jorge M. Serrador, PhD, who joined NJ WRIISC as Assistant Director of Research, is now our Associate Director of Research. Prior to this, Dr. Serrador worked in the Department of Neurology at Harvard Medical School

and Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, both located in Boston. His educational background from the University of Waterloo (Canada) includes: Bachelor of Science in Physiology, Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, and a Masters degree in Kinesiology (the study of human movement), specializing in exercise physiology. He received his doctorate in Kinesiology from the University of Western Ontario (Canada) and conducted his Postdoctoral Scholar research in Gerontology, or the study of aging. Currently, Dr. Serrador is an Associate Editor for BioMed Central journals Neurology and Neuroscience. His work on brain blood flow is among the top 50 most cited articles in the journal Stroke, a leading journal in neurology. He also received the Science Foundation Ireland E.T.S. Walton Award that provides funding to internationally recognized scientists to spend time as a visiting professor in Ireland.

Dr. Serrador has been previously funded by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH)



JORGE SERRADOR (SECOND FROM RIGHT) WITH HIS RESEARCH TEAM (LEFT TO RIGHT): MICHAEL FALVO, MELISSA BLATT (SEATED), JESSICA JASIEN, AND REBECCA MILLER AT NASA JOHNSON SPACE CENTER, HOUSTON, TEXAS.

to look into the relationship between balance and brain blood flow in fainting. His current NIH-funded work extends this into the area of nausea, a common symptom in many medical conditions.

Dr. Serrador brings a wealth of experience to the NJ WRIISC as an international expert in both brain blood flow and balance function.

As head of the Integrative Human Physiology Lab (IHPL) at the NJ WRIISC, his research will focus on issues critical to our returning Veterans. Working collaboratively with NASA, he will continue to examine the role that impaired balance function may play in MUS as well as mild traumatic brain injury (mTBI). To conduct this work, a specialized human rotator, built at NASA, will be installed at the WRIISC. He will also examine the effect of mTBI on brain blood flow.

Dr. Serrador continues to work on new techniques to improve neural function that can result in improved balance function. This technique may translate into new treatment modalities for Veterans with this problem. Using this same technique, he has also been able to improve sensory function in patients with sensory loss due to diabetes, providing a novel treatment model. The addition of Dr. Serrador's integrative approach to understanding disease will help the WRIISC translate new research findings into innovative treatment paradigms. 🍷

# CAM Updates:

## What is the WRIISC doing in this Area?

The DC and CA WRIISC locations have developed Complementary Alternative Medicine (CAM) educational programs for Veterans while the NJ WRIISC is well on its way. CAM has been shown to help improve symptoms such as pain and fatigue and enhance emotional well-being.

In response to feedback from combat Veterans with post-deployment health concerns, the DC WRIISC began their CAM Program in 2006. These CAM treatments are performed by experienced practitioners who have treated many combat Veterans with deployment-related health concerns. They offer a number of different CAM programs including:

- **GROUP AND INDIVIDUAL ACUPUNCTURE PROGRAMS:** Acupuncture is thought to support overall health by helping to restore a sense of internal balance and vitality. During the acupuncture sessions, certain points on the body are stimulated with the insertion of fine needles.
- **YOGA NIDRA PROGRAM:** Yoga Nidra therapy tries to bring mind and body into harmony through breathing and meditation.
- **LABYRINTH PROGRAM:** A therapeutic walking meditation exercise.

The CA WRIISC CAM program started in January 2010 by providing yoga classes to Veterans. Word of mouth and a modest publicity campaign is quickly making this a popular program.

The reasons for taking yoga vary among the Veterans but according to staff at CA WRIISC, many have reported help with relieving symptoms of Post

Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and lower back pain. One Veteran travels four hours each way for the yoga class each week, while many travel at least one hour to and from the classes held at CA WRIISC. Clearly these classes are providing a valuable service to our Veterans.

As the CAM programs at DC and CA continue to grow in popularity, they look to expand their programs to better address the concerns of combat Veterans with post-deployment illnesses or injuries.

