

## Breaking the Silence

**Shirley:** When I got into the Army, I went to welding school, and I was one of two females out of 300 guys. They're going to treat us differently. You know that everybody's looking at you to fail. Lots of things happen. Sexual harassment, assault. It was just coming at me viciously from all sides. And would I tell anybody about that? No. As a woman, you bury it so deep, it's almost like you forgot it ever happened.

My name is Shirley. I was in the Navy as a radioman, which is telecommunications. And I was also stationed in the Army, journeyman welder. I came in when I was 18. That's all I knew. Had scholarships to college, but was a little bit of a rebel.

I wanted to see the world before I kind of settled down. So I went through all the training. I would then be shipped off to my first duty station. Being in an MOS where there were very few women, it was very hard. You couldn't tell anybody how you detest something that somebody's saying. You suck things up and you didn't complain. I'm good. Everything's fine. But it's not.

When I got out, there were some decisions I had to make. Some of us just go ahead and decide our silence has to be permanent and some choose to get help. I was going through five blood pressure medicines. Work was my choice of drug. I had sleep apnea. And so trying to change that, I decided to do a sleep test. The machine, helping me sleep then made me start dreaming about things that I had suppressed for so long.

I would see faces of the people that either harassed me, or tried to assault me. Doing all the work that I did was helping me through the rough times. What I failed to realize was there was too much that I was doing. So through the VA, I'm in a stress management counseling group. We bonded well together. We were a team. We stuck up for each other. We understood each other. It's that camaraderie that I think a lot of us were missing. Being able to talk to somebody that knows your pain, feels your pain, but we're in it together, it's really helped a lot of us. I felt like I'd found another home.

I had a wakeup call. Started eating healthier, walking, exercising more. And now I'm starting to mentor that next generation. I'm a mother of four boys, strong boys. I have eight grandchildren. Seeing where I am today, I feel like I've accomplished a lot. I'm a woman that was in the military when women were not really recognized. I'm most proud of that I did get through that. I'm a good person. I don't have to be a superwoman. I can just be me.



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