



1,000 WORDS

Stories from the VA's My Life, My Story Project

Edited by Thor Ringler and Seth Jovaag

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VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

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DISCLAIMERS

This book is a product of the My Life, My Story project. The contents do not represent the views of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs or the United States Government.

Some of these stories contain graphic descriptions of violence. Others describe incidents of sexual assault and physical abuse. Please use discretion.

These stories were told by the veterans in their own words. They are not fact-checked. They are best attempts by admittedly imperfect listeners and writers to reflect back what each veteran shared during an hour-long interview on a specific day.

The editors take full responsibility for any mistakes that you encounter while reading this book. To err is human. We willingly embrace that humanity.

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FOREWORD

Stories have a uniquely transmissible quality. They move us. They move between us. Moments that we never lived become moments we remember. Lives that we could not imagine, somehow find a home in ours.

Since 2013 writers for the My Life, My Story project at the Department of Veterans Affairs have interviewed over 9,000 veterans and written short stories about their lives. Each story is reviewed and edited by the veteran, and with their approval, added to their VA medical record. Any VA provider who is caring for that vet can easily find their story and read, in their own words, what matters to them, who matters to them, and why.

We keep each story to about 1,000 words so that health care providers have time in their busy days to read them. We would never presume to tell someone's whole life story in 1,000 words. But we do try to capture some of their spark and essence. And if we can learn by reading these stories even a fraction of what these veterans learned by living them, we will have learned plenty.

This book exists because 15 remarkable people shared their lives with us. We hope their stories find a place in you.

BILL

I was just a kid who went through school, not paying attention to anything. Everyone talked about going to college but it wasn't even on my horizon growing up. I knew my parents could never afford to send me and, to be brutally honest, I never thought I was smart enough to be one of the college kids.

I grew up in Tacoma, Washington, graduated from high school in June of 1968, and enlisted in the Marine Corps a week later. Boot camp was at San Diego. Like everybody else, I got marched off the bus, stood on the yellow footprints, went through the whole drill, got my hair cut, got trained on everything Marines did and do, and even qualified as a sharpshooter. It was "Old Corps." They were allowed to touch you back then.

My MOS (Military Occupational Specialty) was 4312—Press Information Man. They gave us tests after we signed up and I had some journalism experience from high school. I got sent to the Marine barracks in Great Lakes and was there for about a year. After that I was sent to Okinawa and assigned to the Marine Corps Public Affairs Office. It was a good duty station

because there was absolutely nothing to do. I requested to go to Vietnam. I didn't want to just write stories, I wanted to experience it.

I took a C-130 from Kadena Air Force Base to Da Nang. I somehow developed a connection with the choppers and was always checking in with those guys. One day I heard a call come in, so I grabbed two cameras, ran out, and hopped on a dust-off. They were going off to pick some people up and drop some stuff off.

Up ahead I could see a firefight going on where we're going in. There was only one shot left on the camera roll and I was able to get a picture looking down on that firefight. I loaded a new roll of film into the camera, and by then we were much closer. I saw a VC and I thought, "Nobody's ever got a picture of a VC firing at us," so I focused in on him.

As I pushed my shutter release, he pulled his trigger. I saw his muzzle flash through the lens and that muzzle flash came in and hit me. I fell out of the chopper—it seemed like 500 feet but was probably 10 or 15—and hit the ground.



I remember having three distinct thoughts. The first was, “Shit! I must have twisted my leg.” I looked down but all I could see was the crease of a bullet across my leg. The next was, “Where’s the camera?” Of course, there was no way in hell I was going to find the camera. The last was, “There are bugs down here.” Because these things were buzzing by me.

Then it dawned on me: “Those aren’t bugs, Numbnuts! They’re shooting at you!” [laughing]

I knew I was dead then. Forget about the camera: I had no weapon. But all of a sudden the hand of God reached down. The pilot had rolled that Huey down and the gunner reached out, grabbed hold of my flak jacket, jerked me up, got me on the strut, and then the pilot rolled it out again. I don’t know how in the name of God he did it. But he did it. Whenever I see a chopper pilot now I feel like I should kiss him.

My coming home story is interesting. I came back in on crutches. Nobody told me not to wear my uniform. I was working my way through San Francisco International Airport—this proud Marine with his ribbons and stuff—when I saw her coming. She had on a long fur coat and beautiful long black hair. I don’t know what made me look at her, but I saw her and she saw me and she was coming right at me.

I was watching her—her eyes, her hands—all the things that you’re trained to do. Finally, I just stopped and she came up to me. She looked at me. She had beautiful brown eyes and

they had tears in them. She put her finger on my chest. She said, “You’re nothing but a hitman for the U.S. government,” turned around, and walked away. I thought to myself, “Welcome home.” That’s probably why I haven’t talked a lot in 50 years.

When I got back home to Washington state, I enrolled at a community college. It took me about three or four classes to figure out that I couldn’t do it, I couldn’t adjust to people. I had to get out of there. So I took my car, a plum-colored ’66 Chevy with chrome wheels, and my dog Puddy, a black Schipperke, and we went around the country together. We did a circuit: Minnesota, Ohio, Wisconsin. This was before therapy dogs, but in hindsight that’s what she was. We had some great conversations. [laughs]

On one of those circuits I got introduced to a girl, Val, and we hit it off. We kept in touch and I visited her in Denver. Long story short, I ended up staying there. We moved in together and got married in 1973.

When I was 25, I decided I wanted to be a lawyer. I started at Denver Community College and after two years transferred to the University of Colorado. I went to school full time, but I couldn’t afford tuition, so I got a job at St. Andrews Hospital in Denver. By the time I was 34 I had a four-year-old son, a new baby girl, and was the Director of HR at St. Andrews.

I got recruited by HCA (Hospital Corporation of America) and we moved to Saudi Arabia and lived there for five years. My ex-wife was very happy in Saudi Arabia with a close-knit community

and a lot of good friends. When we moved to Nashville in '89 it was just the opposite. I think that was the beginning of the end for our marriage.

I got a job as VP of human relations at Lutheran Hospital in La Crosse, Wisconsin. I helped put together the merger of Gundersen and Lutheran which is now Gundersen Health System. I put in a lot of hours, and we were really having trouble at home. We started seeing a therapist as a couple, and the therapist suggested we get individual therapy. That's when a lot of the Vietnam stuff came back. My therapist was drawing connections between the stress and not sleeping and nightmares. Long story short, we got divorced in '98, a few days short of our 25th wedding anniversary.

I moved back to Colorado in '99. I had met a woman at Lutheran in the leadership development program. We kept in touch as I went through the divorce and all the bad times. Kathy and I ended up getting together in 1998 and have been together ever since. She pulled me through a lot of stuff. All the demons were there and I just went back to hell in a handbasket.

We ended up moving back to the Midwest and I got a job with the UW Medical Foundation as their HR director. Fifteen years later I retired. And here we are today.

I never did get the camera that dropped out of the helicopter in Vietnam. But I did have that one picture on the roll from the firefight. I had it up on my office wall, from the first job I ever had until I retired. I called it my "Focus Picture." It

got me through 40 or 50 years of work. Every time I looked at that picture, I remembered the story, and the idea that no matter what happened in the world of work, nothing was as bad as that.



TERRY

My dad was a full-blooded Omaha Indian, or just a drop below. He was taken away from my grandparents and put in one of those Indian boarding schools, but there was a train that ran nearby, so he ran away from the school, jumped on the train, and didn't get off until he got to Wisconsin.

My mother was German. She worked with my grandmother and my three sisters as cooks and bartenders at the hotel in our hometown. I had one full brother, Raymond, who we called Buck. My dad hated being Indian on account of how we were treated in that town. My brother and I had to fight our way back from school every day. We were the Indian boys, the odd ones.

My dad earned his reputation as a fighter and a drinker. He had been in the Army in Korea but never talked about that. He never spoke his native tongue at home, either. The only time I heard him speak it was on our trips. Every couple of years he would take my brother and me out into the woods for a weekend. He would drink beer and revert back to being Indian. He would talk to us, but we couldn't understand him.

After Mom and Dad separated, they both remarried and had children of their own. Dad had custody and we had to live with him and his wife. I was 10 and Buck was two years older than me. My stepmother didn't like us and was very abusive. We were never allowed to have kids over or go to other kids' houses. Instead, we would come home and do her chores. I remember once I didn't set the table right and she stabbed a fork into my arm. It stuck there and started bleeding, but she took it out and bandaged it up before my dad got home. She would always tell him how terrible we'd been and all the bad things we'd done. Sometimes he'd get out his belt and beat us again.

Buck joined the service when he was 17. After he left, I did all the chores and got all the beatings. School seemed like the least of my worries, so I dropped out and joined the Navy. I went to boot camp at Great Lakes in Illinois. Pretty quick, they found out I could type 60 words a minute without mistakes, so I became a clerical worker. They sent me to Norfolk, where I just sat in a damn office in dress uniform and typed. I got



tired of that and asked for a transfer. The XO gave me orders to the USS *Pocono*, the communications flagship, where I became a bosun's mate.

In 1967, we went on a cruise to join the Fifth Fleet in the Mediterranean with a battalion of Marines on board. After the Med, we went through the Panama Canal. When we crossed the equator, they had a big party. They gave us all certificates, and we went up to the helipad and fired guns all afternoon.

When we got to Vietnam, we deployed the Marines down nets into Higgins boats and then joined the fleet. But we weren't there long. We saw the USS *Forrestal* blow up: a missile went off on board and hit a plane, which started a fire. We could see them using forklifts to push jets and helicopters into the ocean. They sent us two of their guys to be buried at sea. Seeing those guys in their uniforms, lying in coffins with holes drilled in them, it stays in your memory.

We headed back to Norfolk after that, and I got out of the Navy. I drove back to Wisconsin with a trunk full of whiskey and rum. I moved close to home, met a girl and lived with her for 10 years. I was working as a concrete carpenter, and me and my foreman became friends. He came up to my house to go hunting once, and when I woke up during the night, he and my girl were asleep in the bedroom. I had my gun at her temple when she woke up. I came to some kind of realization, put the gun away, and told them to get out of my house.

I quit that job, but there were a lot of concrete companies around, and I got another. Buck, my cousin and I moved to Madison and lived together. We did nothing but work and drink and date women. Eventually, we went our own ways.

I moved back near my hometown again and met a girl who was single and had a little boy. We settled in together. She was going to the university. Life was good for us and I ended up being with her 30 years. I grew her son up, taught him how to ride a bicycle, then a motorcycle.

We moved back to Madison. Her son started college and went out on his own. My girlfriend and I started a company together, and I went to MATC and got a degree in commercial art. We did well in this town. But along the way, I'd found this group of Indians at the university and was invited to join the Wunk Sheek Drum group. I started to learn the songs and the beats and got to know the tribes, their customs and traditions. My girlfriend didn't like that. She said, "We're not going in the same direction." We ended up separating.