The NJ WRIISC is in the final credentialing stage of a Qigong instructor, Dr. Anna Rusiewicz. Dr. Rusiewicz, a NJ WRIISC faculty member, is an expert in Traditional Chinese Medicine and a Clinical Health Psychologist. Once the credentialing process is complete, she will be able to educate and inform Veterans about Qigong, an ancient wellness practice similar to the Traditional Chinese Medicine modality, Tai Chi. Dr. Rusiewicz also heralds the beginning of CAM research studies at the NJ WRIISC. She will be conducting pilot studies of Qigong for Veterans with unexplained fatigue. Stay tuned for updates. 🌸

The DC WRIISC is conducting a VA Research study that will explore whether a group ear acupuncture program may help Veterans with PTSD-related sleep difficulties. If you are an Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom Veteran who lives in the Washington, DC metropolitan area and are interested in learning more about this study, please e-mail Michelle Prisco at: [michelle.prisco@va.gov](mailto:michelle.prisco@va.gov) or call us at: 202-745-8000, extension 6236 or 6235.

# Around the WRIISC *News*

## NJ WRIISC

### Educating providers to improve Veteran care

**AS LEADERS** in addressing exposure concerns for Veterans, the WRIISC remains on the forefront of educating providers on how to care for Veterans with exposure concerns.

This past July, NJ WRIISC staff members, Ron Teichman, MD, MPH, Associate Director for Clinical Care, Education and Risk Communication and Susan L. Santos, PhD, MS, Assistant Director for Education and Risk Communication, developed and were featured in a live 90-minute satellite broadcast on VA Knowledge Network. This broadcast was filmed in Salt Lake City, Utah, and was available for VA employees to view on television and the Internet. The title of the broadcast was “Understanding and Responding to Veteran Exposure Concerns: *From Assessment to Communication.*”

The purpose of this broadcast was to acquaint health care providers with some of the common military related exposures of concern for Veterans and to train health care providers in how to both assess and communicate about military related environmental exposures with Veterans. The successful program was rebroadcasted 10 times throughout August and September. VA also selected this program to be shared with and broadcasted to other federal agencies due to the high quality and relevance of the information provided. Additionally, a limited number of DVDs of the broadcast enable us to reach out to a broader universe of providers.



SUSAN L. SANTOS, PHD (SEATED, RIGHT) GETS OUTFITTED FOR A SATELLITE BROADCAST OF “UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONDING TO VETERAN EXPOSURE CONCERNS: *FROM ASSESSMENT TO COMMUNICATION.*”

In addition to the Satellite Broadcast, three NJ WRIISC staff members developed lectures and were presenters in a VA National effort to educate all providers on exposure issues of concern and VA plans for surveillance. This effort was supported by VA Central Office, VA Office of Public Health and Environmental Hazards and VA Employee Education System (EES).

The series of day-long training sessions for environmental health clinicians and primary care providers across the country entitled, “Exposure Concerns of Veterans: *What You Need to Know,*” was held in Indianapolis, Indiana and Portland, Oregon in July 2010 and in West Virginia and South Carolina in October 2010. Feedback from providers who attended these sessions was positive, indicating both the need for education on this topic in the VA provider community and the importance of knowledge gained/applicability to practice.





## DC WRIISC

### New autonomic reflex laboratory for evaluating OEF/OIF Veterans

**HAVE YOU EVER HEARD** of “Autonomic Disorder” or “Complex Regional Pain Syndrome” (see side box)?

A true story of a Gulf War Veteran will illustrate some

of the unique advanced diagnostics and services available at DC WRIISC. Patty Green (name changed to protect privacy) is a 27-year-old female Veteran who came to DC WRIISC with severe pain in her right hand occurring most days for the seven months since returning to the United States after her deployment to Iraq. Before coming to the WRIISC, Ms. Green underwent carpal tunnel decompression surgery to alleviate the pain. However, her pain worsened after the surgery. Her health care providers were planning a second surgery to implant a spinal cord stimulator when she was referred to the WRIISC for a second opinion.

Ms. Green visited the Autonomic Function Testing Program at DC WRIISC. During this visit, the WRIISC clinical staff discovered that when compared to Ms. Green’s left hand, in her painful right hand/forearm: a) the vessels provided less than 50 percent of the blood flow, b) the nerves supplied less than 50 percent of the sweating activity, and c) the temperature differed by more than 1 degree

in 70 percent of the surface areas. With this vital information, the WRIISC physicians

were able to provide a diagnosis of Complex Regional Pain Syndrome and develop an appropriate medication and treatment plan. Currently, the Veteran is pleased to report that

she is pain free most of the time, and importantly, the unnecessary and invasive spinal cord procedure was avoided.

