A Marine opens up about his identity

Tim: My name's Tim. I was in the Marine Corps. I went to Parris Island 2008 and I served on Camp Pendleton at SOI West and 1-1 as an armor. I grew up in the south before the iPhone, so there was a lot of questions I had. In my mind place, I was bisexual because there were no other gay men anywhere, and in my head, it wasn't a question. I didn't care. It was a nonissue. I wanted to serve my country, I wanted to be a Marine.

When you're in the Marine Corps, your sexuality does not define you, how good of a Marine you are is what defines you, and that's what I held on to, and that's what made me try hard. I put my personal needs and desires to the side to be the best Marine that I could be.

I never looked at any of my fellow Marines sexually, ever, and that's what a lot of people think I did because gay men have a stereotype. One time, one of my staff NCOs grabbed my iPhone and he wanted to see something and one of the last things I had looked at was very damning, so I remember he took my phone, asked for my password and I turned white, and I just had to say, "please give me my phone back" to one of the men I respect the most out of my entire life, I had to ignore his order and just give him that, "I need my phone back." The thought was tearing me in half that I was being someone to these brothers of mine, but inside I was someone else.

My last night in the Marine Corps was a Marine Corps ball. I had just got home from deployment and I drove off base. I was so happy. I was like, "Now I can find my identity. I can figure out who I am. I can find my partner. I can establish myself in this life." The fear, this overwhelming weight that was constantly on me of getting found out and getting kicked out, because if you get found out under don't ask, don't tell, you lose everything. You get a dishonorable discharge. So to have that burden lifted off of me was an incredible breath of fresh air.

That driving off base, that lasted for about two days before I was like, "Wait a minute. What do I do now?" because all my brothers, I still couldn't tell them. I still couldn't tell them anything. I was ashamed to tell them. I was ashamed of myself, so I immediately, and not on purposely walled them all off. I already had the beginning of a drinking problem, but then I got in a relationship, and that relationship centered me. It was what I needed. It was stability, it was some structure, but as soon as that relationship ended, that is when issues seriously got bad for me. I started doing more than drinking. I was using other substances because I was just a little kid and crying and alone and hurting and the only way to make the hurting stop was to get out of my mind.

So I went to the VA, and I was like, "Something's wrong with me." I tell myself to stop and I can't and then I do it anyway. She talked to me, the lady at the VA mental health, and she really pointed out to me about how the phases of my life had gone. How I had never established an identity for myself, of who I am, my why, my reason for going and the only thing I had ever really held on to was being a marine and it's gone.

They all know now. Not one of them was mad at me. Some of them were mad at me for not having told them sooner, but that wasn't an option under don't ask, don't tell. I've come into contact with a lot of LGBT Veterans, and it's just been a community. Being around other Veterans, gay or not, that helps. My problems pale in comparison to some of these other people, so I find strength in the success of their stories too.

If you're conflicted with your sexuality, stay true to who you are. The longer you try to deny who you are, the more trouble you're going to cause yourself. Just be honest with yourself and be honest with the people who love you and who will stand by you, because you're most likely going to lose very little, and you're going to gain a lot.