The bomb blasts in Iraq reverberate among troops too tough to acknowledge the symptoms.

Sgt. Ernie Rivera is being treated but worries about others.

BY WILLIAM R. LEVESQUE
Times Staff Writer

TAMPA — The blast from the roadside bomb lifted Sgt. Ernie Rivera's truck off the ground. Rivera figured he was lucky to escape alive.

But in the weeks and months that followed, he was plagued by headaches, nightmares, a loss of concentration, overall malaise.

"I thought I was going crazy," said Rivera, a platoon leader with the Florida National Guard. "But I was always taught that a good soldier just sucked it up and didn't complain."

Rivera wasn't as lucky as he thought. The blast wave from that December bomb left a telltale wound as real as any piece of shrapnel.

Traumatic brain injury, or TBI, has become the signature wound of the war in Iraq, afflicting thousands of soldiers exposed to bomb blasts. To many, it is frustratingly elusive, hidden like a lethal yet invisible virus.

Rivera, now being treated at the James A. Haley VA Medical Center in Tampa, said the Guard never instructed his troops about TBI's dangers or symptoms. Now he plans to write a letter to the 150 men in his company warning them about this invisible wound he fears they will ignore.

"I had never heard of TBI," said Rivera. "When they told me I had it, I said, 'What in the hell is that?'"

Trauma preys on private on soldiers

BY WILLIAM R. LEVESQUE
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Top view

Cutaway

Front view

Side view

Blast-related traumatic brain injury

When an improvised explosive device detonates, it creates strong waves of pressure. These blast waves slam into a person's body, the brain can smack against the skull and its tissues can be pulled in different directions.

Areas where the brain can be injured

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See TRAUMA, 13A

"But I have to professionally and respectfully disagree with him. If somebody wasn't listening, that's not good," Burnett said all of the men of Rivera’s company have been questioned about TBI and none expressed concerns after returning from Iraq last month. All have been briefed about its symptoms, he said.

The general said the Guard realizes some soldiers may fear stepping forward, thinking that TBI carries a stigma, like battle fatigue, or that it will delay their ticket home.

The symptoms got worse.

"He was like a band of brothers," Scott said many soldiers ignored the signs of TBI and he knows of many men who refuse, like Rivera, to leave combat.

"It's like a band of brothers feeling," Scott said. "No matter how bad the symptoms, they want to go back and protect their brothers in arms."

Rivera worries about his men, especially the 42 from his platoon. The former members of the 234th Infantry Regiment are scattered around the state, including Tampa Bay. In retrospect, he remembers their symptoms: headaches, rage, insomnia, crying.

"He always fought for his men when they got in trouble," she said. "He's got a good heart."