MENOMONIE — Dean Marsh joined the U.S. Navy in 1986 and was mobilized three times before retiring in 2007.

In January, after bouncing from job to job for a couple of years, he decided to return to school and started attending UW-Stout.

"I miss driving big vehicles and shooting big guns," he said. "For a while I couldn't leave the house without a bottle of water in my hand and I kept reaching for my 9-mm," he added gesturing to where he kept the gun on his hip.

Like many U.S. military veterans, Marsh has experienced challenges readjusting to civilian life after serving. He spoke about his experiences last week at a student veterans panel at UW-Stout. The emotional difficulties U.S. military members face are receiving attention in the wake of charges against U.S. soldier Robert Bales that he murdered 17 Afghan citizens March 11.

Marsh's return to this country after serving in the Middle East wasn't easy. He came home to 10-inch-high grass in the yard and a flat tire on his car. Yet he knew his deployment had been harder on his family than on himself.

"I was in the zone," he said. "I was on a mission."

Lt. Col. Cynthia Rasmussen agreed families left at home have a much more difficult job. Rasmussen has worked as a mental health nurse in the Army Reserves for 23 years and is a Veterans Administration nurse practitioner. She was the psychological director, combat stress officer and sexual assault response coordinator for the Army Reserves in 19 states.

"Families' mission in war is to hold down the fort alone," Rasmussen said during the event at UW-Stout. "Families didn't sign up for that."

Rasmussen said those in uniform want to go because they want to serve their country. However, military life is quite different from the lives soldiers knew at home.
During war, the focus is on the mission. Other tasks become unimportant. Decisions are made quickly.

In contrast, the home lives soldiers return to require a focus on multiple tasks simultaneously. Cooperative decision making can be difficult for those returning from service, Rasmussen said.

Rasmussen knows firsthand how military life changes a person's thinking.

After serving for nearly seven years she found it difficult just to decide what to wear because for years she had worn only her military uniform.

"Civilians make 9,000 decisions a day," Rasmussen said. "Service members make 3,000."

Dawn Mataczynski, who was part of the student panel, served six years in the Wisconsin National Guard. She was deployed for two of those years.

Mataczynski, who is now a senior at UW-Stout studying psychology, said many of her military colleagues used alcohol and drugs to cope with the stress of military life.

Rasmussen said that approach is all too common.

"It is more socially acceptable to go to a bar or go home and drink a case of beer than raise your hand and say you need help," she said.

John Bensend spent six years in the U.S. Army Guard and was deployed in 2009-10. He is studying business administration at UW-Stout.

Two men he served with also attend UW-Stout, a fact that helps him navigate his way through school and adjusting to civilian life, Bensend said.

"You try to associate with other people and it is difficult," he said. "The first couple of months I would have given anything to go right back. It was so much easier."

Marsh said he has experienced similar challenges.

"I can take an M-16 apart blindfolded, but I couldn't use my computer," he said.

Despite the challenges of adapting to post-military life, Marsh, a freshman with an interest in management and education, is glad he returned to school. He recently read his first Greek tragedy.
"With a little luck I'll get out of here with a degree," said Marsh, who lives in Elmwood and commutes to Menomonie for school.

Veterans need more assistance adjusting to post-military life, Rasmussen said. They need hope, help and work.

"The disservice we do is they come home, we wave a flag and have a parade," Rasmussen said. "A few weeks later we say come back to our civilian world. Our society needs to do what American Indians do. They allow their warriors to be honored for the rest of their lives."

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