I've been getting to know other Indians and going to Pow Wows. Getting my Indianness back. I became a Sun Dancer and have gone to North Dakota for that for many years. It's become the mainstay of my life. We keep the Sun Dance tradition alive, and that's an honor.

It's good to be here in the hospital now. It's giving me time. I've been thinking about my brother . . . how much different our lives could have been had it not been for our stepmother

treating us like that. There was no love there. But we knew what love was; we could see it in other families. So we drank a lot and stayed inside our minds. The only reason we worked was to make money to drink. And then the fighting would start.

Buck went to prison a couple times. All my life I was spared that stuff because he went through it first. I learned from him. When his diabetes got bad, they had to cut his leg off. I took care of him for five years before he died last year at 73. It still hurts, but I remember when I found him. When I realized he was dead. There was a quietness there. In me. I walked outside and there was absolutely no change in anything. Except for that. I haven't found that quietness since.

The permanency of it is what's so hard to accept. I just can't believe I can't touch him anymore. All the folks here want me to go and see somebody and talk about all this. But bringing it up again and again . . . it hurts me too much.

I remembered this poem the other day and wrote it down for him and my other brothers. It's really lonely without those boys around. It goes like this:

*It's a beautiful thing to love
what death can touch,
a fearful thing to love, to hope, to dream,
a holy thing to love.
For your life has lived in me,
your laughter lifted me,*



*your words were gifts to me.
To remember this brings painful joy.
It's a human thing to love, a holy thing
to love what death can touch.¹*

It's been a strange thing to live this life and not have that love. It was easier to fight, rather than feel and understand. That's why the Sun Dance has meant so much to me. Over the years I've met so many people there. Over time, they gave me a life with love in it.

I feel bad for my brother, who never had that feeling.

¹ The original version of this poem was written by Rabbi Chaim Stern.

JOANNE

I will start from the time that I changed from a happy girl to a mature teenager. In 1939, I was just 11 years old. We were listening to the radio and heard an alarm. They announced that the German army had crossed the Polish border and airplanes were on their way to Warsaw. And soon we heard the sirens. They started bombing. I was in the Girl Scouts and the first thing that I did for my country was to put on my armband, go down to the street, stand on the corner and try to help direct people to safety. The Germans dropped cluster bombs that would burn everything. In those first days Warsaw was on fire.

Many of the children in Poland were scouts like me, but the Germans outlawed the scouts. So we went underground and became part of the Home Army, the Polish resistance. My father was a lithographer for a newspaper during the day but he also printed newspapers for the underground.

We did a lot of training. We learned how to find our way with compasses and maps. We reported on German troop strength and positions, and that information went to England. We tried to keep people safe from German raids. We'd scout buildings

and then make maps for each street, noting the escape routes for each building. We would give those maps to everyone on the block. That way they might have a chance.

The Germans went into the churches and seminaries. They took the young priests-in-training, the seminarians, and hung them. Their bodies were outside for everyone to see. These were 18- or 19-year-old kids. I remember my mother taking me there. She told me, "Remember this. Remember." Every morning we would run down to the streets because the Germans would put up posters on buildings with the names of the people they were going to kill that day. We wanted to know if we had family on the list.

We knew what was happening to the Jews. The Germans moved them into the Warsaw Ghetto. They were starving and tried to sell their possessions for bread. One of the people that was bringing them food was my mother. It was dangerous because the Germans would shoot anyone who they caught doing this. We tried to help each other, Jew or no-Jew, we were all people. One day while I was walking past the ghetto there



were German soldiers breaking into a house. I saw a woman throw her baby into the street from an upper story window and then she jumped out herself. There are some things you can never forget.

The Warsaw Uprising started on August 1, 1944. City fighting is different than other kinds because you fight in every building and every street. I arrived at a post where the lieutenant had been shot in the stomach. We had no medication or anybody that could help him. I had some training in first aid, so they asked me to sit with him and talk to him. They opened up a hospital in another building and we moved him there on a stretcher. Later we had to move the hospital again.

One night I was the only nurse—not really but they called me that—and one of the guys got out of his bed and walked up the stairs to the ground floor. He was about six feet tall and 20 years old, and he was delirious. I had to go up and bring him back. When I got up there I could see Germans through the windows in the building next door. I managed to get him back down, then gave him sleeping pills and he fell asleep.

I turned 16 during the Uprising. On October 3, 1944, we were ordered, “Put your arms down,” and the Uprising was over. It lasted 63 days.

The Germans collected us from the center of Warsaw. They put us on cattle cars and took us to Germany. We were sent to Stalag X-B near Sandbostel. A couple months later we were

transferred to Stalag VI-C near Oberlangen. It was the only Nazi camp for female POWs.

We were in that camp when we started hearing fighting going on and bullets flying. We were liberated by a Polish division under General Maczek who was under British command. Nothing could have stopped them.

We were sent to a bigger displaced persons camp in Bavaria. There were a lot of kids in that camp and they organized classes and teachers so that we could go to school. I also learned how to ski there. We were given the option to return to Poland—which was under Russian occupation—or stay in the camp. I didn’t go back, even though my mother wanted me to. I’ve loved to travel since the time I was little, so I chose to stay and see some more countries.

After that I was sent to a camp in England. I finished my high school diploma and two years of college. I met my husband. He had served in the Polish Army in Iran and Italy. We got married and our daughter was born in England.

We moved to Chicago and my husband got a job working for GTE. We also have a son who was born over here. I stayed at home when the kids were small because I wanted to raise them. After my daughter went to high school, I went to work for Marshall Field’s. I worked as an accountant for them for 20 years, and I spent my money on travelling. When my daughter graduated, I took her to England, France, and Poland. I wanted her to know the place where she was

born, and where she came from. And I always wanted to see France.

My husband and I visited most of the 50 states, but not all the southern states. My husband didn't like the heat—it reminded him of when he fought in Iran. He died 17 years ago. Since then, I've been pretty busy with my dog Chi-Chi. She's a Chihuahua mix, 17 years old, and no good. [laughs] My daughter-in-law is taking care of her while I'm here in the hospital and she called me and said, "She's killing me!" For the first couple of days she howled at the window.

When I was at Stalag X-B one of the guards in our building was half-Polish. He would take our letters and mail them for us. When we needed something, he would always try to get it to us. We called him "godfather." Not all Germans were bad people. They're just like everybody else. There were lots of them that helped us. When we were in prison, we had to carry coal to the camp in little wagons. When we went into the woods to get the coal, some of the girls would run away to nearby villages and the Germans would feed them and give them food to take back. There were people there who hated Hitler as much as we did.

I remember once during the uprising I saw a German soldier. He was carrying the body of a Polish girl. He had shot her. He didn't know that she was a little girl. He was crying because he had a little girl like her at home. He didn't want to kill her.

Those were bad times [sighs] but we passed them. Today is my birthday. I have a nice family. I have six grandkids. They're all educated and have their own homes. They're doing pretty good. And some of the girls are staying home and raising their own kids now. I have 16 great-grandchildren—it's hard to remember all their names sometimes. [laughs]

A few years ago it was the 70th anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising and the Polish government paid for us to come over. They transported us to the sites of fighting and where people had been killed. At 5 o'clock—the time the uprising started—all the sirens in Warsaw went off. For three minutes, all the traffic in the city stopped.



STEVEN

My mother always said that when I was able to crawl, I started dragging rocks home. When I was four, my folks bought me a tumbler and I started tumbling stones and making jewelry. I didn't spend money on candy like other kids. I spent it on rocks.

I was selling stuff by the time I was eight. That year my folks bought me a 10-inch diamond saw for cutting stones. My dad gave me a little spot in the window at the front of his shop. There was a meat market across the street from us. People would stop on their way up from Illinois. Some would come over to our shop and I'd sell them rocks and jewelry and stuff.

My folks got really involved in rock hunting with me. We'd go on "rock trips" to the Dakotas. We'd go down by Peoria, Illinois, to hunt geodes in a quarry. Mostly we went just north of here, around Wautoma, Wisconsin. You could find red jasper, red jasper hematite, some unakite, some petrified wood once in a while, or even some agates. One time I found a geode full of tar. Back then it was worth about 75 bucks—a lot of money. Mother would put rocks in her purse until no more would fit. Every year Dad and I would buy her a bigger purse.

When I was 12, I bought a 24-inch diamond saw and grinder that cost me fifteen-hundred dollars. That's back when minimum wage was 50 cents an hour. I made money on my rocks, but I always worked for my dad, too. He was an electrician, so I was a gopher for him and for other carpenters, plumbers, or heating guys. I helped him wire up the new feed mill in Deansville. We fixed appliances, radios, and TVs, too.

After I got the grinder, my dad started helping *me*. He'd make "cabs" for mounting a ring or a necklace or a broach, stuff like that. If Dad got the job, he was in charge. If I got the job, I was in charge.

After a while, people got to know about me. I did craft shows and flea markets all through high school. I never liked school. Dad was for OJT (on-the-job training) and I was too. There'd be nights when I'd work with him until three in the morning, then get up and go to school.

My parents were named Harry and Lucille. Dad was in the Navy in World War II and was stationed in the Philippines and Guam. My mother was from a town north of here. When she

STEVEN'S ROCKS & GIFTS

OPEN



was four, her dad jumped in a pond to try to save a kid, but he landed on a stump, punctured a lung, and died four days later. When my mother was 15, she came down to live with Aunt Annie and Uncle Jack in the hotel across the street from where I still live in Marshall, Wisconsin. That's where she met my dad. They got married in 1936 and had me in 1952. I was their only child.

I was about to be drafted in December of '71, so I enlisted in the Army National Guard. I got banged up pretty good at boot camp. The drill sergeant kept yelling at me to kick higher, so I did . . . and flipped myself over backwards and shattered my arm and banged up my back. The sergeant said I wasn't hurt, so I didn't get to the hospital until the end of the day. I spent the next 32 days in traction. My arm still doesn't stretch out straight.

I enlisted as an electrician but they made me a cook. I was in the Guard until '78. I worked a lot at Camp Douglas on weekends. I'd do the cooking, serving and cleaning up, then do the baking for the week ahead. The only thing I hated was the cookies: you had to do 16,000 at a time.

Other than eight or nine years, I've lived here in Marshall, right on Main Street. I mostly worked for myself. I remodeled houses and apartments, built a couple of buildings. I was an electrician. I did a little catering. I helped out at a welding and manufacturing company for about 15 years before they closed up in the mid-90s.



From about 1983 to 1990, my rock shop was only open by appointment. Around 1990, I started opening on weekends, then went to weekdays, too.

