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Subject: What Do You Want From Me
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What do You Want from Me?

PTSD: I thought I was stronger than that and for forty-eight years I was--until I wasn't.

A Vietnam Veteran friend told me I was screwed up and needed help and he didn't take No for an answer, and literally walked me through the VA's intake. He knew I had last gone to the VA nine years earlier--it was like an exploding colostomy-bag airburst of buereacrtic-insult-rudeness and max effort to send me to some other department or just out the door. Everyone that VA-Day offended me. I never went back. John said it was different at the VA now. I wasn't buying it.

I knew something was wrong: sane people don't think about Vietnam every day for generations; don't have intrusive thoughts that derail a normal family get-together; don't have grandkids ask grandma what's wrong with gramps; don't have a wife that crys because she doesn't know what's wrong with me and feels like she's walking on eggshells around me.

I understood Vietnam would never leave me alone when, one Veterans Day I watched the obligatory June 6th D-Day with an old WWII vet pointing out where he came ashore that bloody day, sixty years ago: "…and over there's where so and so was killed and over there was where Al bought it—" and then he broke down and started crying.

I remember asking myself when it would ever end--it was the 60th Anniversary of D-Day, yet the eight-years old vet was still emotionally in turmoil over it. At that moment, I knew it would never end for me--either I handled Vietnam or Vietnam would handle me. It's kicked my butt.

I thought I could suck it up and cram Vietnam back in some deep box in my brain-bucket, which I conned myself in to believing was possible. That worked fairly well during the daytime, but Vietnam still rules the night.

I started and hosted two large Vietnam Veterans websites, which are now in their twentieth year and now two of the oldest. Hundreds of stories are posted by Vietvets, with thousands of photos, plus hundreds of war poems and prose are posted. I also have posted dozens of stories and hundreds of photos of my 1965-1966 tour as a K-9 Sentry Dog Handler at Da Nang Airbase, as one of the first military working dogs in Vietnam with U.S. forces.

The last ten years of my life have taken a toll on who I was and am today. Anxiety, depression, nightmares and near constant intrusive-memories have surfaced and overwhelmed any meager attempt to subdue them. Unreasonable sudden flashes of anger that I recognized as such but couldn't stop. I thought I was losing my mind. It couldn't be PTSD—whatever that is--that's for those shell-shocked wounded-heart combat-fatigue type guys...and yes I believed that was real--for them--and they need and deserved help from the government or that somebody should hand them a hankie or give them a magic pill—it was some other guy's problem.

Things got worse. Insomnia was the norm. Checking the doors and windows being secure was my new unrecognized hobby. Setting on the couch half the night listening...staying alert...seeing my Nam memories play out...wondering if I killed him…seeing faces I served with of KIA and those who were, have, and are dying from Agent Orange--remembering their names; their dogs names--and unable to make it stop or go away or control it at all. I didn't even know what "it" was.

I stopped leaving the house--if I could help it--things went wrong if I went out. I stopped making excuses for not going to the grandkids soccer games or school events--I just said a Pat-Nixon-No...and now I realized that everyone felt relieved gramps was staying home again. I cared--but I didn't care. I wanted a bunker I could climb in to.

I couldn't hear an airplane fly over, or a chopper whop by without it triggering a daymare. I couldn't see trucks with wood slate rails; foothills; Air Force Bases along freeways; spoiled meat...all of the things that had were dormant

for several decades were suddenly and without reason demanding I listen-up and figure it out--now.

I had no idea what was happening to me--I thought I might be losing it—I was sure of it. I decided to talk to a friend I had known for years who had became a psychologist. Conversation went like this: I have this friend who is becoming a basket case and can't handle unexplainable memories of the Vietnam War. He did his part without anguish or bad feelings back then--hated the enemy, lost friends, sucked it up and went home and did alright with his life until now--do you think he has PTSD and if so what should I tell him?

My shrink friend, whom I really do respect, paused in thought and his reply went something like this: Don, you don't fit the typical profile for the typical PTSD veteran I see. You are clean cut, dress well (for the 70s) [funny guy], shower regularly, don't drink and I don't believe you've never taken illegal drugs. [he was right on all points except the 70's crack]. And you graduated from university, are a reasonably dedicated Christian--your politics do need some work--and you've been married to the same lady for over 47 years...in short you are not the stereotype norm I see for PTSD. Nevertheless, your friend is in jeopardy and perhaps danger, and needs to seek help--the sooner the better. As I've said, that was over nine years ago. Vietnam was okay with that and slowly turned up the burner.

