

## I thought I was living a normal life

**Ray:** My name is Ray. I served with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 47<sup>th</sup> Infantry Mechanized, south Vietnam, 1969, 1970.

**Ray:** My coming home was no picnic. I didn't know what to expect, but the way we were treated, way beyond any comprehension. We had lit cigarettes flicked at us, beer bottles thrown at us, called baby killers and war mongers, and I shut down, absolutely shut down and berated for decades. I just turned it off. I put it in a lock box, closed it, put the key in it and locked it, and didn't want to have anything to do with Vietnam, the public or anything.

**Ray:** The biggest transition was; you know on Friday you run on ambush patrol killing people, and on Sunday you are driving a car and supposed to stop at a red light. There is a huge disconnect, huge. Peripheral sounds, smells, brought it back, no matter how much I wanted to lock it down, the emotions, the triggers out there just didn't allow me to. I acted out, I became a drug addict and an alcoholic for decades. I couldn't cope. I tried, I thought I was living a normal life. I got married, I had kids. Could not deal in a corporate world. Ended up going into my own business and I have said to people, "If I had people working for me the way I work for me, I would have fired them years ago. I am a terrible employee."

**Ray:** I had gotten divorced after 21 years of marriage and I met a woman, who I was not looking to get involved with anybody, I wanted some space, but I met a woman and on the first date I was hooked. We eventually got married and she said to me, "You have to give up your drugs and your alcohol." And I did. I started going to AA and that was a turning point for that phase of my life. Being in an alcoholic and drug program you become much more in tune to who you are, what you do, and why you do it. It became very clear to me I was carrying a lot of baggage from nam.

**Ray:** In 2002 I met a guy at lunch and we became friendly. It turned out he was in nam about the same time I was and he said. "Would you consider reading names, they are rededicating the wall in Washington?" and I thought about it, and that was 32 years later there about. And I thought, well maybe now is the time to deal with it, and that was my introduction to reliving everything, and introducing it, going to the VA, getting help, and becoming very involved.

**Ray:** Frankly, I didn't know what to expect. I went through a routine physical, you know got my ID card, was introduced to a social worker. Before I saw him, I had to go through an intake with a psychiatrist. From the written report from the psychiatrist it became very clear I had PTSD. Wow, there is a name for what I have. So, what does that mean? It sounds clinical, post-traumatic stress disorder, great there is a name to it, but what does that mean.

**Ray:** So, it's been an adventure in finding out what is going on. Triggers are tough for me. I live in the city and a truck backfired on the street and I dove into the bushes. They don't go away, the triggers do not go away. It's how you deal with them now.

**Ray:** Being in the group helped tremendously because through every group the topics change from week to week, but the thread of identification amongst the 35 or 38 of us every week with that particular topic, we are not alone. We learn how to cope. It is no



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longer a blind adventure through the dark. It's an opportunity. Okay, you have what you have, this is what caused it, here is what you can do, and here are some choices.

**Ray:** I think that the younger returning vets fear the mantra of mental health holding them back as they transition out of military life into civilian life. That it's going to be a black mark on them. Rather than carrying the black mark, they will avoid any treatment. I think it is a huge mistake. It is not a sign of weakness. It is not a sign that you can't hold your stuff together. Actually, you have to be pretty strong to go through this, whether you're in an individual group or in therapy, because you cannot get better until you face the demons.



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