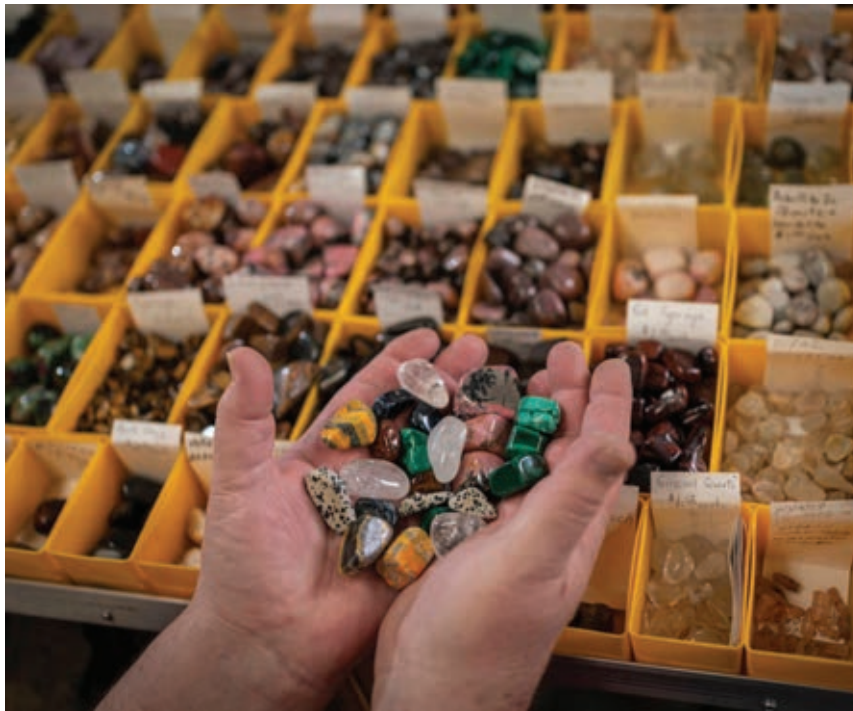
The shop is 34-by-76 feet. One room has my diamond saws and grinders. Another has my carpentry stuff to build cabinets and picture frames or to repair lamps and things like that. The rest is showroom. I make most of the jewelry myself. I've made wind chimes, ashtrays, wall hangings, clocks. You can see everything on my website. Better yet, take a trip out sometime. I give tours.

People volunteer here because they like being around rocks. We've got a lady who does tarot card readings every third Saturday of the month. We have people doing Reiki or psychic readings, too. But it's mostly just me. My house is next door, so I'm in and out of the shop all hours of the day and night.

Mother died in '80 and Dad died in '83. I never married. Came close three times. The last three or four girlfriends just wanted to go out and drink all the time. I'm trying to find one who don't drink, don't smoke, don't gamble and don't do drugs. Most of them are already married though. [laughs]

I got polio when I was four years old. Just last spring, the VA figured out it was the polio causing my breathing problems. I've got a chessboard at my house made of red and white travertine: I want to donate it to the rehab unit at the VA. I appreciate what they've done for me, so I want to return the favor.

Otherwise I just want to keep the shop going until the day I die. Usually when people retire, they sit around and do nothing, and in six months they're dead anyhow. Might as well keep working.



GEORGE

In 1954 my mother wanted to kill me. She had saved money for me to go to college and I had a partial football scholarship. But I decided that I wanted to go into the United States Air Force. I liked the blue uniforms and I wanted to serve the country.

I signed up for three years and had my basic training at Sampson Air Force Base in New York. I didn't have to be disciplined. I knew discipline at home. I knew what responsibility was at home. My mother never ever told me to stop doing anything. All she had to do was look at me. And there was a look for everything.

I was born in Indianola, Mississippi, in 1936, but my family moved up to Rockford, Illinois in 1941 as part of the Great Migration. My mom was Lucille Jones and my dad was Lewis Jones. I have five sisters: Dorothy, Christine, Bertha, Clarene, and Jennie. I was the youngest, the baby.

When I was 13 years old a gentleman in Rockford asked if I could go with him and his wife to Chicago. I didn't know where we were going but I enjoyed being in the Cadillac. We pulled up outside Wrigley Field and the Chicago Cubs were

playing the Brooklyn Dodgers. I got a chance to see Jackie Robinson, Don Newcombe, and Roy Campanella. Not only did I get a chance to see them, but they took me down on the field to meet them. After that we went to lunch and then a show at McVicker's Theater. It was Louis Armstrong, Peg Leg Bates, and Sarah Vaughan. I stayed up on that high for a long time.

In the Air Force I became a load and drop master on C-124s and C-119s. We would drop supplies to troops that were on the ground. After my training I received orders for Donaldson Air Force Base in Greenville, South Carolina. I took the train from Rockford to Chicago, and we changed trains again in Cincinnati. I got on the train with my Air Force uniform on and the conductor said, "You can't sit here. You've got to go back there." I said, "No, this will do fine." He was African American, and he said, "Son, you can't sit here. This is where we change. Blacks have to get on in the back."

At Donaldson they had a bus on base that would take us into Greenville. When I got on that bus on base, I could sit




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anywhere I wanted to. When the bus left military property, a sign went up and I would have to sit in the back.

In January of '55 my unit shipped out to Burtonwood Air Force Base in England. A white guy and I had become very friendly when we were stationed in Greenville. He told me, "George, I can't wait till we get to England where we can have a lot of fun together." One day at Burtonwood we went into Liverpool to a bar that had live entertainment. There must have been 10 or 12 women there for every GI. I went back to the base and this guy, who I'd been friendly with, said, "Why don't you stay where all the [N-words] stay?" At that point I hit him and they had to restrain me.

After that I wanted to get out of there. Our unit had a detachment at Rhein-Main, Germany and I transferred there. Other than that incident, I have nothing but praise for my military experience.

In 1956 my mother became ill, and I went back home to Rockford on emergency leave. While I was there a friend of mine said, "Hey, I want you to meet somebody in Beloit." I said, "I don't need to meet anybody in Beloit. I got my mother's brand-new car and a pocket full of money. I'm doing good." But I did meet her, and the rest is history. Her name was Marion, and we got married on August 1st, 1956.

Marion and I had three daughters: Susan, Pam, and Kimberly. Pam and Kim live out in the DC area. I have four granddaughters, three great-granddaughters, and one great-grandson. I've

always been there for my children. I don't have much respect for a man who does not take care of his family.

I started working at the Chrysler plant in Belvidere when it opened in 1965. I was elected to the union office as recording secretary. I also founded the credit union at Chrysler and opened a business, Soulville Barbecue/Cash and Carry in Rockford. Doing all this indicates that I was not of sound mind. [smiling]

In 1968 I was in the Union Hall tabulating ballots for delegates to the international convention. The president of the union came up to me: "George, I've got to talk to you. I don't know how to tell you this . . . Dr. King has been shot and killed." Tears popped out. I walked to my office. A telephone rang. I picked it up and it was the plant manager of Chrysler. He said, "Can you come out here, immediately?"

All of the black people had walked out of the plant without clocking out. The next day we had a meeting and management told me, "George, we can't have this. We've got to administer discipline." I said, "Don't do it. Let me tell you why . . ." Our plant was one of the only ones in the nation that didn't have any problems or riots.

After that I started memorizing all of Dr. King's major speeches and delivering them. At the dedication of the Martin Luther King chapel in Morehouse College. At the 20th anniversary of the March on Washington in '83. Ozzie Davis introduced me and there were 200,000 people there. I still deliver Dr. King's speeches.



After Chrysler, I became the first director of the Beloit Housing Authority and then got a job as the Equal Opportunity Director with The Homebuilder Association of Greater Chicago. I got to know a lot of people in Chicago and put together an affirmative action plan for the residential construction industry in the Chicago area. We were able to get minorities a lot of jobs in suburbia. Previous to that, those jobs weren't available.

I ended up working for Bendix Corporation and moved out to the DC area with them. I was a manager of human resources and human relations for them. When they downsized in 1991,

I took the early retirement option and I ended up working for the City of Baltimore. I retired from there after 17 years. Marion passed away in 1997.

People ask me, "Coming from the deep South and all the racism you've faced, how do you feel about white people? Do you hate them?" No. Hate is as injurious to the subject of hate as it is to the object of hate. Every black person I meet is not my friend. Every white person I meet is not my enemy. Everybody is the same on God's keyboard. He just wants good music.

When I first joined the military, my mother told me—I'll never forget it—"If you get out of the Air Force with anything less than an honorable discharge, you can no longer reside on planet Earth." In basic training, one of the guys asked, "George, you don't fear nobody, do you?" and I said, "Well, there are two. God and my mother."

TERRY

Almost 30 years after I was in the first Gulf War, when I was about to turn 50, my wife noticed a lump on my breast. Sure enough, breast cancer. I was treated for that, but a few months later, my 50-year-old colonoscopy found cancer too, and it had spread to my liver. I'm at the point now where there's nothing more they can do. I know I'm dying. They figured out that my cancer was related to my time in the Gulf War. But I tell you, if I had to do it all over again, I would. I don't regret a day of my 25 years in service.

I grew up in Freeport, Illinois, where my granddad was the county sheriff. My mom was 16 when she had me; my dad was 17. In other words, I was an oops in the backseat of the old Buick. I also have a little brother four years younger than me.

When I was 13, my parents went their separate ways but they both stayed in town. Dad went to college and ran a successful physical therapy business for 30 or 40 years in Freeport. Mom went to beauty school and cut hair locally.

I was a good kid. I played sports and was a bit of a geek when it came to girls. I wasn't popular, but I got along with

everybody. To me, school was just something you had to get through. After graduating in 1984, I tried college, but I'd drink and miss classes. I joined the Army in the spring of 1985. All I wanted was to go skydiving. I'm not a thrill seeker anymore, but back in the day I liked extreme things like that. The Army said OK, they'd put Airborne in my contract. Away I went to boot camp at Fort Dix, New Jersey.

After boot camp they made me a truck driver and sent me to Fort Benning, Georgia. For a while I could drive anything the Army had on wheels, and I jumped outta airplanes. That was fine, but then I decided to switch my MOS (Military Occupational Specialty) and go into Nuclear, Biological and Chemical warfare. I think I chose that because it scared me. It was all OK, until one evening I got a call: "You must report for duty at 7 o'clock tomorrow morning for Desert Storm/Desert Shield."

When we landed in country, that's when the "pucker factor" hit. For weeks on end, Hussein harassed us with chemical weapons to get us worked up. We were attached to the 2nd



Armored Cavalry Regiment, so when our side was finally built up, our job was to grab the retreating Republican Guard. As it turned out, it was a hundred-hour war, and all was well.

After the Gulf War, I got my third MOS: Military Police. I did that for damn near 10 years, then worked in corrections. Along the way I had stops at Guantanamo Bay, at Leavenworth in Kansas, plus all over Germany and Central America.

