

Helping Our Veterans



Tammy
Gagne



Conquering Disease
Emergency Aid
Environmental Protection
Helping Children with Life-Threatening
Medical Issues
Helping Our Veterans
Preserving Human Rights Around the
World
The Quest to End World Hunger
Support for Education

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Introduction

Seventeen years had passed since Stephen C. Klink had been a soldier in Vietnam. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, also known as “the Wall,” had been finished for a year. But Klink knew that he had to be ready before making the trip. While still at the motel in Washington, DC, he asked his wife if she would mind staying behind for his very first visit. He needed some space; she understood. He took his sunglasses, forgot his camera, and left for the short walk to the memorial.

When he reached the site, he immediately noticed how quiet all the other visitors were. Some left flowers at the base of the Wall, others traced familiar names with their fingertips, and all seemed to be deep in thought. His mind too was wandering back in time.

“After a volunteer showed me how to locate a name,” he recalls, “I searched for and found name after name of those who fought beside me. Seeing their names etched in granite, I was glad I’d thought to bring the sunglasses. Tears stung my eyes. I felt my jaw clench and my stomach sink. For years, I’d hoped that maybe a mistake had been made and that my comrades-in-arms weren’t really dead. Now, I couldn’t escape the truth any longer—they were dead.”¹

Soon Klink took a step back to take in the bigger picture. When he did, he noticed something familiar about many of those other visitors: Everywhere he looked, he saw men just about his age, wearing sunglasses.

“Standing that afternoon in front of a wall of black granite sealed it for me. I could play no more mind games. My search for closure and peace demanded that I now deal with the facts.”²

For many returning veterans, whether they have been back for seventeen days or seventeen years, dealing with those facts can be a mighty difficult assignment. Fortunately, numerous organizations and programs exist to help United States vets go on with their lives after giving—and often losing—so much of themselves.

CHAPTER 1



Risking Life and Limb

The Panjwayi District is known as the birthplace of the Taliban. Located in Afghanistan just southwest of Kandahar, this area has been the site of some of the longest and bloodiest fights of the last decade in the region. Most people would find it hard to imagine wishing to be back in this virtual minefield. But that’s exactly how Nick Keene felt when his catastrophic injury forced him to go back home just five months after his arrival.

“I wish I could have stayed longer,” he shares. “It was hard to think that while my guys were sweating, bleeding in the mud, I’m sitting on a couch doing nothing.”¹

The day had begun with Keene behind the wheel of a Stryker armored combat vehicle. As he drove along, the other members of his unit were scanning the roadside for improvised explosive devices, more commonly known as IEDs. Suddenly, a rocket hit just underneath the vehicle. Before Keene could even realize what had happened, a second strike occurred. This one was a direct hit. It threw him out of his seat and into the side of the vehicle with so much power that it broke his back.

Keene was certain that the blast had blown off his legs, but his eyes insisted they were still there. He would later learn that the damaged nerves had cut off all his feeling. The rocket had done equal damage to the vehicle, which Keene could not move more than a few hundred yards before it gave out. He and the rest of his unit, which included his injured lieutenant, could not get away from the eight able-bodied Taliban members that were quickly moving closer.



One of the Marines' jobs in Afghanistan is to destroy improvised explosive devices, or IEDs, whenever the dangerous weapons are found intact. IEDs have killed or seriously injured a large number of US soldiers. Here, members of Marine Wing Support Squadron 274 destroy such a cache, which was discovered by Marines from Lima Company, Third Battalion, Third Marine Regiment. The weapons were found in an abandoned compound in Southern Shorsurak, Helmand province, during Operation New Dawn in 2010.

The twenty-three-year-old managed to wedge himself into a hole in the vehicle just close enough to one of its guns. His arms and hands were still working, so he relied on them to protect his fellow soldiers. Keene's finger didn't leave the trigger until he had fired all 2,800 rounds. For his actions that day, he would receive a Purple Heart—and a one-way ticket home.

The vertebrae in Keene's back were so badly damaged that it took months for him to find out what would happen to his legs. Doctors eventually decided that they didn't need to amputate them. Even then, however, life outside a wheelchair seemed an unlikely possibility. That same spirit that helped him hang on when his unit in Afghanistan needed him kicked in once again. Keene endured months of painful physical therapy so he could get back on his feet, literally. Although he will always need a cane, he can now walk once again.

Keene has mixed feelings about being declared medically unfit for duty. "I could have appealed it," he notes, "but I just can't do my job anymore. I know that."²

When asked about her son's actions in the attack that ended his military career, Brenda Keene says she isn't at all surprised. "That's just the way he is. If he didn't do what he did, who knows how many would have died," she shares proudly.³




But as Keene makes the transition from soldier to wounded veteran, one thing is clear: His life will never be the same. The frayed nerves that are still intact are at risk of being severed during any of the numerous surgeries that lie ahead of him. If this should happen, Keene could become permanently paralyzed.

Brenda admits, “It’s going to make a big impact on his life and has already.”⁴

Like Keene, Army Sergeant First Class Dale Smith knows what it’s like to return from combat with a disabling injury. While stationed in Afghanistan in 2011, Smith was shot in the head during an attack. Although he is lucky to be alive, the wound robbed him of his eyesight, possibly permanently.



 Iraqi Freedom veteran Charles Matthew Warren is seen here exercising at the Uptown Division of the Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Augusta, Georgia. The facility can provide medical rehabilitation for up to forty patients at one time.

Like Keene, Smith received a Purple Heart shortly after his injury. Upon returning home to Colorado, he was also presented with the Bronze Star with Valor. He brought his own personal cheering section to the

ceremony. His wife Lindsey; daughter Cadence and son Sage; parents Dale Sr. and Cindy Smith; and brother and sister-in-law Raymond and Cassie Smith all attended the event.

“I’m not sure if there was a dry eye in the gymnasium when Cadence was lifted up by an army officer so she could re-pin his Purple Heart as he stood tall and strong amongst the troops,” recalls Cassie. “I know our family was deeply moved by the ceremony in its entirety.”⁵

Following the injury, Smith knew that his life was going to change. But he hasn’t let it change who he is. “He is exactly like he was pre-injury,” Cassie shares. “He makes jokes, he remembers all sorts of things that happened in his childhood.”⁶ Those memories are important signs that Smith’s long-term memory is coming back after dealing with some memory loss as a result of the gunshot wound.

His family members also understand that things won’t always be easy. But they are positive and supportive. “It’s a little bit of an adjustment,” Cassie says honestly, “but nothing we can’t get through.”⁷

A higher percentage of veterans are returning from combat with disabling injuries and mental health conditions like posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than ever before. Experts say that part of the reason is how far technology has come in recent decades. Both military armor and rescue operations are far better than they were before. This means that fewer injured soldiers are dying and more are coming home. But those who are coming home often need some help dealing with their issues.

Judi Cheary is the spokeswoman for the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in San Francisco, California. As she explains, “The equipment is better and the medical care is better, so they’re surviving injuries that soldiers in other conflicts would have never survived. And we’ve increased staff, created a bunch of new programs and are actively doing outreach for these young vets to come to us, but unfortunately most of them don’t.”⁸

Many times, military experience leaves veterans with a belief that they must tough it out on their own. A study by Rand, a nonprofit research group, found that 70 percent of veterans who need help do not ask for it from either the military or Veterans Affairs. Unless these men and women reach out to organizations that can help, nothing can be done.

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