Early this year I decided to go down to the VA and see if someone could just talk to me about what I've never told my wife or anyone—ever—and suddenly felt I absolutely had to tell someone now. It was then my friend John corralled me and told me his PTSD story. Then he heard my stories and told me he would meet me at the VA.

The VA I have contact with showed respect to vets (even when they are bent out of shape), and recommended i have an advocate to file a claim and receive max help. I did file in May and received a permanent rating within four months, whereas I was told by vets it would take two years and then you would have to appeal. I was astounded—flabbergasted-- that my rating was 100%--there must be some mistake; but there wasn't. I felt ashamed and felt pt hat confirmed I was broken and less of a man. I had never talked about Vietnam and resolved not to mention my rating to anyone either.

At a veteran's reunion in last October I caved and told a trusted friend my VA claim was approved and the rating. I was very take aback when he smiled and congratulated me. I hadn't looked at my claim as having a goal to max out the highest rating possible. I naively thought my goal was to find a magic shrink-button light switch to shut down Vietnam’s best effort to kick my head in.

Today, I am signed up at the VA. Every contact at the Loma Linda, CA facility has been great. I have participated in everything recommend for me. While waiting for appointments, I've heard about topical vet issues: Personally, I do not care if "they" change the name of PTSD or not; it's changed many times over the war years of our country: Soldier's Heart, Shell Shock, Combat Fatigue, PTSD. I do care if they try to change it to screw Veterans out care deserved and earned.

What do I care about? I am concerned about my fellow veterans opinions about PTSD, and most, like I was, knew little about the subject.

I am concerned about changing the requirements adding PTSD for eligibility for a Purple Heart. I understand that MRIs and brain scans of PTSD and TBI are similar in areas injured and changed. I am old school in that a Purple Heart means you were wounded in combat or resulting from enemy action, and shed blood for our country—and yes that includes cheap-hearts. And yes I understand that I have trouble dealing with things I did and witnessed and experienced in a fire fight--and at the time didn't give it much thought--but that has changed over the last decade for me.

Believing the above, I would not be able to accept a Purple Heart as it was issued to close friends and relatives KIA in Vietnam--and represents a sacrifice and respect owed, and special honor from our country.

I also care about the young vets from Iraq and Afghanistan, and want them to speak up and listen up when anyone tells them they need help—or if you figure that out on you own. If you are a young vet then just do it so you don't end of forty years from now with stuff for brains.

What I do hope to see is acceptance by veterans and current military that war can fry your brain decades,

generations, after the last shot was fired. I don't particularly care what some Jane Fonda lovin' creton moron draft-dodging civilian troll thinks.

Veterans, PTSD is not a sign of weakness, cowardice, shirking one's duty, as most served honorably and had no problem then at all—but some couldn't cope from day-one of a traumatic event, and some eons later are having problems now. If you were there—you know what that could mean.

So what can you do when talking with a Vietvet who acknowledges to you he has PTSD? You can offer a word of support, even if it's only Welcome Home. Don't congratulate him, for pete-sakes—he didn't win the lotto or snag the carousel's golden ring! The Vietnam-pooch screwed him royal, and the VA recognizes that fact!
They don't need pity or contempt, so if that's your opinion then just move on. Make an effort to talk with a PTSD vet and tell him candidly that you don't know much about it, and ask how PTSD effects him. The vet won't be offended…and you might learn something about why 22 vets in America commit suicide daily.

As for the thought that some are scamming the system...that is likely true. I can spot a BS'er and I suspect you can to; I know the VA shrinks can and do and also submit them for prosecution--and rightly so.

So. How can I word it so you will understand what PTSD ground zero is for me? I would have to borrow from the Allied WWII phrase that signaled the call to action, and the imminent invasion of Normandy: Vietnam, for me, "...wounds my heart with monotonous langur." And that's God's truth.

Whether PTSD is called by names such as Soldier's Heart, Shell Shock, Combat Fatigue, Battle Fatigue--or whether you go back over 2,500 years (which is the oldest reference I have found) where PTSD is recognized and named, "Marked by the Sword," and written in scripture in the Book of Job 15:22 ("He despairs of escaping the realm of darkness; he is marked by the sword" [NIV]). PTSD is real...deadly...and claims the lives of veterans we served with at an alarming rate.

I can't change anything about my private war--I wish I could—and I don't want to be congratulated for having PTSD; neither do I want to be looked down upon. At age 70 now--what do you want from me? —it's in your ballpark so do something about PTSD killing your comrades who stood with you when in mattered.

Don Poss,
100% PTSD
Da Nang AB, RVN 1965-1966
USAF K-9 Sentry Dog Blackie, X129
iPTSD Poems, by Don Poss

Sent from my iPhone

Sent from my iPad=