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The Contract

Some time ago my wife and I were visited by one of our Sky Soldier medic buddies, whom I'll call Doc Bob. Bob and his wife were down here in Florida specifically to meet with one of the civilian gurus on PTSD. In fact, this guru, Dr. Scott Fairchild, did much of the early research on PTSD for the army at Walter Reed and is a recognized authority on the illness. He has and continues to help many Sky Soldiers and other vets from across the country, and their wives, with his PTSD evaluations and ongoing treatment. Doc Bob originally received a 10% rating years ago for PTSD. The VA later upped him to 30% then 50%, almost without argument. There, he hit a brick wall; even his DAV rep told him there's no opportunity to improve on the rating, even though Doc Bob is clearly a candidate for 100% disability.

Now Doc Bob is a bright guy, but the VA doesn't like bright guys. If you display any normalcy to them they will simply shoot down your PTSD claim. It's unfortunate, but that's the way it is. Doc has a tendency to sit in front of the VA pysch and engage him in intellectual conversation. The VA must think, "*If this guy can talk he must not be sick*". Consequently, Doc Bob is stuck at 50%, even though I suspect the PTSD assessment of the medic will indicate otherwise.

Doc Bob and I would sit on the patio here until the early morning hours talking about our war and his illness. Our record was to 3:30 a.m. one morning. Although the VA essentially threw a 50% PTSD disability rating at him, Doc continues to struggle with denial, even though his wife is abundantly aware of his illness and how it has negatively impacted and continues to impact their lives together as well as his relationships or non-relationships with others. I know about his denial, I had it for over 30 years and it is a common trait amongst our ranks.

Another PTSD related trait I personally experienced and one which may keep Doc Bob from receiving his just, due and earned disability rating and its concurrent benefits of treatment and compensation is his belief "*I'm not deserving of anything from the government (VA). I see those kids coming home from the Middle East without arms and legs, they are the deserving ones. I don't want to take anything away from them.*" I understand Bob's thinking, but he's entirely wrong. And, this self-imposed hurdle can be difficult to overcome but is essential to overcome when pursuing one's PTSD or other claim with the VA. Bob has yet to understand the government has passed laws and established benefits and compensation specifically for him and others like him, and he is *not* taking anything away from anyone. Doc Bob simply believes he 1) joined the army, 2) went to war and fulfilled his service obligations, and 3) nothing is due him for it.

This heroic and sick medic would repeat this mantra to me many times over the week he was here. One night I asked him about the *contract* he signed. You know, that contract we all signed at some enlistment office when a sergeant in pressed fatigues gave us the paper and pen to affix our names. We knew we might go to war and we knew we might die or be maimed for life. That was acceptable to us. But, that's all we knew, and that starched-fatigues sergeant didn't tell us about the *other* conditions of the contract.

I asked Doc Bob if he were aware of those *other conditions* of the contract. He said he was not. I then began to cite some of those conditions to him and asked him would he have signed that contract knowing they existed. Just some of those unwritten conditions I rattled off to Doc included:



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- You may experience depression for the rest of your life and will need to be on medication just to live somewhat of a normal life.
- Your parents and siblings may be emotionally tortured during your time at war and beyond.
- You may live a life of paranoia and isolation, trusting few or no one.
- You may be socially restricted, fearing the outside world and spending most of your time in your bunker at home.
- You may be emotionally dead; *it don't mean nothin'*.
- You may experience regular nightmares and dreams which frighten you and your wife, resulting in sleeplessness which can cause other physical and mental maladies.
- You may marry twice, thrice or more times, or remain unmarried, because no one understands you and cannot live with your mood swings, violence or threat of violence.
- You may alienate your sons and daughters, perhaps to never again re-establish mutual love and closeness.
- You may be easily startled by unexpected loud noises, sending your body and mind into survival and/or attack mode.
- You may ponder the thought of suicide or even homicide, as many of those you served with did more than ponder those acts.
- You may live with guilt for acts you committed or didn't commit, the slightest sight or smell activating that guilt at the least opportune times.
- You may lose most or all of your pre-army friends because you've changed, you will never again be the person you were before your army/war experience.
- You may spend too many hours of your life asking yourself, "*Why did I survive and they did not?*"
- You may religiously lock all your doors, rechecking them, and keeping a weapon or weapons close at all times in case of an attack.
- You may find yourself in fights with strangers, friends and even relatives, and then hate yourself afterwards.
- You may spend time in jail or prison, something you thought you would never do.