It was all working out pretty good until Afghanistan hit. I was pushing 40 when I was over there in '03–04. I was tasked with picking up and dropping off Taliban and al Qaeda, so there was hardly an area of Afghanistan I didn't touch. In the process, we'd get in firefights. We'd see RPGs (Rocket-Propelled Grenades). We'd see holes in C-130s. But hey, we did it, and we brought everyone home.

Then the sons of bitches wanted me to go back to Iraq! So, I did a third rotation in Iraq as an MP in 2005–06. It wasn't anything like the first two. I don't talk about it much. The whole situation was ugly, right from the beginning.

Eventually, I got tired of getting my ass whooped, so I became a horizontal construction engineer. I wanted to learn how to build a house, something I could put on the back 40 someday and live happily ever after.

I married my first wife when we were way too young: it wasn't meant to be. My second wife Teresa and I had our son in 1997. When he was about 14, I had to take Teresa into the hospital. Six weeks later, she died of cancer. It advanced so

fast and we caught it so late that there wasn't anything we could do.

Before Teresa got cancer, I'd had soldiers' blood on me. I'd had a soldier die in my arms. I'd had to notify a soldier's loved ones after he died. But to hear the doctors say, "Terry, there's nothing we can do for her," that was something else altogether. She died November 3, 2011.

When Teresa passed, I had several options. I could go drinking. I could go womanizing. I could become someone new. Instead, I chose to worry about my boy and not do that other stuff. But I also wanted tattoos. So, getting tattoos and raising my boy became my focus.

The problem was, I had no idea how to raise a 14-year-old boy alone. I did the best I could, but he wasn't having it. It was like he turned to the Dark Side: selling drugs, stealing weapons, you name it. Oxycontin was the flavor of choice. I could have used some help, to be honest. It was a rough time.

Meanwhile, I'm trying to live my life. I found a gal, Lisa, who's quirky like me. To me, Lisa understands way more than the average person. In 2009, she lost her oldest son to an IED (Improvised Explosive Device) in Afghanistan. She also lost her second husband of 20 years to an aneurysm. Lisa was my Mama Bear, always looking out for me. She helped me see that the best thing was to put my son out on his own. It was the only way to get through to him.



Lisa and I got married in 2016. That year I also got the breast cancer. Then came the colon. A few months later, a reaction between my chemo and my PTSD meds gave me seizures and a stroke.

Which brings me back to my tattoos. I got my first in 1985—a unicorn zebra—but went full bore after Teresa passed. I realized that my tattoos should tell a story. That's what my arms do. One is my “spiritual” arm. It's about Eastern philosophy, with dragons and koi fish and the Yin and Yang. On my back, I have a Buddha. On my “military arm” I have a soldier's cross and other things about my time in service.

I was telling the hospice chaplain the other day about how I came to question my faith. Being a combat veteran was part of it. It's like, if there's a God, why allow men to do this stuff to each other? Why allow my buddy to die in front of me? For that matter, why allow a 14-year-old boy's mother to pass away? So, yeah, I question. I'm not a practicing Buddhist or Taoist. But does it interest me as an alternative? You betcha.

Prior to this cancer, Lisa and I found our Forever Home. It's in the middle of nowhere, Illinois, on two-and-a-half acres. We've got three dogs, five cats. It's the place I'm dying.

As for dying, the hardest part was coming to terms with it. I'm a different breed, though. Am I giving up? No. I still feel OK. I've got a ways to go. But I'm not getting any treatment right now. With my 25 years in the service, I've done more

than your average person does in a lifetime. Right now, I just want Lisa to be by my side as I go through this.

My son's doing better. He has apologized and even thanked me for my help over the years. He's a union plasterer now. He texted me yesterday to say he'd finished his first project by himself. It was just a little 8-by-8 building, but he did it. He was so proud. I am, too.

I'm writing individual letters to people before I die. One of them is to my younger brother. There's a disconnect between us that hurts. I'd just like us to get together and have a beer and watch the sun go down. That'd mean a lot.

JENN

My mom and dad separated when I was three and got divorced when I was five. My dad was not really a part of my childhood, but my mom has always been about the best mom she could be. She wasn't around as much as other moms, but she didn't have a choice about that. She worked hard to support my brother and me and always had two or three jobs.

I loved school and was always really good at it. A week before graduating high school a semester early, I ran into a recruiter in the counseling office. He offered me a \$10,000 sign on bonus and an opportunity to attend college if I joined the Army National Guard. I had never thought about joining the military before, but it suddenly seemed like the best solution. I was 17 and my mom had to sign the papers to allow me to join.

I had my basic training in Ft. Jackson, South Carolina. Basic was intimidating and scary. I started having some physical problems and went to see the sick call doctor on the base. He sexually assaulted me during the physical evaluation. Luckily he left marks on me, and I hit him and left marks on

him. When I was able to escape, I ran back to the bay where we were stationed and hid in the bathroom. I was missing half my layers of clothing and my shoes.

My battle buddy came looking for me, found me and I told her what happened. She told the drill sergeant. He asked me, "Where were you?" I told him, "I was at sick call, Sergeant," and he took off running. When I got to sick call there was my drill sergeant on top of the guy, beating the shit out of him.

After the assault they asked me if I wanted to get out of the military. I said, "If I can get through what just happened, I can handle the rest of bootcamp." My battle buddy was from Wisconsin like me, and she had been assaulted in a less violent way by the same guy. We became best friends and went to AIT (Advanced Individual Training) together. I realized during that time that I was a stubborn individual. I knew there were people who thought I couldn't do it, and I was going to prove them wrong. I graduated from basic training and my dad and grandpa attended the ceremony. It's the only time I've ever seen my dad cry.



After I got through my training I came back to Wisconsin and went back to school. During that first semester I got called back to Fort Jackson to testify against my assaulter. At the court martial I had to bring up all the memories of what had happened. I missed a lot of school, and that affected my grades. It was extremely stressful.

In June of 2006 I got the phone call: “You are now being activated.” I had 10 days to get ready before deployment and I had to get a lot done. I was about to buy a condo, so I backed out on that. I sold my car because I didn’t know what to do with it. Four or five days later they called and told me I wasn’t deploying. I ended up calling my commander and told him respectfully that I really needed to go. My stubbornness paid off. They put me back on the list for deployment.

I served in the Army in Kosovo for 16 months. During my time in the military every single female was sexually harassed in some way. I was tasked with taking care of EO (Equal Opportunity) for my unit which meant a lot of rapes were reported to me. When I would pass them up the chain of command nothing would ever happen. I would get punished for speaking out and vocalizing my issues with the chain of command. As a female in the military, you could choose one of three roles—the bitch, the slut, or the lesbian—and it didn’t matter which one you chose. You were punished and treated like shit for all three.

I came back from Kosovo in the fall of 2007 and went back to college. I started processing the emotions that I wasn’t able

to let myself feel when I was deployed. My grades dropped. I started sleeping 20 hours a day. I didn’t know what was happening. I just knew that I was in trouble. I wanted to kill myself. I wanted to die.

Luckily, I was living a short distance from a VA hospital, and I started going there nightly to sit and feel safe. There was an on-call social worker there and she would talk to



me. It didn't really feel like therapy, she just let me talk. I'd come here and tell my story to her. Over and over. She saved my life.

I got my undergraduate degree in psychology and my master's degree in May of 2013. My goal was to get a job working for the VA and I now work there as a counselor for other Veterans. I know how important it is to have someone else who has been there too. I also know how long it can take to heal.



Trauma isn't something you recover from in a nine or 12 week-program. It's something that can get better over time, but it's with you your whole life. You also need to be stubborn. The only reason I have a relationship with my father now is because I wanted to have that. For years I just hated him. I stayed away and had nothing to do with him. I started reaching out when I was in high school, but it was me who made it happen.

I lost someone in Kosovo, someone really near to me. He was my Sergeant Major and he was old enough to be my dad, maybe even my grandpa. He had daughters my age and we would sit and talk about them for hours. In the beginning of our deployment, he didn't have any pictures of them. At my request, he brought back pictures of them when he went on leave, and I got to see his beautiful wife and two daughters.

I was the one who packed up his belongings after his death and sent them on back to his family. I helped load his body onto the airplane to go home. You can't imagine the emotions that go through you at a military funeral. They play Taps. One of our own black female soldiers sang "Amazing Grace" and the national anthem. And there's roll call.

They read out the names of everyone in the unit and everyone says, "Present," when their name is called. But this roll call can't be completed because someone isn't there. They get to his name and instead of someone answering

back there is silence. They call his name again and there's silence again. They call his name a third time and again there's nothing. There's a minute of silence, and then the guns start firing. It's an indescribable feeling. The sound goes through your chest and your stomach. There's nothing like sending a body home.

KEVIN

About the time I hit 13, my mom and I were arguing a lot. My parents divorced when I was 10, and for lack of a better term, my mom's right out of a trailer court: any stereotype that comes to mind, that describes her. She'd kick me out, or I'd just leave for a couple of weeks at a time. We lived near a golf course, so I'd grab a jacket and a pillow and go sleep on the greens. In the winters I'd sleep in my buddy's garage. It wasn't heated, so I'd lie on top of big bags of dog food to keep me off the cold floor.

My mom and I went back and forth like that. I'd be home for a couple of weeks, then she'd kick me out again. Finally the police poked their nose into it and got social services involved. I was sent to a group home when I was 15. I got kicked out of there for fighting and had to live at a place called Norris, a "residential facility" up by Milwaukee, until I was 18.

Norris was almost like a prison. It was racially divided: you had the Black guys, the Spanish guys and the White guys. It was a rough place for the small kids, but since I worked out a lot and was pretty big, I did all right. My first week, I got into

it with one of the bigger Puerto Rican kids and took care of him. Without realizing it, that was the best thing that could have happened to me. After that I was on pretty good terms with everybody.

I know this all sounds kind of messed up. But how I grew up also made me the person I am today. I've always said I'm like a cockroach: I can't be killed. And really, my growing up wasn't that bad. Think about it: as a 15-year-old kid, I didn't have to do chores. I could do whatever I wanted. We'd steal some beer, smoke some dope. It felt like I had life by the nuts. And the regimented lifestyle at Norris ended up serving me well in the military, too.

After Norris I didn't have a place to live. I talked to my father for the first time since I was 10, and he said I could stay with him until the summer. That year I joined the Marine Corps, mainly because I didn't have anything else to do and because I thought it'd be the biggest physical challenge.

I did good in the Marines. I did my advanced training in Amtracs, or the Amphibious Assault Vehicle, at Camp Pendleton.



I started out driving and doing routine maintenance, then worked my way up to crew chief. I was a section leader by the time I got out.

