

Veteran's Affairs

Life can get a whole lot better

Pete: My name is Pete, I served in the United States Army from 1966-1970. I was drafted, went through basic training at Fort Leonard Wood, advanced infantry training at Fort Ord, California. To the man we were slated to go to Vietnam as a Private and a Sergeant came up and said, "Hey your test scores are high enough to go to Officers Candidate School, would you like to do that?" And I said, how long is it? And he said, "6 months," and I said yes I want to do that.

Our company walked into a battalion size regular army ambush and we walked right into it and lost quite a few people and several wounded, including me. I ended up breaking my back and I lost a toe.

I had a lot of difficulties that I didn't really realize I had. I had never even heard the word Post Traumatic Stress Disorder back then. I had no idea why I couldn't sleep; I had no idea why I'd get up and walk around and look outside and check my perimeters. I know now. I had no idea why I had the nightmares; I would make up in the middle of the night and touch my chest looking for the blood of a 51-caliber machine gun that was kicking dirt up around me back when we had that firefight back then in the ambush.

A bus would backfire, and I would hit the concrete, tear up my knees, tear my pants up. Big-time exaggerated startle response in there and big-time anger issues. I would fly of the handle, push my button the wrong way and I was four-letter words and ready to go. I just basically shoved it all down so far that it didn't exist for me.

I was an adrenaline junkie. I raced automobiles, raced them professionally. I won a National Championship in 1979. I chased dirt bikes all over the place, trying to get that thrill and adrenaline hit of combat. I completely avoided the war, didn't tell anybody I was ever in any of that kind of thing. I just kept it all inside and didn't realize at the time, I was running away from myself, so I drank.

I just became a workaholic and an alcoholic. I'd work 12-14 hours a day, became very successful at my work and business. We build a very successful business, and then we sold the business and stayed retired and traveled the country for 5 years full timing it in a motor home, and I ran out of things to do and I thought I was losing my mind.

That's when everything came back at me from Vietnam, I mean I was a walking basket case. One of my friends said have you ever registered at the VA and got your ID card down there at the hospital? I said, "What do I need that for, I've got private health insurance." "Well you might need it sometime, why don't you go do that." So, I did and when I checked in for registration to get my ID card and handed the guy the DD-214 he happened to be a Vietnam Vet. He looked down at the DD-214 and he saw the Combat Infantry Badge, Purple Heart, Silver Star, some other things and he said, "Have you ever been evaluated for PTSD?" I said, "What's PTSD?" He said, "Never mind, we'll get you an appointment with a doctor and you tell him you need to be evaluated."

So, I got all the tests and I was really impressed because they did a first-class job on all the tests. In the meantime, I get a Primary Care Physician and I said the guy at the desk says I ought to tell you that I maybe ought to be looked at for PTSD. I still didn't know **Pete:** what they were talking about. She gave me a referral to mental health, at the



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Albuquerque VA, and I was referred to a psychiatrist and I proceeded to go twice a week for a couple of years. He helped a whole lot.

Then I moved on into the basic group therapy for Veterans and you had to go through that before you could get to the combat-only Veterans group. The thing I found out is that, one combat Vet to another combat Vet, I don't care if it's a World War II, or Korean Vet, or current war Vet, first Gulf War Vet. A combat Vet sits down with another combat Vet and in about 2 minutes the trust bond is just like that, and you can talk. While I was doing that, you were assigned a psychologist, and I met once a week with that psychologist, besides the group which was about an hour and a half or so a week, and was making some progress and understanding things and the psychologist was helping quite a bit for me to understand things. I still wasn't really being told what I should do, but I was learning and understanding what was going on with me, and of course talking to a lot of other Veterans who had similar problems like that at the time.

Most Vietnam Veteran's feel like it is time to put something back and we feel an obligation. We said a long time ago "Never Again" are we going to let another generation of Veterans be treated like we are treated. We do care deeply about them that they don't keep making the same mistakes that we made, and they are. If somebody doesn't get to them and point out there is help, and you can trust the VA to go in there and get some help, and we will help you find your way through the VA. We will help you understand what is going on, and the help is there. You will find the tools, but you still have to do the work yourself. Nobody is going to fix you. That is not going to happen. But if you can get the tools and you are willing to do the work yourself, life can get a whole lot better.



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