- You may smother your wife and kids with your "protection", making their lives miserable.
- You may lose your god or other beliefs formerly important to you.
- You may adopt rituals, rituals not normal to others, and they will be part of your daily routine.
- Going to a movie or a restaurant with your bride may be a major struggle or something you just don't do. Too many strangers out there, it's unsafe out there.
- If you do socialize at all, it might be at some dungy VFW filled with smoke and belching vets. You feel safe there. Of course, this does not appeal much to your wife.
- You may take risks, physical risks and others, afterwards wondering why the hell you did that.
- You may be a womanizer, a boozier, a drug user, even a work alcoholic, all to hide some deep pain inside you don't quite understand, all to escape an otherwise normal existence.
- You may cry way too often, sometimes just sitting alone and thinking.
- You may only be able to hold a job where you work alone because you can't work with others, or, you may not be able to work at all.

Every one of these symptoms add up to *stress*. PTSD is *not* being crazy, PTSD is living a life of stress, and stress is the biggest killer of all.

I then asked Doc Bob if he would have so readily signed that contract many years ago had they told him about these possible conditions. He honestly replied, "*I'm not sure*".

These "conditions" of that contract we all signed were never written, there was no second page to the contract, they were simply little bonuses many of us were given by the army as we excitedly headed off to Basic somewhere or came back from the war zone. And, many of these gifts are better known as



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A New Airborne Trooper

On July 26, 2009, Major Ed Privette, former communications Officer and Commander of Headquarters Company 2/503d in 1967, and Dak To veteran, pins his original 1952 jump wings on his grandson, 2LT Nick Privette, during jump school graduation ceremonies at Fort Benning, GA. LT Privette was graduated West Point in 2008, and hopes to join the 173d Airborne Brigade with whom he spent his senior class summer in Italy. Of nearly 550 paratrooper candidates who began jump school with Ed's grandson, just over 400 graduated. Yup. Sounds about right.



Post Traumatic Stress. Our brains have been taught and conditioned to act and react differently than what is otherwise considered normal; and what was taught us and what we experienced in the military and at war can never be unlearned, it can only be managed, at best.

Doc Bob earned his disability rating, he *is* sick. His view of *nothing is owed me*, is unwarranted. He is no different than the kid coming home from Iraq with no leg. The only difference is the kid can see his wound; our wounds are hidden inside and difficult to understand and accept.

Note: The next issue of our Newsletter will detail steps one can take to file a VA claim for PTSD. We will also invite Dr. Scott Fairchild to provide an article further describing the illness and available treatment.

Smitty Out

Our Newsletter

This newsletter is created specifically for the men who served with the 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173d Airborne Brigade (Sep), during the Vietnam War. Information submitted for inclusion in the Newsletter will be reproduced at the sole discretion of the producer and subject to edit for purposes of brevity. The producer accepts no responsibility for errors or omissions, or for the accuracy of the content of information presented herein.

Please send all submissions, including photos, to rto173d@cfl.rr.com This Newsletter will be issued periodically. Initial circulation will be to over 300 troopers of the 2d Bat who served in Vietnam.

If you do not wish to receive the Newsletter please send a note to the above email address. Please forward this to your 2/503 buddies. If you received a forwarded copy of our Newsletter, please send your name, unit and email address to the above email to ensure future newsletters are sent to you.
Airborne!