After advanced training, they sent me to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, for a few months, and from there I did a Med Float on a Navy ship—the USS *Manitowoc*. We started in Spain, went up and down the coast of Italy, then hit the north coast of Africa. Muammar Gaddafi was raising hell around there. Twice they started handing out live ammo to us, but twice they changed their minds, so nothing came of it. We also went to France, Sicily, Barcelona, and Portugal. Along the way we trained with the Italian and Portuguese Marines. In the mountains of Italy, there were still remnants from fighting in World War II, which was fascinating. We went pretty wild in the bars, too. I also spent seven months in Japan and a lot of time at Twentynine Palms, California.

I had a younger brother and sister. During my third year in the Marine Corps, my brother and I were both stationed at Courthouse Bay in Camp Lejeune. We still talk today. He lives in Florida, is married and has a kid. On the other hand, my sister committed suicide several years ago. She never could hold down a job and was always pretty depressed.

After the Marines, I thought about living in California but decided to go back to Evansville, Wisconsin, where I had friends from when I was young. Eventually, I studied diesel mechanics at a technical college. After that I started working on semis.

Finally, I bought a cheap truck of my own around 1997 and became an independent driver. I'm still doing that. In fact, I'm doing this interview on my way down to Montezuma, Iowa, to drop off some light-weight docks.



When I was younger, I'd drive anywhere for money, but now I'm not working as hard. I'll have my house paid off in about eight years. My truck's almost paid for, my trailer's almost paid for, I got some money in the bank. Still, I like what I do. I might stick with part-time driving until I physically can't anymore. It's easy money, and everyone needs a reason to get out of bed in the morning.

I've been married to Julie since '93. We met where everybody in Evansville meets—at a bar. [laughs] We don't have kids, but I do have a son from a gal I dated for three weeks just before I met Julie. He's out in Portland, Oregon.

Julie and I live on four acres in southern Wisconsin. We have four miniature donkeys: Scooter, Sophie, Sarah and Sonny. I used to have nine, but my wife got tired of feeding them all when I was gone, plus hay gets expensive. But they're so much fun. They have more personality than dogs.

You could say my life's boring. I don't drink much. Don't smoke. Until seven or eight years ago, all I did was work. I bow hunt in the fall. I have a big shop for my semi and an old Mustang I like to mess with. We go down to Florida every winter and South Texas for vacations. See? Boring. But you know what? Boring can be good.

I could've wiped my parents out of my life, but I didn't. I'm like a dog that way—loyal—though I keep them at arm's distance. My mom lives off Social Security, so I'll give her a little money here and there. My dad lives alone in the middle



of nowhere in Northern Wisconsin. He just had coronavirus and almost died. I spent a week up there getting him squared away after he got out of the hospital. I got him a bunch of food. I had to give him a bath and cut his hair. I'll order him things off Amazon like paper towels or clothing. If I don't, nobody else will.

Back in the Marines, I had a platoon sergeant at Camp Lejeune who knew I was raised different. He kind of hovered around me and taught me some real basic shit: *Save your money. It's fine to drink a few beers, but don't get stupid about it. Buy the cheaper car.* Now, I always save money. I'm never late. I always have a Plan B. It all comes back to that guy. Before that, I was just figuring shit out myself.

DARRELL

My parents got divorced when I was nine and my dad got custody of three boys and a girl. We moved to a small town outside of Madison, Wisconsin, but in the tenth grade I chose to start going to high school in the city. My dad didn't have a quarter for the bus so I pedaled all the way. In January 1949, my junior year, it got too cold to ride, so I enlisted in the Army. My dad had to sign the permission papers. Three months later I was in Japan.

I enjoyed Japan for the 14 months I was there. But then, on the 17th of June, 1950, some of us were in downtown Kyushu when we heard an announcement over the loudspeakers: "Report back to camp." When we got back, they told us to put everything in our footlocker and to put our address on the footlocker. We didn't really know what was going on. Within a couple of weeks, on the 3rd of July 1950, we hit Korea.

We were the first ones to go down there. They told us we'd be going into combat and that the North Koreans would run away when they saw American troops. Well, they did run—they ran right over us. North Korean tanks were coming and

I was firing a bazooka at them but the shells kept bouncing off—it turns out they had sent us over with practice rounds. It was terrible.

We got pushed south and ended up at an outpost in Taejon. There were six of us out in a truck when we saw smoke coming from town. When we got there, we saw GIs who had been shot, lying in the streets. We drove up a dead-end road, and then our driver and his buddy got shot so we jumped out and hid under a bridge. One of my friends—he got hit in the head—a big chunk of it was gone. He stood up and hollered and screamed and went over the bank. He was dead.

We hid in the weeds but a North Korean soldier spotted us, so we took off. Then I got hit across my buttocks. Another bullet went across my ear and through the arm of the guy in front of me. Back in town, we'd seen GIs who had given up: they had their arms tied up and were shot behind the head. But by then we were out of ammo, so we gave up. It was July 19, 1950.

The guy who captured me put his rifle right in my face. He was about ready to shoot me when a commanding officer



came up and stopped him. They took our boots and our fatigue jackets. They kept us in our white t-shirts so that they could see us. They took us to a hut where there were four other captured GIs. They moved us around a lot after that.

By Halloween, we hadn't eaten in weeks. I'd lost 80 pounds. By then there were 800 of us and we were moved into a cornfield. One day a jeep drove up and a big North Korean officer got out. He wanted an American officer to come up front, but nobody would. So he got his pistol out and hollered and screamed. Finally, a 2nd Lieutenant walked up and saluted him. The big guy turned him around and shot him in the back of the head.

We named this guy "The Tiger." He wanted everyone to know that he was the boss. He pointed at the mountains with his gun and said, "We're going on a march." We had no food or water, so everyone was getting weak. Some guys couldn't make it. There were guards stationed behind us, and if you fell behind them you were a goner. The Tiger would shoot you.

A friend of mine named Frank was there. I was trying to help him because he wanted to give up. I kept telling him, "Don't give up. Someday, we're going to be on the last jeep coming out of here. Don't give up." But after a while he gave up. And here comes The Tiger.

I was carrying Frank when one of the guards hit me in the knee with his rifle and we both fell down. The Tiger raised his pistol, and I thought, "Here we go again." I said goodbye

to my family, my little sister . . . and then all of a sudden I looked him in the eye. I could almost see the trigger moving under his finger. But he took it down and motioned for me to get going. I went about 50 paces, then looked back. The Tiger shot Frank and just kicked him into the ditch.

All together we marched 400 miles. We figured out later that he shot one-and-a-half men per mile.

The winter of '50 was a bad one. It got down to 30 to 40 below zero. We were in a schoolhouse with no heat. Everything was made out of corn stalks and mud. Our compound was fenced and when a guy would die we'd take him outside and add him to the pile. Their bodies would freeze almost immediately in that weather, so we made sure that his arms and legs were apart: it'd make it easier to carry them later.

I noticed a little house on the other side of the fence. I often wondered, "Is there anything in there to eat?" One night I crawled over the fence, got inside and found a bunch of hot red peppers. I stuffed my pockets full of them. I didn't think about escaping because I had no boots and it was very cold.

On the way back the guard caught me. He whacked me with a club several times on the back. Then he made me eat all the red peppers, and *oh my*, they were hot! I thought they were done with me, but then the guard changed, and the new guard picked up the club and knocked me out. They thought that they'd killed me.

I woke up outside on top of the pile of frozen bodies. I was able to crawl back inside, and someone hollered, “Hey, D’s back!” They all jumped on top of me and hugged me, trying to get me warm again.

[pause]

At a certain point the Chinese took over from the Koreans. They made us go to school every day for 10 or 12 hours to listen to them talking about how good the communist government was and how bad our government was. During the winter of ’51 they put us on wood detail. We’d cross the Yalu River on the ice, into Manchuria. If you didn’t bring back a heavy enough piece of wood, they would send you back to get another piece. When the spring came and the trees started to bud, the birds ate the buds—and we did too. Then the corn would grow and we’d get that.

When the war ended, I crossed the “Bridge of No Return” on August 26, 1953, during the “Operation Big Switch” prisoner exchange. We were being helped out of our truck when some Marine said, “Come on, I’ll help you out.” But I told him, “I’ve got a lot of pride in me yet.” And then I saw the American flag. I went over there and put my arms around the flagpole. I don’t know how long I cried . . .

At that point I weighed 102 pounds. After 21 days in a Japanese hospital, I was flown home and discharged on Veteran’s Day in 1953.

I went to work for my brother-in-law who was in the elevator business. That lasted for 35 years. I got married in 1954. We had four kids and are still together.

I’m into old cars, and so was my daughter. I bought her a ’74 Camaro, and she finished high school in that. About 12 years ago she came to me and said, “Dad, do you think we could get that old Camaro running?” I said, “Nah, it’s junk.” But that gave me a spark. She wanted to take it to her 25th high school reunion, so I decided to get it all fixed up. But around then, my daughter got cancer. I still have the car, but she never got to see it. She’s been gone 10 years now . . . my pal. I miss her so much.

I go to area schools now and talk to kids about my experiences. I try to forget too, you know, but it’s tough. My wife, she’s put up with a lot. I used to pound on the walls and all that stuff.

Years ago, my wife and I got invited to go to a church in Korea. My wife didn’t want to go but I talked her into it. I went to visit Panmunjom, which is where I’d crossed back into South Korea in 1953. That same flagpole is still there. I went over to it again.

When we started our march in Korea there were over 800 GIs. Only 248 survived. Today there are 61 of us left. I don’t know why I’m still alive. I have no idea.



ORLANDO

I grew up in a little area of Chicago called Logan Square. Probably some of my best memories are from there. It was a Puerto Rican neighborhood, and there were only four black families that lived there. Me and my mom, we lived up on the third floor of an apartment building. My aunt and her kids lived on the second floor. The Jones family and the Tolden family lived up the street.

We went to school together. I played baseball over at Darwin Elementary. My music teacher in high school, Mrs. Bowers, I'll never forget this lady. She made it a point to expose us inner city black kids to different music, mainly opera. I still remember "The Flight of the Valkyries."

I was singing in a choir since I was five years old. I had my own little singing group in high school. Me and Kenny, Richard, and Raymond would walk through the lunchroom just singing away. You had to be an athlete or a singer to keep a girlfriend. I was so little I had to do both. [laughing]

My ma didn't want me to play football, but my uncles talked her into it. I was a Varsity starter for four years even though

I was the smallest person on the team. I'd get pounded every day. I'd come home cramping and bruised. She'd sit there and massage my legs and put ointment and stuff on. A lot of times she'd cry, and I'd tell her, "Don't cry, 'cause I'm going to keep going."

After high school I joined the Marines. I didn't join the Marine Corps to be part of some big bad outfit. It wasn't the uniforms or wanting to be a hero. I joined because I got a girl pregnant in high school. I couldn't afford to go to college and didn't have any prospects. I joined the Marines so I'd be able to take care of my child, my oldest daughter LaToyia.

