

I believe we're all in this together

Mike: My name is Mike. I served in Iraq. I was medically retired as a Marine Lieutenant Colonel. I enlisted between my junior and senior year in high school and, I always knew I was going to be a Marine. I came from a Marine family. I enlisted and then I got a scholarship to go to college and I went to college and I got commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in 1990.

I built and trained and led in combat the first Iraqi Army Battalion that was trained by U.S. Military. It was a big challenge, it was, you know, the biggest challenge of my life. We made the assault in the Second Battle of Fallujah in November of 2004. We were the only Iraqi Battalion that actually made the assault. Of the eight advisors on my team, four of us were wounded and they treated me and, bandaged me up and they wanted to medivac me and I said, no, I'm going to stay. I went to Quantico do my out brief. I went to the hospital in Quantico. I told them that I was already seeing the Psychiatrist at the base in Iraq and they said, okay, you know, we're going to diagnose you with post-traumatic stress.

I just figured I was going to you know, suck it up and fake it until I make it and it would go away eventually. The whole time I was getting headaches, very, very severe headaches; incapacitating for days at a time where I couldn't do anything except lie in a dark room. It took a while to see a neurologist and to get a diagnosis, but eventually I did. I wear sunglasses most of the time even inside because of my sensitivity to bright light as a result of traumatic brain injury. I said, okay, I'm going to stay home for a year. I'm going to go back for a year. You know, I didn't want anybody to know and it didn't work out that way. I had become very aggressive, a lot of road rage, a lot of physical fights; some trouble with the law. There were times when I couldn't tell if I was in Iraq or in Connecticut. They were sort of merging together and then, like March, it was the week of St. Patrick's Day, I can't remember what day it was but that's when I had this sort of melt down. We were having a Pre-Deployment Physical and my Battalion Commander took me aside and said, you can't go. You're not ready to go. You have not spent enough time in the United States, and you haven't recovered from your first deployment yet.

A friend of mine that I went to college with called me out of the blue. I hadn't spoken to him, at that point, 16 years, but he happened to be a VSO for a Veteran's organization and I was telling him, you know, this is all the stuff that happened. He said, well, I'm a VSO. Have you ever thought about, you know, applying for a disability rating? Have you ever gone to the VA? Have you ever done? And I said, no. I don't know anything about it. He put me in touch with this guy and I went and the guy started the application process and they got me to the VA and I started going to group sessions and I start seeing an individual guy and they start me on medication and that sort of thing. And things, you know, start to slowly but surely improve.

I have a much better perspective and my head is much clearer, but you know, it's a lifelong process. I understand now that it's not going to be that somebody flips a switch and suddenly, you're better. I understand that we're all in it together. I believe that, you know, we're all in it together and I think that we have to be committed to each other. I believe that I survived what I did because I'm supposed to be helping people who have suffered the same things that I've suffered, who need a helping hand.



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