



This was written by a veteran who attends our Paulding Vet Life Community. A little long, but well worth the read.

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Greetings from a Vet that is "on the other side".

I am a 20+ year Veteran. I have only been involved in the Vet Life Community program for a few months, but those few months have benefited me, and my family, more than the decade of trying to stand on my own..

Veterans have a "never give up" mentality. I remember doing field maneuvers as a recruit. The drill instructors would give commands that we would carry out. One command in particular was, "RETREAT"!! The immediate and loud response from the recruits was, "STAND AND KILL"!! I clearly remember them teaching us that if you have run out of ammo, knives, sticks and rocks, then you physically take on the enemy and bite out their Adam's apple!

This mentality is ingrained in veterans. I recently went into a car parts store where I knew the gentleman behind the counter was a fellow veteran. I shouted out "Semper Fi!!!" He responded, "DO OR DIE!!!", and his response was just as loud, strong and confident as a new recruit.

All Vets, regardless of their branch of service, have that "never give up mentality," and now in our post-military time, we Veterans feel like a failure if we even consider asking for help.

I am currently dealing with medical problems related to the Gulf War Illness. In my situation, I was medically discharged from the military and started receiving benefits from the VA. I must say that my experience processing through the VA was not the nightmare that I have heard so many other veterans share.

In addition to physical issues, I also deal with a reoccurring nightmare that stems from an experience while still in boots. I was in a situation that only a Soldier would experience and would have to deal with. At the time of the experience, I squashed it all down inside of me and simply drove on. Today though, this and so many other situations that I have "squashed down," cause my head to feel like a steam boiler that is under more pressure than I can handle, and every once in a while it blows wide open!

When I say that "I" am dealing with these physical and mental issues, it is not the complete truth. When the nightmares come, when the pain comes, when the mood swings come and

when the struggles come, my wife, my sons and my daughters are all impacted. All of them have to "deal with" my issues. I try my best to hide them from the family. My wife and I have always tried to shield our children, but sadly, in all our efforts and good intentions, it has not been an easy path.

A few years back I did seek out help from a counselor. At that time, I knew I needed help and even wanted help. After a few sessions, I could tell from her comments that even though she had the best of intentions, she was not anywhere close to comprehending. The thing was, she was not a Vet and she could not grasp what I call, "the Veteran Mentality". It is simply a different way of seeing the world and dealing with the world.

I went to a few AA meetings. I felt that I would be around people who were also struggling. I thought I might even meet Veterans there who could understand what I was going through. Even though I enjoyed the meetings, it was not a good fit for me. My issues were different and I did not feel like I belonged there. Specifically, I did not feel like I could get up and share my struggles because they were not related to substance abuse.

In my head, what I wanted to find I was a group of Vets, sitting around, sharing their issues without worrying about being judged, and without having to explain the military mentality. Since I was unable to find that, I continued to just squash my issues down inside me and drive on.

In November 2016, I finally hit rock bottom. I took my cell phone, hid in the bathroom, talked quietly and called the VA. I was asked to come to the main hospital for an evaluation. They told me the specific days and the specific time and said to come early or that I may not get seen that day due to the high volume of Veterans and then I would end up driving back on another day. And they also told me to "be prepared to wait".

I asked if they could just go ahead and tell me if there was group counseling for Veterans in my area. They said that they did not have any information about that. Needless to say, I was very surprised. Finally they suggested checking with the American Legion.

I got excited because it was, in fact, a great idea that I had not already thought of. I have been a member there since before I retired. I support the American Legion and the people there have always made me feel welcome. So, now I had received the lead that was going to get me out of this funk.

My bubble burst when I called. I was told that the Legion did not have any type of group counseling nor did anyone there think that there was anything like that at other legions. I could not believe it! Surely they know the insane suicide rate among veterans. I did get one good thread of help from them. A lady there had talked to Steve Schiffman about his program, Operation Not Forgotten, and she gave me his phone number.

I immediately called. Steve told me that the program was designed specifically for veterans – by veterans. After talking to him, I felt like I had received an early Christmas present.

When my first meeting came, I was ready. I was ready to release that pressure that I had been squashing down inside of me. Out of respect for the others at the meeting, I tried to keep it brief, but just hitting the high points felt like I had finally exhaled after holding my breath for a long, long time. Even though it was the first meeting and I didn't know the others very well, I still felt comfortable getting it out.

The Vet Life Step By Step Journal is absolutely amazing. It asks questions that have helped me dig out and deal with issues that I have crushed down inside of me and had never wanted to think about again. Sometimes it feels like I am pulling scabs off my heart as I am forcing myself to deal with these issues. Now, when those ugly thoughts appear in my head, they do not seem to have the control over me that they did. I can honestly say that without the extra ugly baggage in my head, I can drive on a whole lot easier.

I was asked to share my experience with Operation Not Forgotten / Vet Life Community and I hope that what I shared made sense. My best experience related to this program, by far, has been when my family told me how pleased they are that I am going to the meetings, and that I appear to be a happier person. I know that I still have a ways to go, but my message to other Veterans is that I have reached the other side and it is good.

Thank you,
Jim

