

PALO ALTO DAILY NEWS

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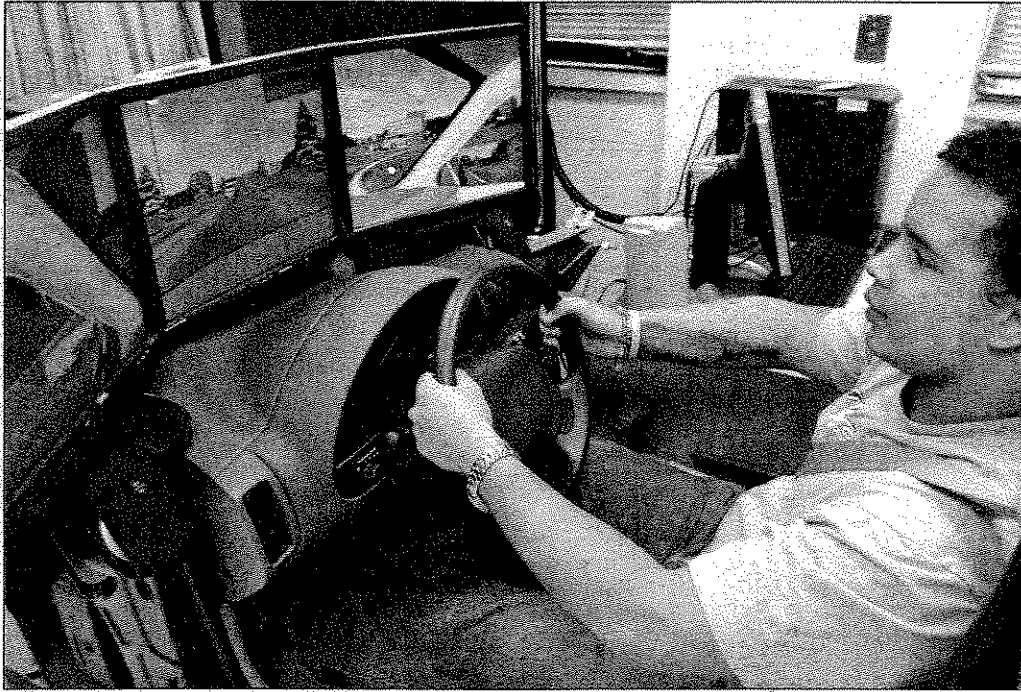
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Wounded soldier on mend



TRAINING — Cpl. Jason Poole works on the driving simulator at the VA Palo Alto Polytrauma Center. Poole was severely injured in Iraq and has undergone six reconstructive surgeries since arriving at the center unable to talk or breathe on his own. Daily News photo by Victor Maccharoli.

Hospital rehabilitates troops injured in Iraq

BY DANIEL VELTON
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

Several decades ago, the shrapnel that blasted through the side of Jason Poole's head and came out his eye probably would have killed him.

Today, the 23-year-old U.S. Marine corporal is considering enrolling in a local community college, perhaps studying to

become a teacher. He is planning a move over the weekend into a Cupertino apartment to live with a friend.

He is discussing these plans over a Burger King breakfast sandwich about 17 months after being hospitalized and going through daily rehabilitation at a Palo Alto "polytrauma" center, one of four such facilities

nationwide, where medical specialists are treating a new breed of wounded servicemembers.

"The genesis for this was the number of injuries coming from Iraq and Afghanistan," said Gordon Mansfield, Deputy Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs, who visited the Palo Alto VA hospital site yes-

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terday. "The military is saving people that in my generation — Vietnam — would have been dead."

Poole, who graduated from Cupertino High School in 2000, is likely one of them.

Pummeled into coma

He joined the Marines at the age of 17 and was on patrol duty along the Iraq-Syria border on June 30, 2004, when an explosive wreaked havoc on his head. He was in a coma for two months and paralyzed on the right side of his body after regaining consciousness.

At least five surgeries and months of rehabilitation later, Poole can see out of his right eye and hear out of one ear.

"I'm extremely happy," he said. "Considering the blast thing and everything else, I feel pretty good."

The Palo Alto polytrauma center is part of a system that includes similar centers in Minneapolis, Tampa and Richmond, Va.

The centers were formed in response

to increasing numbers of military personnel returning from overseas with severe brain trauma caused by roadside bombs or other improvised explosives.

Kerri Childress, a VA Palo Alto health care spokeswoman, said that studies indicated "60 to 70 percent of the people that we are treating would not have survived (the first) Gulf War, let alone Vietnam."

Improved armor, science

She said the increased survival rate was likely due to Kevlar helmets, body armor and improved field medicine. The injuries that servicemembers live with subsequently, however, are often more serious than before.

Mansfield, the federal official who visited with several of the 23 local polytrauma patients in the morning, said, "A lot of the traumatic brain injury is something the military didn't catch before. Like every war, we learn as we go along."

Psychologists, doctors and nurses

treat the servicemembers' injuries with different approaches, and technology plays a significant role.

The most common prosthetic visitors will see in the unit, for example, is a PDA.

"It's as close to a prosthetic for the brain as we can get," Childress said. Patients, many of whom suffer from memory problems, are issued the palm-sized computers and input daily or weekly reminders, as well as photographs of hospital employees along with their names.

Poole, the corporal, said he has improved dramatically because of the specialized physical and mental rehabilitation.

He does not like to dwell on the war that made the treatment necessary, but he does think of it on occasion, and the fact that he remains upbeat surprises even himself.

"I feel like I should be really depressed," he said.