

Horses help disabled vets

Animals calm bad memories of combat

By Jim Steinberg Staff Writer

At age 66, Richard Keto is still haunted by the intrusive memories of combat in Vietnam's A Shau Valley, a key entry point for men and materiel from the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Then a sergeant with the 101st Airborne Division, Sgt. Keto was a squad leader on "search and destroy" missions for the division.

Although he missed by one year the infamous battle of "Hamburger Hill," fighting still was intense during his combat tour, in 1970 and 1971.

Too often, terrified civilians would fall into the withering crossfire between United States and North Vietnamese forces, he said during a recent interview.

Keto was among the second group of veterans last month from Jerry L. Pettis Memorial

HORSES A4



Al Cuizon Staff Photographer

Chris Williams, 50, of Rialto gently strokes Sky's forehead during an equine-assisted therapy class Thursday at Buffalo Meadows Ranch near Redlands.

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Ben Tovar, 59, of Grand Terrace works with Bentley during therapy Thursday at Buffalo Meadows Ranch near Redlands.

Al Cuizon Staff Photographer

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HORSES

From A1

Veterans Medical Center in Loma Linda to complete an equine-assisted therapy program.

"This has been very calming. And my blood pressure has gone down. So has my cholesterol. I'm less anxious," he said.

Many returning vets complain of having a very short fuse when dealing with civilians.

But maintaining a calm demeanor is important. A horse won't deal with you if you are not calm, said Sal Puentes, 52, of Rialto, a former Marine.

Veterans in this group said they gained confidence through the tasks instructor Angie Sheer asked them to do with their horses, which include having the horse walk in a certain direction, then having them go into an enclosure.

The course does not involve riding the horses.

Keto said he had never been around a horse before and he was initially afraid to be inside a corral with one.

But he said learning to keep that anxiety in check and controlling a 1,000-pound-plus animal has built his confidence.

The idea to bring equine therapy as an additional treatment option to the Loma Linda VA was originally pitched by Jeff Allen, a volunteer peer support specialist there and a 21-year Army veteran.

Allen proposed the program to the Loma Linda VA as part of several diverse treatment modalities he and others are promoting as "alternatives to medications."

"Medicines certainly have their place, but we feel there needs to be tools to teach a love of life.

"You can tolerate a lot of pain if you are having fun," said Allen, who survived a helicopter crash, his legs being crushed by a heavy object and a broken back in separate accidents during his military service.

Last year, the VA funded the horse therapy pilot pro-

gram class from a donation, he said.

It was viewed as successful, but Allen was told there no funds for new classes this year.

In his funding hunt, Allen connected with the Disabled American Veterans Chapter 12 in San Bernardino.

"We are seeing a new generation of veterans coming out of military service and having PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), as well as problems readjusting to civilian life," said Richard Valdez, chapter commander.

The National Institute of Mental Health defines PTSD as an anxiety disorder that can develop after exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which grave physical harm occurred or was threatened.

The chapter wants to ensure that there are viable programs available to help the new group of veterans immediately and therefore decided to fund the program for this year.

Much less was known about PTSD in the post-Vietnam era, and as a result those veterans suffered for 30 or more years before appropriate help was available, said Valdez, a Marine veteran who fought in an area south of the A Shau Valley nicknamed the "Arizona Territory" due, in part, to its frequent ambushes and numerous mines and booby traps.

Valdez, who was on the front lines during the Tet offensive of 1968 — a massive attack by North Vietnamese regular and irregular forces — brought PTSD issues home to his family and children.

"We want to stop of the cycle behaviors being transferred to children," Valdez said.

Kendal Boyd, an associate professor of psychology at Loma Linda University, who has studied the traumatic effects of war on veterans, said he can understand how a warrior who might not want to sit and discuss problems with a therapist, might be more receptive to therapy inside a horse corral.

The small body of studies on equine therapy suggest it is a "promising technique" he said.

Nancy Farrell, a staff psychologist with the Loma Linda VA, is surveying equine therapy students before and after their six-week instruction course for

anxiety, depression and quality of life.

Eventually, she would like to do a research project on the project.

Dealing with a horse forces a veteran to confront his own unchecked emotions, said Boyd, Farrell and equine class participants.

"Horses are intuitive. They pick up emotions and reflect what comes from you," said Sheer, a veteran riding instructor who has been conducting equine therapy classes for about 10 years.

For teaching, Sheer uses her own horses or borrows horses boarded at the Buffalo Meadows Ranch, where she teaches.

She picks horses that have dispositions appropriate for the day's lesson. And she noticed that veterans tend to gravitate to horses that are like themselves.

In the first group last year, Sheer said one veteran with extreme symptoms of withdrawal was attracted to a horse which had been mistreated by its prior owner and was itself withdrawn.

The horse responded well to the vet's friendship efforts, she said.

The next class, which should begin later this month, will be made up entirely of female veterans, Sheer said.

Farrell said class participants have told her they not only benefitted from the class with horses, but also from the scenic location, which is in the Riverside County section of San Timoteo Canyon, near the border with Redlands.

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