It just so happened that when I joined the Marine Corps, I was good at it. I started off as a Motor T, a mechanic. But promotions were slim with that MOS (Military Occupational Specialty). When it came time to re-enlist, I switched over to recon. That was in '89. I was in 1st and 3rd Recon. Got promoted up and made my bones.

I was in the Corps off and on for 16 years. I had a blast too. Never had so much fun in my life. Any time a float would



come up, like a Westpac Cruise, I'd volunteer. I'd volunteer for anything that got me out of the States.

I was a Gunnery Sergeant when I got into the car accident. I was a passenger, in the back seat. The other guy was driving. He peeled out of a parking lot and was doing 70 down Halsted Avenue in Chicago. I remember exactly what I told him, "You need to slow this car down before you kill somebody. And then I'm going to have to punch you in the mouth." The last thing I saw was the side of a vehicle. Lights out.

He wound up killing seven people. He's up for parole in May, I think. I'm going to make sure I'm there. I woke up



from a coma a month and a half later: busted up from head to toe, neck broken, legs shattered, my face caved in, massive internal damage, right shoulder torn out of the socket—the whole nine. That was in 2003.

I've had 21 surgeries since then, but I don't get too upset about it. With the cards that have been dealt me, a lot of people would have probably committed suicide by now. But I don't think about that. I got strength in my faith.

I'm a truck driver by trade. My late father owned a trucking company. That's how I got into the game. My uncles, my cousins, my sisters, nieces, and nephews—we all worked for my dad.

He ran his business out of his home, had his office in the back, right off his bedroom. That was the hangout spot with his notebook pads, and his rolodex, everything around him on the bed. Unless I had to do something down at the shop, nine times out of ten I was at my dad's house, goofing off with his crazy self. That man had a sense of humor that was just ridiculous.

When my brother Ron got killed, that hit me. Ron was my idol. I was only two years younger than him. He taught me how to play baseball, football, basketball—my brother was the man. After the funeral, I'm back there stretched across the bed, losing it, and I hear all these people laughing up in the front room. I'm thinking to myself, *What could be so funny? I just buried my brother.* And there my dad was, holding court. He had the entire house in tears, laughing.



My father passed away about eight years ago. My mom passed away in 2016 from Alzheimer's. I was lucky enough to have some parents that raised us the right way and taught us how to treat people like they want to be treated. They held us accountable for whatever it is that we did, good or bad. I count that as a true blessing. We didn't have a lot. We were dirt poor. But we had that.

Altogether I've got five children. There's my oldest daughter LaToyia, she'll be 34 in October. Monique is 27. Then there's little Artis and Nevaeh, that's Heaven spelled backwards. She's my baby girl, I call her Snoot-Snoot. She's getting ready to turn 14 in October. Little Artis is 15.

My oldest son Isaac died in 2011, he accidentally drowned. Isaac lived in Fort Lauderdale with his ma but we were still close. He was a good kid. He had a scholarship to go to Florida State. A month after he died, his son Little Isaac was born. But my daughter-in-law . . . I guess her grief was too much. She got into drugs real bad and got hooked up with the wrong guy. This guy, 16 months later, he got high and beat my grandson to death, murdered him. I lost my son and my grandson in 17 months. That did a number on me.

I went through a little phase where I was suffering from depression and drinking a little too heavy. For like two years. Something just clicked. I called to make an appointment and told them I needed to talk someone. The lady had me come in the next day. That was the best thing I ever did. For a little while I was seeing her and then I started seeing an outside shrink, too. Everything just kind of fell back into place.

I'm hoping to get my voice back so I can go to church on a regular basis. They had to put that tube down my throat for all these operations and it screwed my voice up. The docs tell me it'll get better. I don't pick my church because the preacher

might be good. I pick my church because of that choir. If you've got a stone-cold choir, I'm your guy, I'm there!

In general life is good. I'm not bitter or angry. I thank God for everything that has gone on in my life, good or bad. I'm blessed to be the man I am today. *Semper Fi!*



LARRY

I've lived a damn good life.

I was born and raised right here in Madison. There were eight of us—six boys and two girls. My father worked for Findorff, operating heavy equipment like cranes. For a while, we lived over by Truax Field. There used to be barracks: four buildings on a block, each with three houses end-to-end in a straight line. You could pass a 45 record to your neighbor through the cracks in the walls. My mother always had two or three jobs. The older kids took care of the younger ones. We were taught well. I believe there's a lack of discipline today. If a kid needs an ass-whipping, make sure he gets one. My brothers performed that role.

Growing up here was awesome. I'd jump on the train at Oscar Mayer and ride uptown to the Square. All the kids would hang out at King's on Friday nights. King's was a burger place where you called your order in from your car. We'd pick up girls, play kissy-face. We'd race our cars around the Square, stoplight to stoplight. There were church dances. Someone always had a bottle of liquor. I was a hippie, a long hair. I smoked pot and

had a good time. Sometimes we'd go to parties at the sororities and fraternities. In 1968–69, when the riots were going on, I was 14-, 15-years-old, but I was downtown throwing rocks.

I did my share of fighting, too. I'm not very big, but people would say, "Watch out for Larry, that guy's fast." We all had reputations in our family. *Don't mess with the McKennas!* I got so many stories. Once, I sat in a dunk tank at the Corn Festival in Sun Prairie. I'm drunk and tripping on LSD, playing blues on my harmonica and talking smack to the crowd. "You throw like ass." Words I don't use nowadays. I had a big crowd—I mean a BIG crowd. I made so much money that when I left the guy gave me a hundred-dollar bill.

I graduated high school in 1971. I worked a couple years at different jobs—cutting trees, painting, smoking dope. In 1974, I enlisted. It was that or prison. I was headed down the wrong road. My dad and my older brothers had all been military. My dad had always said, "Be a man and join the Army."

I told them, "I want to jump out of airplanes," so they put me in the Airborne infantry. I was a paratrooper stationed in



northern Italy. We were skiing all the time, running around in the mountains and all over Europe. I got my French, British, and American jump wings. I learned how to rappel. My squad beat the entire battalion in a live-fire exercise, and the reward was going to French commando school for 10 weeks. That was awesome. The first day, we did a night jump on the German-French border, met at the rally point, got rid of our parachutes, went right to a little French bar, and got drunker than hell. We were out in the field for the next two weeks, with the French aggressing us in the Black Forest in Germany. We kicked ass. It was fun.

I was in for three years. After I got out, I spent two years running around the West: Colorado, California, Wyoming. I had money saved. Then I came back to Madison and worked here at the VA doing custodial work. The VA was not a place to be in the early seventies. It was like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. A lot of the Vietnam vets were junkies, heroin addicts. The care was bad. Guys were wandering down the halls all doped up. Just seemed like the staff didn't care. I left after two years. After that, I was a jack-of-all-trades. I worked construction. I worked at Webcrafters for 18 years. I worked at UW as a custodian in the dorms for 10 years. My best job was at Sauk Prairie Hospital, cleaning the OR. They were good people. It was an important job and I got so much praise from the people in the OR.

I met Kay at a bar. She's a great person. Bull-headed. Do anything for anybody. People kind of take advantage of that.

If you ask her now why we got married, she'll say it was to get me on her insurance. It's true. I wasn't working at the time and was hurting myself all the time dirt-biking and skate-boarding. I was still doing the half-pipe at 30, which back then was kind of unheard of. I was getting hurt a lot.

We had three kids. We have two left. My son Eliot and my grandson Andrew drowned in the Wisconsin River, near Tipperary Point, in 2015, on Father's Day weekend. Andrew was five. Another grandson, Nate, almost died that day. That river is more dangerous than driving a car. Eliot had told me



where they were going. I said, “Don’t you be taking those boys up there above the dam.” And he didn’t heed my words.

I’ve got seven grandchildren and one on the way. They are my everything, and they all love me, too. My daughter Miranda is up in Appleton. My daughter Abby and her husband are living with us now, which I love. Nate goes fishing with me all the time.

I fish just about every day. Lake Wisconsin. Lake Mendota. I don’t have a shirt on all summer. I don’t own a boat. “B-O-A-T—Break Out Another Thousand.” I let my friends own boats.



I pay for gas. Most of the time I just fish from shore. I told my friends, “I need to find me a video photographer and start my own show called, *Fishing from the Banks with Larry*.” It’d be funny as hell.

In the winters, me and my friends used to go out to the ice shanty on Friday with pots of chili and five cases of beer and not come home till Sunday. Just play cards all night long, smoke pot, every now and again check your tip-ups. I still go, but not as much. I go to Florida and fish for the whole month of March and deep-sea fish. Wish I could win the lottery, I’ll tell you that. I’d move down there and take the whole family. Water, sunshine, heat. I lived down there once for nine months. Kay and I didn’t divorce. I just said, “I’m going to Florida.” I had a great job. The only reason I came back is I missed the grandkids. I said, “I can’t be away and miss them growing up.”



DARLA

I got out on February 19th, 1973. At about two-thirty in the afternoon. I blocked out all of it. Vietnam, North Vietnam, when our ship got hit, people dying, real traumatic stuff. But I thought about it, often. I just kept it really secure and far away. And I kept myself away.

I married Kathy before I went into the Navy. Our first son, Rick, was born when I was in Vietnam. When I got back, we lived in Sacramento and tried to make that work, but it didn't. I moved back to Milwaukee, Wisconsin where I was born and raised. I delivered furniture for three years. After that I went to college for three years. I didn't graduate but that's where I met my second wife, Mary.

What a life we had! Probably the most wonderful woman I ever met. She was the stable person in my life. And I have to tell you, my mind was fucked. I didn't even know it for a long time. But somehow, she kept the world together for 35–36 years. And supported me all that time. We had two children together, Ben and Kelsie.

In 2002 I told Mary that I was trans. After crying all night long, she said, “You know, everything in my life now makes sense. From what I've seen, found . . . it all makes sense to me.” Mary said she would never hold me back from being the person I am. It was good. It was very good. For the next 11 years we were in therapy. Our goal was to stay together but we struggled the last three years. In the end we just knew what was best for both of us.

I left in 2013. I had to be myself or die. I chose to live.

I was in the war zone in Vietnam for 20 months. I served on the USS *Buchanan* (DDG-14), a guided-missile destroyer. It wasn't the cruise I thought it would be. I think the toughest part for me was when we spent 117 days on the gunline right outside of Quang Tri. And going up the Cua Viet River? That was something. It's about the size of the Wisconsin River and we took this huge destroyer up the channel to get to these Marines who were under fire and in bad shape. We saved 58 lives that day.



