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# Profile of a Veteran

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Black slacks, cuffed at the bottom, of course. Converse-covered feet, and matching black-colored ball cap tops off a faded jean shirt to hide a generously used *Limp Bizkit* tee-shirt. The worn colors and print desperately holding on.

If anything, the thought of a teenaged boy full of angst comes to mind. Maybe a rebellious twenty-something who has just recently moved out of his mother's basement. What's under that ball cap reveals someone else. Fifty-four-year-old Jackie Kieth with a white beard, tired eyes, and a story to tell.

A Virginian-born kid, Jackie was like any typical rambunctious boy with siblings, a mother and a father...nothing out of the ordinary. Then he grew up.

Suddenly he wasn't a little kid anymore and his future started to appear in the window. With high school ending, Jackie had two options: the first was to further his education. College wasn't an option for Jackie though, his relationship with education was like oil and vinegar and his grades were left under the rug for quite some time.

Then came the second option. The same option the past five generations of men in the Keith lifeline: enlist into the military.

The Navy placed Jackie. His father, resting a proud hand on one shoulder, putting a powerful grip on the other, stressed to his son the magnitude of responsibility. He was terrified.

"In the morning, this crazy bastard comes in clanging on these pots yelling 'wake up! Get yourself out of bed!' and all I thought was, 'Man what did I get myself into?'"

Between the extensive exercise, the heavy loads carried on tired backs, and days spent in hot weather, all demanding physically, leaving the body and worn out. The real pain though was what was happening mentally. “The logic was ‘we going to kill commies for mommy’, that was the main focus for everything”. He recalled if you didn’t break down mentally, then you couldn’t stay.

Suddenly boot camp finished, and Jackie seemed ready for the real experience. After a test of cognition and aptitude, the Navy tossed Jackie into a submarine with hundreds of other men.

“I thought it was going to be great, just like the movies. It was the complete opposite”, because for Jackie he was given the least wanted job: the chef of the underseas.

“We were shoved into a sub for four years, and people were angry. People were annoyed at the world for many things. We would all get these letters, these letters we called them ‘Dear John’ letters. All of a sudden these men would get dumped by their girlfriends, the extent of time down there wasn’t known by us, and before I knew it, everyone was mad at the guy who made the eggs”

While deep underwater, Jackie educated himself. Trained to do the vast majority, he could repair just about anything, he knew his lefts from his rights due to knowing every valve system that was housed, could shoot any gun he could get to, all while making a savory dinner the next night.

After eight years, the Navy released Jackie. Two years later that he felt a need to be back with the people he honored; the people he felt natural around, the guys that respected him, and he respected them.

This time he was put onto the USS Saratoga in 1986 as the ship cargo loader. At that moment, Jackie knew he was back home. From France to Sweden, and all the way back again, He knew his place was on the ship.

There were the light times, but then there were serious dark times for Jackie . After an honorary discharge, there was a coping mechanism he seemed to have lost. Something small got broken down in the process which wasn't able to be fixed, most of it due to harboring dark memories.

“There was this guy I was stationed with in France, he was my friend. One night he got drunk and thought he could fly. He jumped off of a five-story building. He was a brother to me”

Even though there weren't any battles around the ship because, “being on an aircraft carrier, no one had avocados to shoot at us” there was still an emotional battle, that to this day, Jackie hasn't been able to cope with fully.

“I think I have experienced PTSD, but because I was never ‘in combat’ I think I need less help than those people. I mean my friend, who was killed in friendly fire. I have constant flashbacks of him, dreams about him, does that make me have PTSD?”

Nowadays the Navy is far behind Jackie. He happily works five days a week in a typically unusual place for most 54 year-olds - a pizza place.

“I deliver pizzas for a small pizza joint name Eli's and it's the best job I have ever had,” he said. “There's no stress and I feel happy doing it”

On the days that Jackie isn't reminiscing about his younger days or hand delivering a good pizza, he's helping out at the VA hospital about once a week. He lends a hand, although none of this is as important as what he's doing with his future. Jackie is now studying hard at Johnson and Wales University to finally help the people he sees enter the VA hospital daily.

“I want to help people at the VA and get them on their feet and get them off the drugs. I mean education is the greatest in the world”

Everyone knows a Jackie Kiehl - a person trying to start a new life, a life that can accomplish almost anything. The challenges faced, though, is a hard one, especially for veterans.

There is a headwind for awareness of veterans, like Jackie. Although mental illness can be a real crutch for most veterans in the war. That's where I want to focus my career. Having two grandfathers, one who served World War II and another in the Korean War, I got to live with a first-hand account of what mental decay really is, and I want to help those people, any people, who suffer severely, and help integrate them into today's society, to help ease the pain they go through. The aftershock of mental illness also shakes the ground for the people that live around the mentally ill. I want to help them all, I want to be the ease of the pain, and hope that one day, that they could live happy successful lives, just like Jackie.