



LOCAL VETERAN WORKS TO OVERCOME MEMORIES OF VIETNAM

Although his home is in West Akron, there was a time in the not-so-distant past when Joe would return to Vietnam on a regular basis to fight a war that wouldn't end.

"I have vivid nightmares of the time I was hit by a 61 mm mortar round," says Joe as he adjusts his "Combat Wounded" veteran's hat and shakes his head trying to rid himself of those memories. "It was that incident that put me in the Walter Reed Military Hospital for five months. I used to relive it at least once a week. I would wake up in pain so intense that it felt as if it was happening all over again," remembers the retired contract inspector as he stresses each word to better describe the intensity of his agony.

The painful flashbacks of combat experienced by Joe and millions of other Vietnam veterans are one of the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a psychiatric disorder that can occur after a person witnesses or experiences events such as military combat, natural disasters, terrorists incidents, serious accidents, or violent personal assaults like rape.

Symptoms of PTSD include nightmares, flashbacks, depression, the numbing of emotions, and feelings of anger, irritability, and distraction. According to the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, veterans of war are the community most associated with PTSD, which was once referred to as "shell shock" or "battle fatigue." In fact, The Anxiety Disorders Association of America notes that an estimated 15 to 30 percent of the 3.5 million men and women who served in Vietnam suffer or have suffered from PTSD.

People struggling with PTSD can also experience an exaggerated startle response, sleep difficulties, guilt, agitation, and heartbeat sensations. In an effort to remove the traumatic experience from their memory, PTSD sufferers are known to avoid individuals, thoughts, and situations associated with the traumatic event.

According to Charlie Goold, a Licensed Independent Social Worker at Portage Path Behavioral Health and expert on PTSD in veterans, certain events, such as anniversary dates of the trauma and national holidays like Veteran's Day may trigger memories of the traumatic event. In fact, specific smells, such as an after-shave or perfume have been known to trigger distressing memories.

With a sense of guilt in his voice, Joe recalls the time when he witnessed his best friend's death. "I sometimes have nightmares of the time when I saw my best friend get shot in Vietnam. He was shot about 10 to 12 times at close range. I have felt guilty about his death for a long time ... I should have been watching out for him more closely," says the ruggedly handsome veteran as his eyes fall to the floor.

In an effort to make the nightmares stop, Joe courageously returned to Vietnam in the fall of 1988.

“I went back to Vietnam with a group of other veterans as more of a therapeutic retreat. The trip was very rewarding and allowed me to put a lot of the hatred I had toward the country and their soldiers behind me,” says the now relieved veteran. “One of our tour guides was actually a Vietnamese soldier in the war, but there was no real animosity over our being there.”

Adds Goold, “For some Vietnam veterans with PTSD returning there can be a horrific thought, but for others like Joe, the trip is a healthy experience. Returning to an area where a traumatic event occurred is completely up to the individual.”

In 1989, a proud Joe was one of a select number of individuals allowed to speak in front of a United States Congressional Subcommittee on the issue of allowing veterans to return to Vietnam. Although Joe was honored to represent his fellow Vietnam veterans, he found the experience to be a frustrating one.

“It was an odd situation, because in the sixties we were going to be sent to jail for not going to Vietnam, and then in the eighties were being threatened with jail for actually going to Vietnam on our own free will,” he says in amazement.

Joe’s symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder didn’t begin until about ten years after his injury, common among individuals with PTSD. Realizing that he needed help, Joe visited the Cleveland West Side Veteran’s Center who referred him to Portage Path Behavioral Health for treatment.

“The PTSD treatment process is different for everyone,” says Goold. “Often times, the severity of the trauma, and the supportive environment after the trauma are factors that point toward a favorable treatment.”

“I could not imagine what would of happened to me if I did not seek help,” says Joe remembering his life before treatment. I’ve been going to Portage Path for about ten years now. Before therapy, I was so depressed that I did not even want to live, but since, I have really dealt with my depression, and my nightmares are becoming less and less frequent.” He continues, “I think the most important part of getting better is just talking about it, because until then it doesn’t go away.”

For more information on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or other veterans’ issues, contact the Veterans Services Outreach Referral Program at 330-434-0491 or Portage Path Behavioral Health at 330-253-3100, or log on to the National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder web site at www.ncptsd.org.