Lew "Smitty" Smith
HHC, 2/503d, '65/'66

The Coolest Guy I Ever Knew

This is not a “war story”, but it happened while I was XO of Charlie Company (2/503d), and Fred Henchell was Company Commander....some time during the end of '65 or early '66.

We were in base camp for a few days following one of our combat assaults (or preparing for the next one), when one of the daily afternoon rainstorms started. Fred and I shared a CP tent and were both in the tent at the time, each at our own desk on opposite sides of the tent. Our backs were to each other with the open space in the center of the tent between us.

Now, I need to point out that this CP tent was erected on the intersection of two PSP (Pierced Steel Planking) sidewalks with which most units used to “pave” the company areas. If you stood in the center of the tent when the sides were rolled up (which they usually were), you could look through the screen on either side and see right down the length of the PSP walkway.

At the time the rain started pouring down, Fred and I were working at our respective desks when suddenly there was this tremendous deafening *BOOM* in the center of the tent behind each of us – remember, we were both sitting at desks facing opposite walls of the tent. Needless to say, I almost crapped myself; but



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before I could even turn around, and with the noise still ringing in my ears, I hear Fred Henchell calmly and clearly say over his shoulder toward the entrance to the tent.....”Come in”!!!!

Well, I’ll tell you, I laughed so hard I fell out of my chair. I realized that what we had just experienced was a lightning bolt that had come through the center of the tent and the only damage you could see were large holes in the screens on either side of the tent.

According to eye witnesses, the lightning had struck the PSP further down the company street and ran along that pathway paralleling the ground right above the steel and right through the screen on one side of our tent and out the other side.

Of course, the guys who ran in to see how bad off we were got the surprise of their lives when they saw the company commander with this smirk on his face, and a “crazy” 1st LT rolling around on the floor laughing his ass off!!! All of this is to attest to the deportment of Captain Fred Henchell....the coolest guy I ever knew.



LTC X.A. (Tony) Esposito,
U.S. Army, Retired
“C” Co. and HHC
2/503d Inf. (Abn)
173d Airborne
Apr. '65- Apr. '66

Photo by Tom Goodwin

Camp Zinn, home to the 2/503d, 173d Airborne (Sep) 1965-1967.



Best of the Best?



Good buddy, Larry (Big Dog) Hampton of Charlotte, NC, and 1/503d sniper extraordinaire in Vietnam, responded to our call for input to this newsletter. Here is Big Dog's submission:

**"First Batt.....
The Best of The Best**

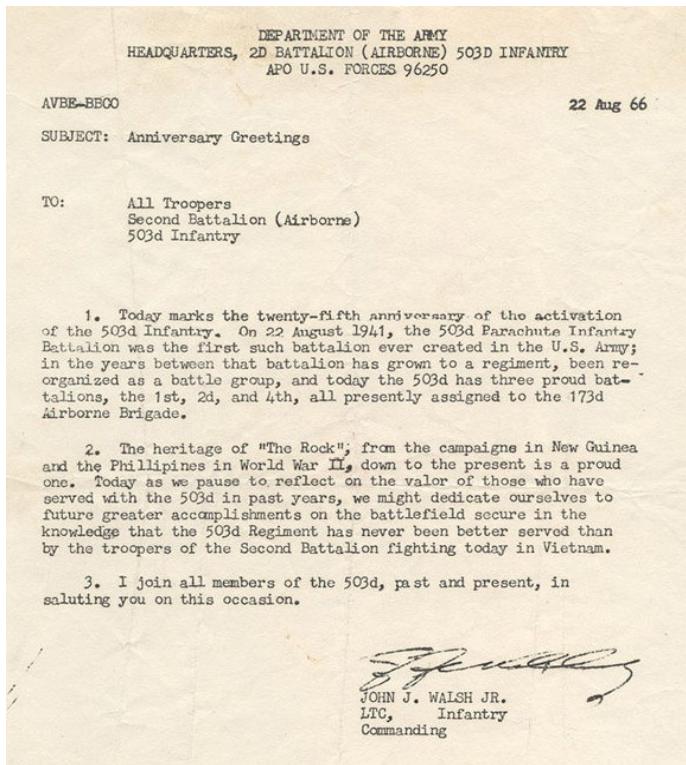
**That is all.....Front
Cover will be fine....."**

