

# Survivor: War hero reaches out to help Soldiers

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FORT HOOD, Texas -- John McCormick is a survivor. He survived two combat tours in Vietnam and came out a hero. He survived deep depression and suicidal ideations and came out addicted to alcohol. He survived his substance abuse and came out with a message for today's troops who face the same fight he fought himself: You can conquer it all, but you don't have to go it alone.

The 72-year-old retired Army officer, a graduate of West Point's class of 1961 and Corpus Christi resident, visited Fort Hood in March 2011, when national media outlets were reporting a spike in suicides among Soldiers in February.

Later that month, Army Vice Chief of Staff Gen. Peter Chiarelli held a press conference at the headquarters of the 1st Cavalry Division here. With national Alcohol Awareness Month observed in April, the general discussed the correlation between substance abuse and suicide.

"There's no doubt in my mind that there is a correlation between substance abuse, both alcohol and prescription drugs, and suicide," Chiarelli, who has spearheaded the Army's suicide prevention efforts, said March 28. "Suicide is a compulsive act, and when you mix alcohol or some other form of medication with individuals who may have ready access to a firearm you have a lethal combination."

McCormick is living proof of that correlation.

"It really means a lot to me," he said, "if I can help one Soldier by telling my story."

## WAR HERO

The armor officer's DD 214 (record of service) reflects uncommon heroism: Legion of Merit, Bronze Star with Oak Leaf Cluster and "V" device for valor, Army Commendation Medal with Oak Leaf Cluster, Air Medal (ten, two for valor), Vietnam Gallantry Cross with Silver Star, Vietnamese Staff Services Honor Medal 1st Class, Vietnam Service Medal with one Silver Star and one Bronze Star, Vietnam Campaign Medal with "60" device, Ranger Tab, Parachutist Badge and four overseas bars.

During his first tour to Vietnam, 1966-67, he served with the 25th Infantry Division's 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment, commanding Headquarters Troop. His exploits, and those of his men, are recalled by correspondent David Reed in his 1967 book, "Up Front in Vietnam."

Reed discussed "McCormick's Raiders," a group of combat support Soldiers - cooks and clerks, mostly - who then-Capt. McCormick organized into a fighting force to ambush enemy infiltrators at his squadron's base camp in Cu Chi. He led his raiders several times each week over a five month period. He never lost a man.

McCormick returned in '67 a hero, and a bit of a celebrity, as McCormick's Raiders were also featured on NBC and "CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite."

"I use the word euphoric. I'm going home. My wife was there. My kid was there, and there were going to be demonstrators. I didn't care. They didn't spit on me or anything like that. I didn't care," McCormick recalled. "I brought a sword home from McCormick's Raiders. It's still hanging in my house (today)."

McCormick believed he was destined for great things in the Army: high rank, senior command. He was promoted to major June 17, 1968. He was what the Army calls a "fast-tracker."

For the next four years, academics, in particular the French language, dominated McCormick's life: a year to study in Paris to receive three French diplomas, followed by a Master's Degree at Columbia University and three years teaching French at West Point.

But the war beckoned.

His second tour to Vietnam was very different from his first. This time, now a major, McCormick served as an operations officer for a Special Operations unit operating on the Vietnam border with Cambodia and in Cambodia itself. He flew in more than 250 combat missions. Two aircraft were shot out from under him, but he survived the hard landings unscathed. Operations he planned accounted for more than 1,200 confirmed enemy killed in action. He received a plaque noting the exact figure: 1,269.

But something was very different when it was time to return home.

"I slept on the plane almost all the way home. I was sitting next to a colonel, and we talked about family, the war, while drinking scotch and water. We got off together in San Francisco and I went on

to Corpus Christi," McCormick recalled. "I was just emotionally spent. I had no great feelings about meeting the family or not, it just wasn't there. The sense of responsibility was so intense, that when it was lifted from me, I just collapsed. I didn't want to do it anymore."

When he arrived home, that lack of emotion followed him.

"I'm sure I smiled and hugged everyone," McCormick said, "but it didn't feel the same."

## NIGHTMARES

After returning from that second tour to Vietnam, McCormick was assigned as the operations officer for a tank battalion at Fort Hood. Nightmares began to assault him. He couldn't concentrate. He couldn't function properly. He nearly lost hope.

"I sat in our home in Temple with a loaded pistol in my hand," McCormick recalled. He said he was prepared to end his own life that night in 1972. What stayed his hand was his concern that he'd somehow botch the job and leave himself a vegetable, a burden on his family.

