

## The Long Road Home

When I came to, I was on the floor of my friend's new law office. I was attending the open house and suddenly became dizzy, started sweating and leaned against a wall for support. That's when I passed out and slid to the floor. Miraculously I didn't spill my glass of champagne. Home from Vietnam just a few months, I didn't know what was happening to me. That was my first experience with PTSD.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder develops in some people who have experienced or witnessed a life-threatening, dangerous or terrifying event. It causes your nervous system to remain in a state of psychological shock. Trigger events, sounds or even words can cause a flashback to the event making it difficult to process emotions and reactions. Uncontrollable thoughts, nightmares, anxiety, anger, overreaction and complete changes in one's thought processes can occur. This causes interference in daily activities, work, relationships and social situations. Often, the result of these symptoms is isolation, depression and too often, suicide. PTSD can be caused by a single event. Imagine a combat soldier being involved in multiple horrific events over the course of a year or more.

I was in the Army and served a one-year combat tour as an Infantry NCO in Vietnam. I had what most combat Vets would describe as the usual experiences. Bobby traps, firefights and ambushes sometimes lasting for several hours with intense machine gun fire and incoming mortar rounds. Surviving that, I then had to help clean up the battlefield. That meant picking up bodies and pieces of friends and loading them on a chopper. Helping the medic with the screaming wounded and getting them evacuated. Then you picked up your gear and continued the mission only to get attacked again the same day or the next day. It was relentless.

When I returned home in December 1969, I had nightmares and flashbacks reliving those experiences. Referred to as night terrors, I would wake up sweating, and breathing hard, my heart racing looking for my weapon. I experienced PTSD symptoms of anxiety, hyperarousal, irritability, anger and guilt. I had no idea what was happening, and neither did the one doctor I went to in late 1970. He did tell me I should see a psychiatrist. That wasn't going to happen. A 22-year-old kid was not going to see a shrink and be forever marked as crazy.

The Veterans Administration wasn't able to offer support to a million Veterans with PTSD. It wasn't even a formal diagnosis until 1980. With no help from the military, the VA and most friends or family, I kept quiet, tried to deal with it on my own by avoiding situations that would trigger memories or reactions. That meant isolation from those who knew I had been in Vietnam. I moved from the town I grew up in, never told anyone I met that I was in the Army and tried to get along and build a life for myself.

In a strange twist of fate, I became a salesman. I had to interact with people every day. It was hard, and I had high levels of anxiety all my life. I developed a mantra to try and calm myself before talking to people. I expected the worst and hoped for the best. I was good at it, but I paid a high price in terms of my mental highs and lows on any given day for my entire career. I

didn't react well to being managed. Questionable decisions by companies frustrated me and I couldn't contain my anger. That led to frequent job changes and career moves. Twenty-two to be exact, along with two failed marriages. It was difficult but I managed to be successful in spite of myself.

I retired in 2014 at the age of 66. I had managed to suppress most of what plagued me as a youth. I was in the VA healthcare system for hearing loss, so I had an annual physical. In 2016, I was experiencing nightmares, insomnia, outbursts of anger and control issues. My primary care PA questioned me during my physical. When she asked if I had been to the Wall, I burst into tears with the memory of that visit and seeing my friends' names. Without hesitation she said, "you have PTSD." She set me up with a psychiatrist and over the next 16 months, he walked me through my experiences in Vietnam and their effects on my life over the past 45 years. It's common for Vets with PTSD to have an increase in noticeable symptoms after retirement. I suddenly didn't have work to focus on in my daily life. Dreams came back and the old feelings that I suppressed for many years returned.

It's taken a long time for Vietnam Vets to be welcomed home. I returned from the war to a country that scorned us, didn't want to be associated with us or at least were indifferent to our experiences. I felt that people despised the fact that I had fought for my country. I encountered people in the airport calling me names like baby-killer. Some Vets were spat on. It's not what coming home from a war was supposed to be.

These encounters contributed to the PTSD that approximately 30% of returning Veterans were experiencing. People who supported the Vietnam war didn't always support the returning Veterans. I thought Veterans of previous wars would be helpful so I tried to join the VFW. I was told I wasn't welcome. "Vietnam wasn't a declared war. You lost the war. We don't want your kind," they said. As a result of this and similar experiences, I didn't talk about Vietnam. I often felt isolated and alone, as did many other Vets.

We are old now. Most of us in our late 60's to early 80's, if we are still alive. The VA estimates that there are still over 271,000 Vietnam Vets with PTSD. That's over a third of the estimated 610,000 of us still alive out of the 2.7-3.5 million that served in Vietnam. Of those with PTSD about 60% are receiving care through the VA.

Soldiers that served in Iraq, Afghanistan and other war zones are coming home with far worse cases of PTSD. The VA and several non-government organizations are available to help them free of charge. Still, there are 22 Veteran suicides every single day. Asking for help is harder than fighting a battle. There is still a stigma attached to mental health care. Especially for those on active duty. They fear they will be seen as unfit for duty, promotion or even continued service. So, like me, they push it down, hide it, isolate and suppress their thoughts and emotions until they can no longer function. Then suicide seems to be the only viable option to end the pain.

During my prolonged therapy I found that talking and writing about my experiences helped me deal with the causes of my PTSD. A few years later, I wrote a book about my experiences that was featured by a group called "22 Until None" that works to prevent Veteran and military suicides. That led to teaching an online writing class for Veterans. Several of them commented that thinking through their issues while writing about them helped them as it did me.

Every Vet who shares his or her story is unknowingly helping someone deal with their problems. The stories get passed around in the military and Veteran communities. I had one Vet contact me that said reading my book changed his life. He had been married 50 years and never spoke to his wife about Vietnam. He read my book, had his wife read it, and now they talk about it. Another said he was thinking about suicide. After reading my book he decided to write his own story. Healing is contagious. We just need more of it.

I still have PTSD. I will always have PTSD. But now I have the tools to recognize it and cope with it. Most of the time. Sometimes. At least I can review a situation and determine why I reacted the way I did. The base symptoms never go away. Anger and frustration are still problems. Simple questions I sometimes interpret as personal attacks. Old thoughts and fears still linger. For example: If I am not in control then someone else is and I can't depend on them to make the right decisions. It's a big bad dangerous world out there and I alone am responsible for my family's safety and care. I always have to be prepared, vigilant and I still sit with my back to the wall in a restaurant. Some things will never change even though I can look at what I'm doing and realize why. My subjective rationalization skills out-perform my objective analytical skills almost every time.

Forward. Always forward.