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Army Specialist Claudia Carreon is rebuilding her memory after traumatic brain injury.

TBI: Vets, VA Face New War's Hallmark Injury

Story and Photos by D. Clare

Army Specialist Claudia Carreon thumbs through a photo album. It is full of smiling faces—cousins, aunts and uncles, friends; her mother, her husband, her daughter.

The photos reassure her. They make her feel loved. And as she studies the faces, she tries to remember.

Handwritten on each photo are captions with names. And there are notes. Claudia's always writing notes. She has a special iPAQ handheld personal computer, and she keeps a thorough diary and date book. They call it her "prosthetic brain." It bridges the gaps in short—and long—term memory caused by her traumatic brain injury, or TBI.

"I don't remember the events. That's why I take so many notes," she says. "It's discouraging to look at pictures of myself and not even know why I'm smiling."

When were you hurt? How did it happen? When did you

get married? Claudia goes to her iPAQ to find the answers.

On June 10, 2003, Spec. Carreon, a member of the Arizona National Guard serving in Iraq, was involved in a head-on automobile collision in Baghdad. An Iraqi citizen died at the scene. Following initial treatment for injuries from the accident, Claudia was returned to duty.

Then less than a month later, she was demoted to private first class for failure to follow an order. People in her unit didn't realize she was hurt; she couldn't remember things.

Eventually, the injury was diagnosed and Claudia was medically evacuated from Iraq. She was transferred to the Army Reserve and promoted. After getting her rank back, she was sent to the Department of Veterans Affairs Palo Alto Polytrauma Center to restore everything else.

"My long-term memory is bad. But my short-term



memory is getting better,” Claudia says. “From last week to today I can see improvement. My awareness is much better.”

She speaks with some confidence—confidence she will need as she faces an uncertain future.

50 first dates

Like the leading lady in the movie *50 First Dates*, Claudia must relearn the most intimate details of her past.

It is a daily struggle to rebuild her relationship with her husband from scratch. She and Richard, an active duty Coast Guardsman, married in late January of 2003—before the accident.

“I only know I’m married because I have a wedding band,” she says. “He tries to pull memories out. It’s very difficult. We end up being mad at each other.”

She doesn’t know her two-year-old daughter Sandra Rene. “I can’t remember being pregnant or giving birth,” Claudia says.

She’s apprehensive about what the future holds. She says that the prospect of going back to the regular Army before being discharged is “terrifying.” A proud soldier, she doesn’t want to get in trouble for making mistakes because of her brain injury.

That there are no visible indications of disability beyond knee braces makes things more difficult for Claudia. If people don’t see a physical wound,

she notes, “they assume you are doing great.”

She’s also nervous about reuniting with her husband because of the strain her injury has placed on their relationship.

Claudia’s story is unique. But where she lives, and trains, and rehabilitates, uncommon stories are common.