Besides unexplained pain caused by Complex Regional Pain Syndrome, other autonomic disorders may manifest as unexplained irritable bowel syndrome, some

types of chronic fatigue syndrome, ill-defined dizziness and/or fainting spells, and poorly-controlled or early stage reactive airway disease/heart disease/diabetes,



DC WRIISC NEUROLOGIST MIAN LI, MD, PHD IN HIS AUTONOMIC TESTING LAB

#### **AUTONOMIC NERVOUS DISORDER (ANS):**

A disorder of the autonomic nervous system. ANS affects heart rate, digestion, respiration rate, salivation, perspiration, diameter of the pupils, micturition (urination), and sexual arousal.

#### **COMPLEX REGIONAL PAIN SYNDROME:**

A chronic progressive disease characterized by severe pain, swelling and changes in the skin.

among others. The autonomic testing available in the Autonomic Function Testing Program at the DC WRIISC may establish the diagnosis and guide treatments for a diverse spectrum of autonomic disorders.

## CA WRIISC

Presentation by



OEF Veteran  
Jeremiah Ridgeway,  
former Calvary Scout,  
U.S. Army 10<sup>th</sup>  
Mountain Division

**THE CA WRIISC** hosted a presentation for clinicians, chaplains, members of the hospital's Polytrauma unit, psychology students, and hospital administrators on September 22, 2010 by OEF Veteran Jeremiah Ridgeway, former Calvary Scout, U.S. Army 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division. Mr. Ridgeway's photo of an Afghan soldier (at right), shot in the province of Nuristan in Afghanistan won the Editor's choice award from National Geographic magazine in March 2008 and was later published in a special edition of the magazine. A second photo (at top right), received an honorable mention in a later contest. An Emmy-nominated short film documentary featuring his photos can be seen on the Web:

[www.nationalgeographic.com/ridgeway/emmyentry31](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/ridgeway/emmyentry31)



FOUR LOCAL NURISTAN CONSTRUCTION CONTRACTORS AWAITING WORK ON A UNITED STATES FORWARD OPERATING BASE

Mr. Ridgeway spoke about his tour of duty in Afghanistan, highlighting the complexities of fighting in a region where the enemy wears no uniform. He described how he became interested in photography and took us through a photo journey of his service in Nuristan from February 2006 to July 2007. His exquisite and candid photographs capture



AN AFGHAN NATIONAL ARMY SOLDIER IN KAMDESH, NURISTAN AMID THE FIRST SNOWFALL OF THE YEAR

the conditions and atmosphere of the war zone in Afghanistan. His descriptions of events leading up to the photos allow us to imagine what he and other soldiers live with on a daily basis. He described dust so thick on the ground that each step sends up a cloud of dust all around as you

walk. One photo shows a dismal trailer-like room that served as living quarters. This was considered luxurious since it had electricity which was a big improvement over the previous month spent sleeping under a Humvee.

Mr. Ridgeway described how the camera allowed him to separate himself from the desolation and violence he was photographing. His photos captured candid views of the Afghan population and the effect the war has had on its citizens, particularly young children. Note the premature signs of aging seen in the hands of the young boy (below). During his presentation he touched briefly on the topics of Post Traumatic Stress and Traumatic Brain Injury suffered by Veterans and how multiple blast exposures and close proximity to injury and death takes a toll on many soldiers.



A LOCAL NURISTAN BOY BEARING PREMATURELY AGING HANDS LOOKS OUT FROM INSIDE THE REMAINS OF A BURNED SOVIET ARMORED PERSONNEL CARRIER.

Mr. Ridgeway currently works full time for the Vet Center in Santa Cruz, CA, and attends college part time in business administration. He helps Veterans receive the services they deserve and plans to spread the word about the WRIISC program. [↗](#)

**ABOUT THE COVER:** Technical Sergeant Hans H. Deffner captured this photograph of New York City's victory parade for returning Veterans of Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm on June 10, 1991.

# WRIISC Advantage

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## *Your Second Opinion Resource*

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