There's nothing pretty about war. The only job that we were trained to do when we went through bootcamp was kill. We had other duties, but when you see that, and you do that . . . you come back home to a strange environment. It doesn't make sense to you. It's a world that freaks you out. It's no wonder that Veterans, no matter what war they serve in, might . . . retreat, not be around, not be a person.

When I moved to Madison in 2013 my life totally changed. I remember going in to do a legal name change. I could finally live under a name that I always wanted to live under. That I needed to live. And then it just snowballed. Changing your gender on everything. Getting a passport in your name. Credit cards. On and on and on . . . [tearing up] It happened so fast. Like being on this high that you could never come off of.

All the help I got in Madison. All the opportunities that were given to me. I don't know why it happened. I became this poster child for trans people in Wisconsin. I had never spoken in front of a group before, but I was able to talk about the tumultuous times that transgender Veterans go through. I was able to advocate for the services we need at the VA. It's what I was meant to do. To get up in front of the world. To find the humanness in it. To let the world find the humanness in me, and all marginalized communities. All I wanted to do is make a difference. And I did that.

My partner Jaimie and I have a 30-foot motor coach. We spend our summers in Wisconsin and our winters someplace



warm. This winter we're going to Palm Springs, California. Looking forward to it. I don't like the cold. [laughs]

It's a miracle, to be honest with you. I had given up trying to find a partner. I was one of those people that dated lots of people, lots of women. They were all so much younger than me. I just thought I'd never find somebody my age. My friend Lauren suggested that I try a senior dating app. I went on the site, entered my information and Jaimie was one of ten people who came up. It is so wonderful to have a loving partner, somebody . . . I'm just ecstatic in love. It's so great. [crying] She's beautiful.



I survived Vietnam. I felt guilt over that because so many other people didn't. I've been back home for 50 years and only now can I sit with my back to the door. And I'm not the only one. We're terrified. In a world that seems to not care about us, I have a responsibility to stay alive. I have a responsibility to help others. To let them know that anything is possible. To be able to sit with Vet friends and be able to talk and tell your story. All the emotions, and the sadness.

I want the world to know—and maybe not the world—but I want you to know that because of who I am, because I'm a trans person, it doesn't mean the work I did, or the time I served . . . that you can take that away from me. I served with honor and dignity. I'm trans. And. I'm a proud Veteran of the United States.

WALTER

My great-grandfather bought the home farm in Waunakee in 1899. That's where I was born, and I've lived right around there all my life except for my time in service. We're farmers, out in the country. My sons still live on the farm today, and I'm just down the road.

My parents were John and Rose, and I was the second oldest of five kids. My folks' total income during the Depression was about \$500 a year. There was little or nothing for Christmas gifts, and I don't remember ever having a turkey for Thanksgiving; we'd butcher a rooster instead. Everyone was poor back then, though, so you didn't feel slighted. I can remember 1936 was a really dry year. We pulled the corn out by the roots, stomped it on the ground and threw it on the wagon, stalks, roots and all. There were hardly any ears on it, so that's what we fed the animals that winter. But we all survived.

I went to St. Peter's Catholic School out near Middleton. It was a two-room school, upstairs and downstairs, and had eight grades. Nuns taught us. My mother had three sisters who were nuns, so if I misbehaved, news would travel back home.

Do something wrong and you caught more hell at home than you did at school.

After that I did farm work. I always enjoyed farming. There's a purpose to your work. You always look forward to what you have to do next. I loved the scenery, too. I didn't like horses, though. We called them "hayburners" when I was a kid—you'd hardly use them in the winter, so all they did was eat hay! We used to plow with horses; a three-horse team could pull a 16-inch plow. You could plow all day with that and not get much done. I preferred tractors. I think we have 11 tractors now on the farm.

I got drafted into the Army in November of 1955 when I was 23. I was at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, for basic training, then Fort Lewis, Washington, and then I was sent up to Anchorage, Alaska, for about 14 months, up by Elmendorf Air Force Base. I drove a tank. I remember it getting down to 30-below at night. Everybody had to take turns pulling guard. All night long, you'd go around to each of the tanks and start them up. When you got to the first one, you'd shut



them down again, one by one. And then start them up again, over and over.

I got married in April 1955 to Antoinette. We met at a local dance hall. She was a level-headed farm girl and worked at Meriter Hospital in the pharmacy when we met. She came along with me to Alaska, and we lived off base together with our first son, who was born in 1956. Our first daughter was born in 1957 in Alaska. She teaches in Florida now and always tells her students, “I was a foreign-born American citizen.” No one can figure that out. But it’s because Alaska wasn’t a state yet when she was born. That’s the same reason why I got “overseas” pay when I was stationed there.

As soon as I got out of service, I went back to farming. My dad moved off the farm and we took over. It was tough going at first. My dad owned the land, equipment and animals, so he got 60 percent of the income. But eventually we bought the farm, and then the next farm, and the next and the next. We got up to six farms, 600 acres. We ended up having five kids, too.

Our kids went to school in Middleton, but that’s one of those hoity-toity places where the only thing anyone wants is to go to college. To get any agricultural classes, the kids had to go to Waunakee, so we’d drive them back and forth in the middle of the day. My son did that with his kids, too. I tried to get them to change the curriculum, but when you’re surrounded by city people, you might as well just butt your head against the wall.

Dairy farming is a way of life. First thing in the morning, you milk cows. It’s the last thing you do at night, too. I didn’t miss a milking for 16 years. Sometimes you didn’t feel like it, either. You’d be feverish or sick, but it has to be done.

I think it was 27 years ago that Antoinette and I moved off the farm. I still cut most of the hay and do the combining yet. I drive the cattle and hogs to market—that’s probably a hundred trips a year. It’s a sit-down job, easy. I enjoy working with my sons. If I mess up, I tell them, “Take it out of my pay.” Of course, I haven’t drawn off the farm since I was 65. [laughs]





I remember when I was young, we only had 18 dairy cows and 15 sows. There was no running water or electricity. My dad, my mother, and myself all milked by hand, with a stool and a pail. Now my boys raise 2,500 hogs and milk about 300 cows. About eight-and-a-half years ago, we went to a robot dairy, the first one in Dane County, I guess. Have you ever seen a robot dairy? It's serious. When a cow comes in, a robotic arm comes out, washes each teat, then a little red eye finds each teat to latch on for milking. When it's done, the arm sprays it down

with disinfectant. The cows are on slats, so all the waste goes down below. Unbelievable.

I'm happy that the farm will last at least one generation yet. That's what you work all your life for: to pass it on. The next generation could do very well cashing out, but you hope it continues on. My grandson is enthusiastic about farming too, so we'll see.

I had two uncles. One went to university and was always expanding his farm. The other clipped coupons and took it easy. Who was better off in the end? I don't know. I guess we tried to land somewhere in between. But I tell you what: wives make a big difference. If your wife don't want to farm, you're beat to begin with. Antoinette and I will be married 65 years in April. What's our secret? Just say, "Yes, yes, yes." [laughs] We get along good.

PAUL

To be honest, I come from a dark place. I don't glow with nostalgia when I think about my past. My dad was a robust drywall hanger, but he was also heavily into alcohol and codeine and things like that, which led to temperamental issues. He was basically a vicious tyrant. It was a violent home, physically and psychologically. Back then, what happened in the house stayed in the house. My mom was a registered nurse in obstetrics. I didn't know it at the time, but she was being physically abused by him, too.

I was the second oldest of five kids and grew up in a suburban corner of Milwaukee County, in a tiny town called St. Martin's. Our homelife drove me into the streets when I was in my teens. I ran with a rough gang. That's where I started the drug and alcohol abuse that set the trail for me to become a seriously addicted person. I've been in recovery for over 34 years now, but I spent much of the first half of my life destroying myself.

As far as high school goes . . . imagine trying to get ready for a serious math exam while spending the night before in the

back seat of a car in a used car lot in December in Wisconsin. I spent many nights that way. I did OK in some classes, but the only thing I excelled in was art. Art was an escape, the same kind of escape I'd get from reading a C.S. Lewis novel, where I'm transported into another world. Plus, I was rather good at it.

I joined the Army right after I graduated high school, mostly to get the hell out of Dodge, but I was thinking a little about the future, too. I knew my family wouldn't have money for college, but the GI Bill would, and I wanted to go to art school someday.

I spent two-and-a-half years in Frankfurt, Germany, doing Europe on the "Uncle Sam Plan" and working as an admin specialist in personnel. I learned all about opiates and good German beer and other stuff that inflamed my addictive behaviors. My whole company was much the same: half of us would be strung out at morning assemblies. It certainly wasn't my dad's army. This was a fascinatingly unhinged part of my life. There were bizarre relationships and sexual explorations.



I started playing guitar over there—something I still do today. I started writing, too, which has since led to two books.

I ETS'd (Expiration Term of Service) January 23, 1975, and a year later I was married and we started popping out kids. I was still drinking and drugging as much as ever. I was married for eight years. We had three children who are in their 40s now.

I got my associate degree in commercial art from MATC in 1979 and started working professionally as an artist. But by 1987, I was homeless and on the verge of losing my job. My boss said, "Look, either check yourself in and get help, or



you're fired." On September 10, I hitchhiked to a hospital and checked into rehab. That was the beginning of my real life. Everything up to that point was a facade. It was never genuine or authentic. It wasn't me. When I was using, I can guarantee you would not have wanted to stay in the same room with me for more than 30 seconds. I was 6-foot-4 and out of control, with a mean disposition. The monster my father crammed into me came out. After going through recovery, I'd be more likely to sit down over tea and talk about philosophy or Shakespeare's sonnets or Edgar Winter's guitar work. I was a totally different person. I began to understand a lot more about what I could potentially be, and that I could use art to get there. Art is very revealing, you know. That's why a lot of people are hesitant to show someone else what they're drawing.

I was a commercial artist for over 37 years, mostly for corporations. I did some teaching at the Art Institute in Seattle. I've shown artwork in Vermont, New York, Chicago, the Twin Cities, Seattle and Olympia. I got a fine arts degree in 1992 from the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design. After that, I lived in Minneapolis-St. Paul for eight years, then spent eight years in the Seattle and Olympia area. I had a relationship with a woman in Washington, and she moved back to Madison with me around 2008. That relationship ended around 2012, and I was on my own again.

In 2014, I started working at the rehab facility at Tellurian. With my artistic background, Tellurian came up with an



“Expressive Art” program that was similar to art therapy. I led groups there for a little over six years and told my own story a lot. I also worked the night shift for five years as a human services specialist. I did a lot of my surrealist drawings during those night shifts. I retired in 2018.

I started having abdominal pains last August, and they later found a mass on my pancreas. In January, I learned it is untreatable. I know I likely won’t see 2022. I’m dying. There’s some sadness about that, of course. I don’t want to leave. But I’m not going to waste the time I have left moping. To me, dying is the last great life event. I’ve tried to embrace all of

life’s events, whether good, bad or indifferent. I want to absorb this experience as much as I can.

