

Long buried combat stress returns after 9/11

Don: I'm Don. I served in the Army, Vietnam 1st Calvary. We were flying escort for a convoy and we witnessed a jeep hit a mine and blew up so we circled, came down, and we picked up the bodies. Our ship picked up one and the guy didn't have any arms and legs. That flight with him lying there on the floor was, I'll never forget it. That was the longest flight I've ever flown. We all had to pull certain jobs, one of them was take the deuce and a half out and dump garbage. Most of it was like ammo boxes and junk. We would just throw it off the truck and I hit this kid. I think he was about seven-years-old. I tore a gash in his leg by that board I threw off. I jumped off and went down and got him. He was mad, but he was also bleeding to death. So, I put a tourniquet on his leg and wrapped as much stuff around it as I possibly could. We got to an **Arvin (01:11)** stop. They didn't want to see this kid. They just didn't want him. So, we said, "Alright, let's go. We got to find Army." And we did, we found a medic. I said, "This is a kid." I said, "I hurt him. We got to fix him." He bandaged his leg up and they put him in another jeep and I never saw him again. I don't know if he's alive or dead, but I hurt him pretty bad and that one always got me. I just thought I killed somebody that didn't deserve it.

You hear the stories of people spitting on vets and they did it. It wasn't a lot, but it was enough that it wasn't pretty and I just sort of blocked things out. I got home, got married two weeks later, got a job after I got married and sort of went on with life. I didn't have an immediate reaction. I just blocked it out. I didn't want to remember anything. I didn't even think about it and if stuff came on the T.V. or whatever, I just turned it off, changed channels, wouldn't watch. It didn't hit me until 9/11 and I didn't know it. It was several months later, my wife finally says, "You have to go to the doctor." And she took me to the doctor. Family physician said, "You're going to go to the VA or I'm going to take you." So, I did. I went and I was diagnosed with PTSD and my first reaction was, "Why now and why so many years later?" And they just said something set it off. Something hit a nerve and brought it back. That's when it really started for me and it was hard. I mean, I started getting into alcohol, drank a lot. Withdrawn. Very depressed. To this day, I wake up in the morning and wonder why, "Just why should I? What is there to do?" Going to sleep was very tough; very, very hard. I was afraid to sleep. I was afraid I wouldn't wake up. I don't remember all the dreams. I don't remember all of what happens and then when I do get up and around, I just don't want to remember. So, I just don't bring them back. I was angry. I was miserable. I was miserable to live with and I didn't know it. I didn't even know I was doing this. I didn't have a clue. It was just this constant anger and I couldn't put my finger on it. I didn't know what I was mad at. The constant outbursts for absolutely no reason and some of it I don't even remember doing. She would tell me about it. She said I'd wake up at night. I actually hurt her one night. She said I punched her and that scared me. That was after we saw the doctor and before I got to the VA. That hurt more than anything, to hurt the woman I love; the woman I spent all these years with.

I was at a VFW meeting, State Convention and the State Surgeon come up and tap me on the shoulder and he says, "I want to get you some help." And he sent me to a doctor in Albany, a VA doctor. This guy was amazing and I was treated by him for over two years. It was just an amazing thing and she went with me. So, she went through this with me and she doesn't understand or couldn't understand why the outbursts, why the sweating, why the fear. I wouldn't stand in a line and I don't like to be in crowds. It's tough. But she is the one that made it happen. She did make it happen. I wouldn't be here without her.



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