

More female veterans coping with postwar scars

NOVEMBER 10, 2014, 10:36 PM LAST UPDATED: MONDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 2014, 10:38 PM
BY TODD SOUTH
STAFF WRITER | THE RECORD



VIOREL FLORESCU/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Retired Marine Angelica Jimenez conducting a fitness class at Carve Your Body in Emerson. She said exercise helps her cope with the mental struggles after her service.

Few people would look at Angelica Jimenez and think war veteran. But when she walks down Fifth Avenue in Manhattan in the Veterans Day Parade this morning, at 5 feet 2 inches tall and with hair down to her shoulders, she will be a reminder of the growing contribution of women to current and future wars.

She also stands as the face of a rising female veteran population.

It's been nearly a decade since Jimenez, then a 20-year-old U.S. Marine from Dumont, was with 13 other female service members near Fallujah, Iraq, when their transport truck was rammed by a suicide bomber.

But that day, June 23, 2005, and today, Veterans Day, bring memories of service and tragedy for Jimenez.

“It’s actually a very sentimental holiday for me,” Jimenez said. “It’s not just a day of sales.”

The 2005 blast killed six service members, three of them women. Most of the 14 female Marines inside the truck with Jimenez suffered burns and other injuries. The blast knocked her unconscious, and she awoke in the midst of an insurgent gunbattle.

Blood covered her face, and burns marked her hand, arm, face and leg.

“The shrapnel ripped half of my inner thigh out,” she said.

A female Marine helped carry her to safety and likely saved her life.

Despite that harrowing experience, civilians and some fellow veterans see her and don’t think “veteran.”

There is a popular veteran image in the American imagination: a graying white male with an insignia-decorated hat, jacket or vest. Or sometimes a younger male, still sporting the short haircut and shave that marked his military grooming.

“There is an image that a lot of people don’t recognize,” Jimenez said.

More than 7,000 women served in the Vietnam War, according to the Army Times. The publication counted 16 killed in service. In the Persian Gulf War, 33,000 women served and six were killed. So far, 143 women have died fighting in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

And for female veterans, the growing combat experience comes with little recognition.

Veterans are increasingly younger, more diverse and more female, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Over the next 30 years, the U.S. veteran population is expected to decline from nearly 22 million to less than 15 million with the passing of the World War II and Korean War generations and the decreasing size of the nation’s military.

At the same time, the percentage of female veterans will nearly double, from 9 percent in 2013 to 17 percent in 2043.

Black veteran numbers will rise from 11 percent to 17 percent, while Hispanic veteran figures will increase from 6 to 9 percent of the total veteran population.

The Department of Defense released updated figures Monday showing 4,412 U.S. military members died from fighting in Iraq while 31,949 were wounded in action. An estimated 1.5 million served in Iraq during the nearly nine-year war. In Afghanistan, there have been 2,210 U.S. military deaths and 19,924 wounded.

Military doctors at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas, patched up Jimenez, but beneath the physical scars, the memories of acrid smoke, flame, gunfire and death linger.

Jimenez was honorably discharged from the Marines in 2006, moved to Florida and went to college. She fell into a mental fog of sorts. At times angry, at times depressed, she wasn't herself.

She decided to move home to New Jersey in 2011 and now lives in South Hackensack. After a short time, she tried out a Zumba dance exercise class. Bouncing around, surrounded by sweat and smiles, she felt energized in a way she hadn't felt since her time in Iraq.

"I feel like it saved my life in a lot of ways," Jimenez said.

But, Jimenez said, her physical scars still weighed on her.

"I've been carrying this scar. ... I have not gotten used to it," Jimenez said. She avoided the beach altogether until this past summer. She would throw away tight-fitting clothing that betrayed her disfigured thigh and resorted to always wearing black because it hid the jagged contour of her leg.

"When a man has a scar, it's a trophy," Jimenez said. "When a woman has a scar, it's about devastation."

"When a man has a scar, it's a trophy," Jimenez said. "When a woman has a scar, it's about devastation."

Jimenez was eventually hired as an instructor at the Carve Your Body Studio in Emerson. Her boss, Bessie Neshan, said she knew something bothered the young woman but she didn't ask. It wasn't until this summer, when Jimenez asked Neshan for time off to travel to California for surgery on her remaining scars, that Neshan learned Jimenez had been in the Marines and served in combat.

"It was sad to know that she had to undergo that kind of trauma so young," Neshan said.

A friend, a fellow Marine who'd gotten help, suggested something that might help her, too.

Operation Mend at the University of California, Los Angeles, is a program that pairs plastic surgeons with veterans who have physical scars that require more complex procedures than are typically provided by military doctors. Since its inception in 2007, the program has helped 116 veterans, many with multiple surgeries.

Part of her feared the outcome. Could they make it look worse? Would she go through another round of surgery for nothing?

But friends pushed her to give it a try. One dragged her to a store to fill out the application and send it off.

Dr. Christopher Crisera, Jimenez's surgeon with Operation Mend, said that trepidation is common, especially among veterans who've been in and out of hospitals multiple times. He called it "surgical fatigue."

But after the surgery, the body changes, Crisera said, and sometimes the veteran does, too.

"We really see their personalities re-blossom, regain their self-confidence," he said. "They feel like they're doing something positive about their appearance and feel better about themselves."

Jimenez had surgery in September and it smoothed out some of the scar, restoring some of her leg's natural curve. She's ecstatic about the improvements and preparing to schedule another surgery for next year.

Leading the class as an instructor at Carve Your Body Studio last Thursday, she exhorted the 20 women to move, shake, jump and slide across the room for more than an hour.

Like thousands of combat veterans, male and female, she has moved beyond her military life, finding her way in the civilian world but always aware of her experience.

"I'm a Marine like any other Marine. I went to boot camp," Jimenez said. "I went through the same struggle and I was out there fighting the same as everyone else."

Email: south@northjersey.com