I was gifted a bunch of oil paints about five years ago, and I put it to good use. I have a show up right now at a little gallery on Madison’s East side. I have nearly five decades of artwork stored in my studio. I’ve been gifting a lot of it to my closest friends. I don’t necessarily want to spend my remaining time immersed in a new project. Just yesterday, though, I finished my “farewell” piece. It’s a self-portrait. I stole the composition from something Rembrandt did in his farewell portrait, when he knew he was dying. I posed myself in a cloak. My 12-string guitar is next to me. I’m holding a palette, but my left hand is empty, and because I’m a lefty, that indicates that I won’t hold another brush. I labored almost a week on getting the likeness of myself down. Self-portraits are very difficult to do, you know. And this one had extra emotional value, because it was my way of saying good-bye.

KEN

My dad was a calf-skinner at Oscar Meyer and had a three-piece country-western band called the Goose Island Ramblers. He played fiddle and guitar and was a songwriter. He also had the gift of gab; he could talk to anybody. These days I find myself doing the same thing. Some friends say I look like him, too. That ain't so bad.

I grew up on Madison's east side and graduated high school in 1965. I knew that I'd probably end up being drafted, so two buddies and I went to Milwaukee to sign up. They told us they could really use people in the Marine Corps. My buddies talked me into it.

We did boot camp in San Diego. After that, my MOS (Military Occupational Specialty) was 0311, a rifleman, a "ground-pounder." They sent us by ship to Okinawa for a few weeks of jungle training. We got to Vietnam in December of 1966.

Our base camp was J.J. Carroll, just south of the DMZ. For a couple months, we protected that area and did night patrols. Then we moved to the Dong Ha and Phu Bai area. Halfway through March, they flew us by Huey helicopters to

Khe Sanh, Hill 881 and Hill 861. For a while, we were protecting the airstrip there.

I'll cut through some of the details here, and just say that for about two weeks we were getting in terrible firefights almost every day. One day I told some buddies, "You know, I don't feel good about where we're heading tomorrow." There was a fortified, underground hospital ahead. And sure enough, we got into huge firefights there. The enemy was coming out of the ground, was up in the trees, everywhere.

On April 30, 1967, I was carrying a big Hispanic guy who was injured when I got shot twice in the right thigh. I set the guy down and stayed close to him. But then he took a few more rounds. I saw the side of his head go off. At that moment, I thought, *Well, this is it . . .* But some guys managed to drag me from that area and throw me in a bomb crater.

There was so much chaos, so much firepower around us, but finally there was a lull and they dragged me down the mountain and set me down where they hoped to medevac me out. They'd pumped me full of morphine by then, but after a

CLAIM OF SERVICE
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WESTERN UNION TELEGRAM

W. P. MARSHALL
 President of the United States

W. W. McFALL
 President

The time shown in the line line on domestic telegrams is LOCAL TIME at point of origin. Time of message is LOCAL TIME at point of destination.

815P COT MAY 16 67 MA498 CTB479
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 MR & MRS KENNETH W WHITFORD, DONT PHONE
 ROUTE 1 COTTAGE GROVE WIS

THIS IS TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR SON PRIVATE FIRST CLASS KENNETH J WHITFORD USMC WAS INJURED 30 APRIL 1967 IN THE VICINITY OF KHE SANH, REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM. HE SUSTAINED A GUNSHOT WOUND TO THE RIGHT THIGH FROM RIFLE FIRE WHILE ENGAGED IN ACTION AGAINST HOSTILE FORCES. HE IS PRESENTLY RECEIVING TREATMENT ABOARD THE US HOSPITAL SHIP USS REPOSE. HIS CONDITION AND PROGNOSIS WERE GOOD. YOUR ANXIETY IS REALIZED AND YOU ARE ASSURED THAT HE IS RECEIVING THE BEST OF CARE. HIS MAILING ADDRESS REMAINS THE SAME.

WALLACE M GREENE JR GENERAL USMC COMMANDANT OF THE MARINE CORPS



while, I started screaming, “You gotta get me out of here!” They told me to hold tight, that they’d get me more pain medication. “No!” I said, “I’m on an anthill, they’re eating me alive!” Red ants were in my ears, up my butt and everywhere else. So they dragged me up another small hill, and finally a Sea Knight twin-bladed helicopter came down to pick up some of the wounded. As we took off, you could see the blood running down the lift gate.

Back at the air base at Khe Sanh, they cut off my boots and clothes; they took my helmet, my rifle. They put me on a stretcher stark naked and threw a sheet over me. I’m not Catholic, but a friend in Madison had given me a St. Christopher medallion before I left; I had that around my neck. Next thing you know, a priest is standing over me, saying prayers. Then a nearby helicopter took off, my sheet went flying, and not long after that I lost consciousness.

They got me to Da Nang. In the operating room I heard voices saying, “Well, looks like another amputee.” The room became overwhelmingly bright, and that’s all I remember until I woke up two or three days later. I looked down and saw I still had two feet. A few nights later, something went wrong and they had to rush me back to the operating room. I looked back and my bed was a huge puddle of blood. Something had broken open. But they stopped the bleeding and stabilized my leg again. Five or six days after I’d been shot, General Walter Greene gave me my Purple Heart.

In May, they sent me to the USS *Repose*, a hospital ship, and then to Yokosuka, Japan, to recover. My leg wasn’t my only problem. On patrol, I didn’t have Halazone tablets to purify the crappy water. As a result, I had intestinal worms and malaria, too.

After about a month of lifting weights, going to therapy, walking and everything else, I was feeling good. Eventually they sent me to Okinawa for an office job, and then I flew home for leave and finished my tour at Camp Pendleton. The day after landing in San Diego, we went to LAX. I looked around and said, “What the hell is going on?” War protests. After that, I took off my uniform and traveled home in my civvies. In Chicago, it was more of the same. Madison, too.

On May 11, 1968, they said we were done. Time to go home. It was hard to adapt from what we’d left in Vietnam. Back home, I worked in the paint department at General Motors in Janesville and lived with my parents. I couldn’t forget the doctor’s advice about rehabbing my leg: “It’s up to you to do what you can do,” he said. So, I started walking, and then I started running. We lived out in the country, and there was a five-mile square of roads out there. I started running around that. Farmers would stop and ask, “Hey Ken, you need a ride into town?”

“No,” I’d say, “I’m running around the block.”

“What for?” they’d say. They couldn’t imagine running for exercise. [laughs] I joined a running club in the mid-1970s

and got into 10Ks, then half-marathons. In 1982, I started a Fourth of July run in Milton that's still going today.

But all the while, I kept thinking about Vietnam. When the Tet Offensive happened, I felt like I should have stayed there. I had two brothers and four sisters, but I couldn't tell them or my parents about anything. I had combat photos that weren't pleasant to look at. One day my mom took them out to the burn barrel. "You can't have these around your sisters and brothers," she said. That was all right with me.

Something was wrong with me, though. At work, a guy would bang his coffee cup down and I'd flinch. I was struggling.



I told my boss, "I need a vacation. I don't feel good." I took about three weeks off, and later I went to the VA in Milwaukee to be evaluated. They didn't do much.

To back up in my story: before we left Okinawa for Vietnam, I got a letter from my high school sweetheart. She and I were engaged, but in the letter she called it off. After I got home, however, I met Sharon in 1969. We got married in 1971 and were married 48 years. We had two children: a son and a daughter. I worked at GM for 36 years, and as a side job, I helped a friend do baseball card shows all over the country, from Hawaii to New York City.

Sharon never really asked me about Vietnam. But not long ago, she and I were getting set to take a tour of the battlefields where I'd been. That's when Sharon went in for heart surgery, in September 2018. She died from complications.

No one ever teaches you about grief. In Vietnam, you didn't get time to grieve the loss of your fellow soldiers. You'd lay in your stinking foxhole at night and think about it, feeling sorry for their families, but that was it. I'd already lost three siblings. And then I lost my wife. Terrible. No one prepares you for that.

It was maybe 40 years after Vietnam before I started talking with groups of veterans about it. Then, last year, my neighbors talked me into going on the Honor Flight. I visited the Wall out in D.C. One name I took a picture of was Nick Palumbo. Two weeks before he got killed over there, we learned about the birth of his son. Nick died right before my eyes: shot in

his back and his head. They turned his lights out. Could have been *my* back, or *my* head. But it wasn't.



These days I live alone and work part-time for a nursing home. I drive a short bus and take people to their appointments. After Sharon died, I took seven or eight months off. My daughter finally told me I should go back to work. She was right. It's good to stay busy. It's good to think about something besides the bad stuff that's happened to you.

YOUR STORY

My Life, My Story is available free of charge to any veteran who is enrolled in VA healthcare. Our team of VA staff, students, and community volunteers have interviewed veterans all over the country, ranging in age from 22 to 108. Over 70 VA medical centers have implemented My Life, My Story. Veterans can request in-person interviews at these sites and their stories will be added (with their permission) to their VA medical record. For a map see: <https://marketplace.va.gov/innovations/my-life-my-story>.

If you are a veteran and your local VA does NOT have an active My Life, My Story program, you can still be interviewed and receive copies of your story. However, it won't be placed in your VA medical record.

We conduct interviews in-person (where available), by video, or over the phone. We don't have a standard list of questions, but we usually ask about your upbringing and family; your military service; your careers, hobbies, or passions. Some vets talk a lot about their military service. Others skip over it. You're free to talk (or not) about any part of your life.

The veterans featured in this book gave us written permission to share their stories, but most of the stories we write are never shared with the public. We provide you with printed copies. We put a copy in your VA medical record for your VA doctors and nurses to read. That's it.

If you or someone you know would like to be interviewed for the project, email us at mystory@va.gov. We'd love to hear your story.

If someone asked you to tell your life story, what would you say?

"She put her finger on my chest. She said, 'You're nothing but a hitman for the U.S. government,' turned around, and walked away. I thought to myself, 'Welcome home.'"

—Bill

"I was 6-foot-4 and out of control, with a mean disposition. The monster my father crammed into me came out."

—Paul

"I'm happy that the farm will last at least one generation yet. That's what you work all your life for: to pass it on."

—Walter

"There was no love there. But we knew what love was; we could see it in other families. So we drank a lot and stayed inside our minds."

—Terry

"I will start from the time that I changed from a happy girl to a mature teenager. In 1939, I was just 11 years old. We were listening to the radio and heard an alarm. They announced that the German army had crossed the border and airplanes were on their way to Warsaw."

—Joanne

Since 2013, writers from the VA's My Life, My Story project have asked more than 9,000 Veterans at VA hospitals around the United States to tell their life stories. With the Veteran's permission, those stories go into the Veteran's medical record so that VA health care providers can read them and get to know their patients better. The project has been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *NPR*.



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