He checked himself into Fort Hood's Army hospital the next day. He was sent to Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio.

"They didn't have all the programs they have now," McCormick said. "I didn't have much choice, I was sent. I remember walking into that ward, and it was like walking into hell. It was filled with alcoholics mostly - some old, some middle age, some younger guys. I remember they took us swimming in a pool that was ice cold. I thought, at the time, that must have been some sort of treatment. It was shocking."

Eventually, McCormick was sent back to Fort Hood and given menial supervisory tasks to perform. He avoided crowded places.

"My Legion of Merit arrived from Vietnam," he recalled. "The post commanding general gave it to me. I remember hiding behind a tree (before the ceremony) not wanting to get it."

He thought his career was in jeopardy, until orders came in 1973 sending him to Fort Leavenworth, Kan., and the Command and General Staff College.

"I was euphoric again," McCormick said. "I was back on track." But four months into his studies, depression took over again.

"I was writing a paper about my time with Special Operations, and it all came back," he said.

He admitted himself to the hospital again. This time, he would bounce from Fort Leavenworth to Fitzsimons Army Medical Center in Aurora, Colo. (since closed, in 1999) and, finally, out of the Army, medically retired June 12, 1974.

"The next thing you know, I'm on a plane home," McCormick said. "I'm supposed to be healed, right? It didn't happen."

Through it all, the nightmares continued.

#### SELF-MEDICATING

"They were always there. I'd just get up at night, get in the closet, close the door and pull the clothes," McCormick recalled. "The NVA (North Vietnamese Army) are chasing me. We've crashed and everyone else is dead. It wasn't just a nightmare: it was the same one, over and over and over."

He landed a job at an employment agency and quickly rose to office manager. But McCormick turned to alcohol, at first, just to help him sleep.

"I didn't consider myself an alcoholic," he said. "(But) it was progressive."

He lost his first civilian job. His marriage suffered.

"I'd say to myself, 'It was my disability pay. If I wanted to buy a gallon of scotch, it was my money,'" McCormick remembered. "I was destroying a marriage and didn't care. I got to sleep at night. No more closets, no more wide-eyed in bed. If you drink enough, it goes away."

"As a matter of fact," he said, "Vietnam disappeared."

Though he lost his first civilian job, McCormick headed back to the classroom and completed a second Master's Degree, in education. He began teaching at Moody High School in Corpus Christi. But by 1987, the booze got the best of him.

"I crashed in the classroom, shaking uncontrollably, freezing," he recalled. "I was hauled out on stretcher in front of the whole student body."

While in the hospital, unable to help himself any longer, McCormick said two words that would change his life forever: "treatment facility."

He was sent to a now-defunct treatment facility in Corpus Christi, manned mostly by recovering alcoholics.

"I learned humility there," McCormick said. "The biggest impression was during a group session. As we sat in a circle and they asked, 'Is there anything that happened today that would cause you to take a drug or a drink?' No."

He asks himself that same question now, every day of his life.

It was in the treatment facility that the nightmares finally stopped.

"I like to say that I finally made it back from Vietnam in 1987," McCormick said.

#### WORTH LIVING

McCormick has been sober for 23 years. He's retired twice over now, once from the Army and again from the teaching profession. He volunteers at the USS Lexington, Museum on the Bay's library in Corpus Christi. He remains a regular at Alcoholics Anonymous, where cliches and catchphrases, like "Let go, Let God," "One day at a time," and "Keep coming back, it works if you work it," are used liberally by its participants.

In sobriety, McCormick likes using the cliché, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." But, actually, he said to survive, there's much more to it than that.

"The only problem is that when you're going through this, you don't feel tough," he said. "You've got to be able to see a future that is worth living for - be it family, job, health - anything to get out of that horrible depression.

"Depression, suicidal ideation, alcoholism - they can all be beaten, even if they happen at the same time, as long as you find something to live for," McCormick said, as his eyes misted with tears and his voice cracked with emotion. "I'm a major, retired, U.S. Army, who has been through hell, and there is light at the end of the tunnel. It can be done. It can be done."

McCormick's first marriage ended in 1990, his relationship with his ex-wife damaged irreparably. He remarried in 1995 and said he's mended his relationship with his grown children. John McCormick is a

survivor. But he didn't do it alone. He had to reach out to others, and he's reaching out again.

Walking slowly to his car parked outside the III Corps headquarters following an emotional two-and-a-half-hour interview session, one question remained.

"Do you think we'll help someone?" he asked. "If we can help save just one ..."