

As He Fights PTSD, Former NCO Continues Climb up Boxing's Welterweight Division

By Pablo Villa - NCO Journal

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Sammy Vasquez Jr. scored a convincing win over Aron Martinez on Saturday in a nationally televised welterweight boxing match. But another manner in which the former Army sergeant was a victor is just as momentous.

The bout at Staples Center in Los Angeles was the first time Vasquez had been in the ring since revealing that he is living with post-traumatic stress disorder. He told reporters last month when the fight with Martinez was announced about his condition and the difficulty it has posed. As it was during his days directing Soldiers as an NCO, Vasquez hopes he can help lead others grappling with PTSD toward help.

"I have PTSD," Vasquez said in December. "That's something I've been dealing with for a couple months. It's hard to talk to somebody about what you've been through. You can explain it to them and they can tell you, 'Oh, I know what you're talking about.' In my mind, I'm like, 'You have no idea what I'm talking about. You can't touch the surface of what I'm talking about.' But to talk to somebody, like a counselor that's been through it, that knows what I've been through, and that I can share my stories with, it helps me vent it out and get it off my chest. It's 10 times easier and 10 times better talking to somebody than holding it in."

Vasquez certainly held nothing back against Martinez. The fight, which was a Premier Boxing Champions co-feature, was a one-sided affair. Vasquez (21-0, 15 KOs) used his quick footwork and hand-speed to confound Vasquez (20-5-1), peppering him with jabs and straight lefts throughout the first few rounds. Martinez was on the defensive most of the fight, covering up and making very few attempts to attack the much quicker Vasquez. It was an uncharacteristic fight for Martinez who fought Robert Guerrero to a standstill last summer before losing by a controversial split decision. Guerrero fought Danny Garcia in Saturday's main event for the WBC welterweight title. Nonetheless, Vasquez's pressure wore his opponent down. Martinez quit on his stool after the sixth round complaining of an elbow injury to give Vasquez a technical knockout win.

"A victory feels good of course, but I wanted more," Vasquez said after the fight. "I wanted to go 12 rounds, if it would have lasted that long. I wanted a very decisive win. Unfortunately, he got hurt, but every fight is a learning experience for me."

What we're learning about Vasquez, the current World Boxing Council Central American Boxing Federation, or WBC/FECARBOX, champion, is that he is a gritty contender. His win Saturday was a WBC welterweight semifinal eliminator, putting him in line to contend for a WBC Silver welterweight title against Amir Khan.

"My name is starting to get tossed around and that's the main goal," Vasquez said.

His quest for that lofty title is one Vasquez says he wants to share with his fellow service members.

"I'm just thankful for where I am at today," Vasquez said in December "A lot of my brothers and sisters in arms who are amputees and can no longer live out their dreams, I'm trying to do the best that I can to help them live through me and still find hope and success to keep going and feel motivated. Regardless of their condition, there's always something else that you can do. The impact that Iraq had on me, it just showed me how grateful I am to be in the position I'm in."

Vasquez, a native of Monessen, Pennsylvania, deployed to Iraq in 2005-06 and in 2008-09. His first deployment took him to Camp Habbaniyah, Iraq, where gunfire was a typical part of the day during missions that took Soldiers from the base near Fallujah to the outskirts of Ramadi. Vasquez's second deployment saw him split time between Fallujah and Taji.

"When I was over there, boxing was the last thing I thought about," Vasquez said. "If I didn't think about my brothers in front of me that could be that chance that they get shot or killed. So, when I was overseas *that* was my main focus — being overseas."

Upon returning home Vasquez returned to boxing, a sport he had engaged in since age 9. He won the 152-pound title at the 2010 All-Army Championships and was invited to join the U.S. Army World Class Athlete Program. While a member of WCAP, Vasquez earned a berth at the 2012 U.S. Olympic Trials. Though he missed being a part of Team USA — he lost the spot to Errol Spence Jr., himself a rising professional boxing star — Vasquez knew fighting would remain in his life. What he didn't know was he would be engaged in another fight that didn't involve gloves or ropes.

"When I came back home it was very difficult," Vasquez said. "[In Iraq] you walk around with an M4 for a whole year or more, every day. You eat with it, you do everything with it. You're used to that. You have mortars going off in the middle of the night so you don't get a full night's rest. When you go back home, you're tossing and turning. You wake up startled all the time. You're reaching for a gun you don't have. I couldn't go to Walmart because there's too many people in there, I had to watch my back. Even still to this day, I go sit in restaurants and I can't sit with my back to the door.

"Boxing is a huge outlet for me. There's thousands and thousands of people there to watch me fight and it doesn't bother me ... until after the fight. After the fight, the high comes down, that's when everything gets surreal for me and then it's like, 'OK, I've got to go.' Now I'm getting edgy and a little antsy. It's tough to deal with. I just get away from everybody except for maybe the people that are real close to me."

While Vasquez said he'd rather not divulge specific details about his ordeal, he encourages fellow Soldiers and veterans who are going through similar struggles to seek help. He said it has been a cathartic experience for him, one that has now vaulted him to heights he couldn't imagine.

"I can only thank God," Vasquez said. "There were a lot of guys around me that aren't here today. A lot of things happened and it just didn't happen to me. It just wasn't my day. I'm just blessed to be here. It's an honor."