Now, Dog is a big Harley biker dude, and we can grant Larry his battalion's slogan might be slightly more descriptive of his unit than that of the 2d Bat's. But, Larry failed to mention he lost at arm wrestling to this old 2d Bat RTO at the Cocoa Beach, FL VFW recently.

Best of the Best??? Maybe. But, *We Try Harder.* ☺

Anniversary Wishes

This letter, from (then) LTC John Walsh, Colonel (Ret), commander of the 2/503d in 1966, recognizes the then twenty-five year anniversary of the 503d..



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The Old Guard



We are veterans of the Vietnam War.

**Time is counting the cadence now
as the years slowly march us into history.
The battlefields where we screamed and cried
and bled and died
settle like falling leaves onto its pages.**

**We make our daily pilgrimage
to the seductive siren on the rocks –
Our Lady of the Valley of the Shadow –
Vietnam.**

**She has been our companion for so long now
that it would be hard to imagine life without her.
Indeed, we would be like lost children.**

**She is the tapestry against which
all things are compared.
We measure everything and everyone
by the yardstick of our experience with her.**

**Today she may return us to a
mountain top view of a
cloud shrouded emerald green valley.
Tomorrow may bring a visit to the place
with the dark, blood soaked sand and the
bits of sticky, drying flesh clinging to the bushes.**

**We have that secret place that we retreat to
when the outside world gets too close.
It is where we go to deal with hurtful things.
It is the place where we keep the little
locked box with the bad things in it.
There, we are still soldiers...it is our bunker.**

**Jim Bethea
2/503d, 173d Airborne**

The Tragedy of War



"In popular and also in totalitarian imagery, the enemy is usually portrayed as a fierce-looking, unshaven, foul-smelling, fanaticized evil being with blood-shot eyes. Were it so, one could feel almost good about coming out as the victor in a battle like the one we had just lived through. Alas, the tragedy of war is that both sides look alike. The soldiers we just killed – had to kill! – were young, good-looking, athletic youths just like us. In other circumstances we might have met in a sports competition, a students' program, played in the same band, become friends! That is why, even though I am sincerely glad to have survived, I cannot rejoice; the price for my being alive today will forever be posted on my mind's eye."

Herbert Murhammer
"B" Co., 2/503d
173d Airborne

2/503d Brothers... Where Are They Now?



Milton Olive

B/2/503d 1965 posthumous recipient of the Medal of Honor. We can only hope Milton is now in a better place.



Don Rockholt

A/2/503d Silver Star and multiple Purple Heart recipient, Don is a retired policeman and airline pilot living with his wife, Debbie, in Cocoa Beach, Florida.



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Steve Haber

C/2/503d Bronze Star w/V and Purple Heart recipient, Steve is a former business owner and is retired in Sarasota, Florida with his wife Joan.



Lee Roy Braggs

Originally with HHC/2/503d, Lee served two tours in Vietnam, later completing careers in law enforcement and security. Lee currently lives in Germany where his bride is a teacher.



A.B. Garcia

Recipient of the Bronze Star w/V, A.B. served in the 4.2 Platoon with the 2/503d. Following a career in management with Government Works in Australia, A.B. is retired there where he lives with his wife and is loving every minute of it. Some years ago his 173d buddies gave him the nickname "Aussino" – a cross between an Aussie and an American Chicano.

In future issues of our Newsletter we'll continue to feature our buddies and where they now are.

