

Reaching out for help when two friends were lost

Jim: I'm Jim. I was in the United States Air Force and I was a Security Policemen. We're providing physical security for Air Force bases in Vietnam. We had it made. Up until January 31, 1968 and that was the opening day of the Tet Offensive. Horrific things were happening, one right after the other whereas prior to Tet, if one of those things would've happened, we'd have talked about it for weeks and then one morning I woke up and the sun was up and I was still in one piece and I got on a Braniff 727 and it took me out of there.

The reception that I got coming back to the United States was pretty poor. It got to the point where if anybody would ask me if I had been in Vietnam, I would just say, "No," because I didn't want to hear what was going to follow if I said, "Yes." We just hid. We just grow our hair long, wore bell bottoms. I had nothing to do with any Veterans' organizations. I'd say in the late '90s, a friend of mine sees me walking on the street, "Hey Jimmy. I don't know if you know it or not, your friend that in Vietnam with you in May? Well, he overdosed on heroin. He died." Fall of 2006, it was another one. The second friend of mine that I was stationed with in Binh Hoa. I had heard that he had died, but I didn't hear how up until like January of 2007 and then somebody told me how he killed himself and that started to weigh on me.

I went in to see one of the Service Officers who helps people through their paperwork and stuff with the Veteran's Administration. I told him what had happened. He took me right up to see the Psychiatrist right then and there. It was no appointment or anything. We just right went on in. I talked to this Psychiatrist at the Brooklyn VA for not too long, maybe half an hour or so and he recommended that I see one of the mental health case workers on one on one counseling for mental health care work and I started that probably around February of 2007 and I went every week and it was some things that I never ever spoke about. No one ever asked and no one ever cared and things started to come out. I have found out that I have what they call, "Night terrors." It's not a nightmare, you wake up from asleep and you're out of breath and your heart's pounding 90 mph. At times, I would just break up, start crying and I would say, it's like I cracked open a water faucet and started spilling the beans and my mental health case worker told me what that was. I thought it was something physical and I come from the school of if it's not broke, don't fix it so everything was fine in probably less than a couple of minutes; so, I never went to see a doctor. I never asked anybody about it. She explained it to me that it's like trying to hold a rubber ball or a beach ball underwater and at first it's easy but it's always there and it's constantly pushing, pushing, pushing. They diagnosed me with PTSD 39 years after I left Vietnam. It was a relief to speak to people about this that are interested in it and at the same time, it was that other side of the coin like, "Where was this? How did this affect the last 39 years of my life?" There's nothing to be ashamed of. When I go to the VA, it may sound strange, but it's like being back at a military base. You're not in New York City anymore. Everybody says hello to each other. Everybody's just friendly and understanding.



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

MAKE THE
CONNECTION