

Home from Iraq, a Marine officer □heals through helping



Major Nico Marcolongo and his wife Lisa, with their now 4-year-old son Rocco, are looking forward to this year's Buddy Bowl, a charity flag football tournament they organize.

By Laura Petersen

Major Nico Marcolongo returned home to Solana Beach in January from his second tour of duty in Iraq. He is still an active duty officer, but for the last year has focused on one thing: healing.

His wounds are invisible, but quite real and debilitating, those of posttraumatic stress disorder.

"I have never felt that way before," Marcolongo said. "Never been in so much pain to think dying is going to be the only way out. If I did not have a strong network, my family, if I hadn't reached out to others, who knows."

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a pattern of psychological problems following a traumatic event, which last longer than one month. Someone with PTSD continues to be bothered by the trauma, changes their life to avoid things related to it, and when they can't mentally avoid it, become anxious and jumpy.

"Having your life at risk and seeing people die around you is a hard thing," said Lieutenant Commander Robert McLay, the mental health research director at the Balboa Naval Medical Center. "There are a number of different treatments that work. Cure is very possible."

After a "very intense" tour as an intelligence officer coordinating information for a combat regiment in Al Anbar Province for nine months, Marcolongo said he came home feeling different.

He was hyper-alert, anxious in large crowds and at the same time, detached. He stayed in bed for months, his wife, Lisa, had to wake him, shower him, feed him, while doing the same for their three-year-old son Rocco.

"It was a tough time," Lisa said. "My son would be sitting next to Nico and say 'Daddy's still in Iraq.'"

Now, 10 months later, Marcolongo is much improved, thanks to treatment at the Balboa Naval Medical Center, including talk therapy and medication. He also found **neuro emotional chiropractic** to be very helpful.

"I'm functioning. Still, it's a battle every day to not let it get the best of you," Marcolongo said, who will mark his 14th year of service on Nov. 10.

Marcolongo's future in the military is uncertain. Even if he felt fit for combat situations, doctors say another traumatic event could send him home worse than before.

"I've wanted to be a marine since I was six years old," Marcolongo said. "I'd like to think I could go back – but at what cost? That's really hard to accept."

Recovery time varies, usually taking several months, McLay said. But it is possible to get to a point where patients no longer use medication or therapy to get through their daily lives.

While he still has a ways to go, Marcolongo's key to recovery has been helping others with PTSD.

Marcolongo started a support group for officers with PTSD. It has since expanded to include any marine and their spouse. The small group meets weekly in Oceanside. About six younger men have come to depend on Marcolongo, sometimes calling at all hours of the night in distress.

"My goal is to hopefully help the healing process for veterans coming home," he said. "I don't want anyone else to suffer."

Many men and women struggle to acknowledge they need treatment, and feel uncomfortable going through their chain of command. As a Marine Corps Major, Marcolongo thought his symptoms were something to power through. When he was diagnosed, he thought he was the only officer with PTSD.

The most recent and largest study concluded 12 percent of Iraq and Afghanistan troops experience some level of PTSD, and another 6 percent have some level of depression or anxiety, McLay said.

"It is a large issue for the military," McLay said. "It's pretty common. We encourage people to ask for help and to not feel ashamed."

By admitting he has PTSD through the support group, Marcolongo hopes to encourage others to do just that.

But his desire to help — and the healing process — does not stop there.

There is an annual tradition in the Marcolongo family, and it's called Buddy Bowl.

The flag football tournament started out as college reunion activity 31 years ago, and evolved into a fundraiser for physically injured troops and their families in 1999. Since then, the Marcolongo's have organized the event, and turned Buddy Bowl into an official 501(c)3 organization in 2003.

Something the couple usually does together, last year's Buddy Bowl was solely in Lisa's hands while Marcolongo was overseas. The event was a success, raising \$83,000 for selected charities.

This year, Marcolongo is back home to help organize — and to play in — the 31st Buddy Bowl, which will take place at Camp Pendleton on Nov. 24. So far, 18 teams have registered to play, including a wheelchair division from Balboa Naval Medical Center.

This year's goal is to raise \$100,000 for injured troops supported by the Challenged Athletes Foundation and Adaptive Sports Foundation, and Marine Corps Law Enforcement Foundation, which seeds college funds for children of servicemen and women killed in action. Next year, they plan to add a foundation supporting those with psychological wounds.

Having missed last year's Buddy Bowl, this is going to be a very special tournament for Marcolongo.

"My favorite part of Buddy Bowl is seeing friends I only see once a year, and seeing people who understand it's more than football," Marcolongo said. "This Buddy Bowl is going to be a time for healing."

To register, volunteer or donate to Buddy Bowl, go to www.buddybowl.org. For more information on PTSD, go to www.ncptsd.va.gov. To contact Marcolongo's support group, email traumaticstressgroup@yahoo.com.