

Support from other Veterans who understood

Denny: My name is Denny. Draftee Army, combat Vietnam. I flew to Vietnam with 300 people I didn't see before or since. I spent my 27th birthday there. I was the old guy, the only college graduate, the only one who had held a job beyond high school. And I had to pack up the stuff for some of those guys. I wrote letters to some of those families to tell them answers to the questions I knew they had. What was my son like? How did he get along with his unit? What happened the day he died?

No one told me that at some point I would probably want to grieve the loss of those kids. And no one told me that Agent Orange was more than an herbicide. So, we had the Vietnam War was the war that kept on giving. It was not over when we got discharged. There were a lot of health things that were ignored because they didn't pop up.

What Vietnam took from me was the hope that anything was going to be positive or good or better. After I came home, I never lived in the same place longer than a year. And I never held the same job longer than a nine-month teaching contract. And I never had the same relationship with the same group of people or the same woman for longer than five or six months. Because the need was just to move. If I could keep moving, I'd be okay.

I couldn't find any professional help that was really knowledgeable about war or about soldiers or about Veterans. And I didn't have health insurance, so the plans were really limited. And I couldn't really get plugged in. And the only thing that helped was to drink. So, I drank for ten years. I mean, it got so bad that I needed to have a certain amount of alcohol in my body so I would feel 'normal'.

It was very hard to talk to people who had not been in the military and had no idea of just the basic stuff let alone combat. In the summer of 1980, there was a story in the Washington Post about a young psychologist who was trying to do family therapy. And he found in trying to do family therapy that there was always a Vietnam Veteran in the background. It was either a husband or a brother or an uncle or somebody who was having a real impact on that family dynamic.

So, he thought maybe he could do something if he just got to the core problem by identifying and working with Vietnam Veterans. So, I went, and I interviewed. I talked to the guy and agreed that I would enroll. The first meeting I had three gin and tonics before I went to the meeting just to be at ease. And the first thing the psychologist said was, "For the purposes of our work together, you really need to come here without drugs or alcohol in your system."

We had a group of a dozen Veterans, various services, all Vietnam, almost all combat. And it was the first time I had a peer group of people who had shared experience. At the end of those 12 weeks, my drinking had curtailed quite a bit.

I made a phone call to a DC office of Alcoholics Anonymous. He said, "Well, that's good. You ought to come and check out a meeting some time. In fact, we have one at noon." When I announced I was new, they changed direction and they told the stories of how they had gotten to AA. And I had a great ah-ha and said that fit me. That was it. I haven't had a drink since February 22, 1981.



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

**MAKE THE
CONNECTION**

It was still obvious I had more work to do, but I didn't know exactly what that was. So, I went, and I checked out this therapist. And I liked her, and I liked what she did with the group. So, at the end of that session, whatever it was, six sessions or something, I asked her if she would consider working with me individually. And I worked with her for three years. But she taught me a great deal about what I needed to look at.

I've done volunteer work at Walter Reed four years. Once a week I conducted an hour alcohol education class. And since March of '07, I've been a part of a group of sober people, sober Vets who have brought an AA meeting there. To be sober it really helps to be in a sober environment where other people are sober, other people who think it is important to be sober. Because that's what worked for me, and that's what would have worked for a lot of the guys that I've seen over the past five years.



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

MAKE THE
CONNECTION