

Treatment got him from rock bottom to living well

Robert McKinley Gilmore Sr.: My name is Robert McKinley Gilmore Sr. I served in the United States Air Force from 1971 to 1975. They ended up giving me Clark Air Force Base in the Philippine Islands. And I was in the medevac squadron there. It was the greatest culture shock in my life. People were in Military mode everywhere and that's when I really said "Well, what's going on? I thought this was, you know, everything was going to be peaceful." They said "Well, they still fighting." I said, "Fighting where?" "In Thailand and Cambodia." So, the war was still raging, and American troops were still involved. I became a medic in the Airvac squadron. Green C-141 planes which were full of, it was like a flying hospital and my job, our job was to take those wounded patients out and stabilize their condition prior to them being able to be shipped state-side, and some of them couldn't be stabilized because their injuries were to far gone. And at 19 years old that's the first time I ever saw somebody die.

When you're going to tech school in the service, you're practicing on dummies all the time, plastic dummies. You show them how to do sunken chest hole wounds, CPR, whatever, and you go through the manuals and it's all in a book. But when you deal with a live person, a person who is breathing, who's limbs have been blown off, 95 percent of their body has been burned from jet fuel and the person is in pain, and that's when it made me realized that war can kill you or you can be forever changed. And that made me realize as a medic that I couldn't save people, which is what we had been trained for. All I could do was help stabilize them.

It affected me mentally. I started using drugs, I started shooting heroine. I had previously been involved, but not to that degree. I wanted to act like I was strong enough to understand that some of these young men would die. I couldn't look into their faces. Some people would even ask me to kill them, you know, because their limbs had been blown off or, you know, they would never be the same. And I was seeing these corpsmen every other day they were dying. It was almost a way for me to keep it out of my mind. That was the only way I could serve, that was the only way I could do what I could do. But every evening before I could even leave the base, I would be shooting up when I got in the door just to try to hide the pain. And I felt like I would die over there, I wouldn't come back and I had seen so many other soldiers die.

There's a whole world that affects soldiers when they're overseas. That really goes unchecked. Whether you are drinking, or whether you are using drugs. You know, I mean everybody was doing something, you know. So, I decided I failed myself, I failed my country, I had failed my father. You know, I was a disgrace. And so, I decided instead of going out one evening with my fellow friends, I was going to stay home and kill myself. But before I did, I called my mother. I called my mother to tell my mother that I loved her, and I wanted to hear her voice say, "I love you." But she never said it, she just said "What's wrong?" Then that's when I told her "Nothing's wrong, you don't understand" and she dropped the phone and ran and you know, told my grandmothers who prayed a lot, you know, and I could hear her saying "Robert's in trouble." And I knew I wouldn't make it back, you know, and that's when I tried to kill myself. And that's when, the last time it seemed like I was in a dream. I was sitting there on the side of the hospital bed contemplating how I would kill myself again and the words of a Sunday school teacher came to me from Sunday school class, you know, and said "If you ever get in trouble, you can always call Jesus." That's what the words, they're like that, you know. And I'm thinking I'm hallucinating or something, you know. But sure, enough that's



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what I did, you know, had a talk. And that's when I started back, and I came back and they put me in the special treatment program.

They told me I had one chance to fail, one chance to test positive. And I feel like the military gave me another chance, and because they gave me another chance, I feel like my grandmother's prayers and my mother's love had given me, I was not going to fail.



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