

The Washington Post

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To the Judges:

At its core, truly great journalism is about righting wrongs and changing systems that are unfair or do not work. In recent years, no newspaper reporting has more clearly accomplished this ambitious goal than the stories by The Washington Post's Dana Priest and Anne Hull that exposed the deep and widespread problems in the treatment of wounded soldiers at Walter Reed Army Medical Center and in the rest of the military health system.

Priest and Hull spent more than four months visiting the Walter Reed outpatient facilities, meeting with Iraqi veterans and their families. They proceeded carefully, without identifying themselves to military authorities as they learned about the wounded soldiers' experiences and gathered the detail that gave their stories such poignancy. Washington Post photographer Michel du Cille joined them to visually document their reporting with powerful images. The trust he earned from the physically and psychologically wounded men and women provided emotional and poignant photographs.

Their series, "The Other Walter Reed," resulted in immediate and powerful corrective action from military leaders, the White House and Congress. The day after their first story appeared in February, the Army began cleaning up the substandard housing at Walter Reed. Within weeks, the commander of Walter Reed, the secretary of the Army and the surgeon general of the Army were removed from their jobs. A House of Representatives subcommittee held an extraordinary field hearing at Walter Reed, at which many of the soldiers interviewed and profiled in the series appeared as witnesses. Three blue-ribbon panels were appointed to investigate the allegations reported by Priest and Hull.

Examining the impact of The Post stories, the Project for Excellence in Journalism concluded: "At a time when supporting the troops is the only common ground in the polarizing debate over Iraq, the Post investigation reverberated through the White House, Pentagon and media. Picked up by everyone from cable hosts to network anchors, the story of the war on the home front – dominated by the Walter Reed story – received the highest level of coverage of the year in the week of February 18 – 23."

In a speech at the Naval Academy in May, Defense Secretary Robert Gates cited the reports about Walter Reed in The Post as an example of the importance of a free press. "When it identifies a problem, as at Walter Reed, the response of senior

leaders should be to find out if the allegations are true – as they were at Walter Reed – and if so, say so, and then act to remedy the problem. If untrue, then be able to document that fact. The press is not the enemy, and to treat it as such is self-defeating.”

But Priest, Hull and du Cille were not finished. Following up on thousands of emails and tips from readers around the country and the world, they continued their examination of the veterans health system, and how it treated the men and women who came back from Iraq with psychological wounds as well as physical ones.

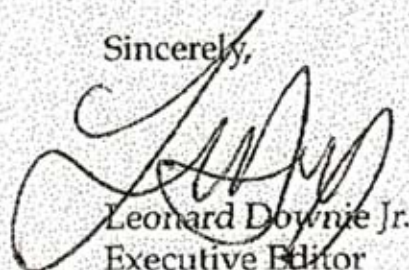
Each time they published, the system responded. In July, the secretary of Veterans Affairs arranged a private breakfast at a diner in the Bronx with Spec. Jeans Cruz, who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), to assure him that his case would be reviewed and his future job training needs would be in recognized. In September, after Priest and Hull wrote about a veteran suffering from PTSD who could not receive proper treatment in his home state of West Virginia, the department’s deputy for mental health services appeared at the man’s trailer to assure him he would be put in the right programs and his disability classification changed so that he and his family would have enough money to live.

In December they wrote of an Army lieutenant who attempted suicide in Iraq after suffering a mental breakdown and then had criminal charges filed against her while being treated at Walter Reed despite a military sanity board’s finding that she was insane at the time of the attempted shooting. After the story appeared, an Army hearing officer recommended that she should not face a court martial or any other punishment.

Nearly a year after the first Walter Reed stories appeared, their effect can be measured by the changed lives of those soldiers they featured in their articles, but also more broadly, by a changed system. Recommendations from the commissions appointed as a result of the stories have now been implemented and Congress has increased funding for veterans healthcare by hundreds of millions of dollars. The Army has added hundreds of personnel to oversee the treatment of wounded soldiers, restructured its system for oversight of the wounded and is instituting improved care for soldiers with PTSD and traumatic brain injury. The Department of Veterans Affairs has announced a review of all its medical facilities to ensure health care standards are met.

These were stories that moved a nation and produced results. We are proud to nominate them for the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service in Category 1.

Sincerely,



Leonard Downie Jr.
Executive Editor