

A harrowing personal journey after 9/11

Cliff: My name is Cliff. I'm in the U.S. Army. I served 25 years. I'm an OIF Iraq Veteran. The Army allowed me to find direction, gave me a little bit more discipline. I was in an aviation unit, aviation maintenance. I served there to 2000 when I left to go work at the Nation Guard Bureau in D.C., and I was working there that day when the plane hit.

We were in Crystal City, which is 4 blocks away. We were walking in. We got into work and we were heading over to the Pentagon. That was a swing space because they were renovating the Pentagon. And going over there was when the plane hit. I sent the E7 that was with me back to the building and then I went forward and then helped from there.

I went home late on the 12th. It was early morning the 13th. I took my uniform off, put it in the wash. I took my boots, hat and gloves off, put them in a box in the closet. And basically, I didn't talk about it. The Washington Post ran a paper on the year anniversary of 9/11. They had families that were writing in about their family members that had passed away. I remember a boy was writing to his mother and I had crawled over half her body in the Pentagon. That really started my downward spiral from there.

I wasn't sleeping at night. I'd have nightmares. I did not want to go to sleep. I started drinking more than I normally had. Because sleep brought on dreams and dreams brought on things that I saw, and I didn't want to see it. My attitude was changing. I wasn't the happy-go-lucky guy that I was. I was getting more withdrawn at work. People noticed a difference in me. A guy I worked with suggested I go and get counseling.

For me, growing up, men never talked about their problems. You never showed emotion. You just did it because you were a man. That made it even harder for me when I started to have problems and going to counseling. Counseling is only as good as you want to make it be. You have to be honest with yourself and with the person you're going to counseling with to get the most benefit out of that. I think when I first started to go to counseling, I wasn't to that point.

I was home on leave for Christmas. I didn't want to live with the guilt of not finding anybody alive. I wrote a note and took 20 sleeping pills. My brother who's a nurse came home and found me unconscious on the couch. He rushed me to the hospital. After my attempt and I was in the hospital and then they moved me to a mental ward, then you realize I need to change what I'm doing. I went back into counseling and talked truthfully about what I did and how I felt and why I felt certain ways about certain things.

It felt like a big weight being taken off my chest to sit and finally tell the whole story. Which in turn, I think enabled the psychologist now to better treat me. And I was diagnosed with PTSD.

You know, there's a lot of stigma out there that if you go get help or counseling it will ruin your career. I was a CW-2 when this went on. I was lucky that I had good leaders and people that supported me that went on. But then I was also honest to my leaders what went on. I feel it's important that soldiers do know that people go through dark places at any time in their life and that's okay. It's okay. That's part of life. If something traumatic happens to you, whether you're on the battlefield or you're driving to work or something,



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that's part of life. But you need to realize that somethings you can't handle by yourself. You can't. And you need to go to a trained professional to help you through those things and give you steps so you can deal with those issues and problems when they come up.

Going to counseling and dealing with what I did doesn't make me less of a soldier. It doesn't make me less of a man. If anything, it makes me a stronger soldier and a stronger man because I can now deal with those issues and problems as they arise quicker and realize them. Both in myself and in my colleagues around me.

Life is good. I enjoy life. It's great. My son is 8 years old. I wouldn't have him if my brother wouldn't have found me. So, that gives me a reason to wake up every day. My wife is great. The Army is great. I don't think it could get any better.



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