Ms. Buzbee

The Washington Post

1301 K Street NW

Washington DC, 20071

“I'm ten years burning down the road

I've got nowhere to run and nowhere to go”

These are lyrics from Bruce Springsteen's “Born in the USA,” which is often received as a patriotic song. But it is in fact about a Vietnam veteran returning from the war to find little to no options open for him. The “nowhere to run and nowhere to go” references how many veterans returned to find no other place for them to work, and no help from the government after serving for it either. This is a huge problem in the United States, with around 131,000 homeless veterans currently. The people that served in the war that the government wanted to fight so badly, end up getting left behind once they have given their service. The government finds no further use and does not support them when they need it the most.

I am hoping to go rather in-depth with my interview, so the article will most likely be rather long in length. I am hoping to add various side notes about my uncle's personality in order to make him come to life for the reader as well as add to his perspective. I want to be as descriptive as I can, which will hopefully make it more engaging. The primary focus is to obtain his experiences both during and after his service, so I can detail how and why the government does not give him enough.

I will be interviewing at least my uncle, who was medically discharged, and if possible my grandfather who served in the Korean War. Both have different experiences with their time in the army but agree that when they returned home they felt like the government had not helped them enough in different ways. My grandfather struggled with some symptoms of PTSD and did not find any help from the army or government, and when my uncle was permanently injured during training, they don’t even offer him enough money to support his family when he can’t even work. Both of these accounts are primary sources as they have experienced firsthand the lack of help from the government after their time. I also plan to consult my father who as a physical therapist worked with several veterans at a point in his career. He has heard many accounts of similar opinions from various patients, so I will be able to collect a wide variety of stories that point to the same thing.

As for me, I come from a family with a lot of service. On my mother's side, her brother, father, and uncle all served in the army at some point in their lives. And my father is a physical therapist and worked with some veterans for a while, and his father served in the navy. I have heard many stories from each of them from various points during their service, and they all seemed to eventually come back to the same thing in the end. When they came back to the states, they felt like their service was not properly recognized. I cannot say that I am qualified from personal experience of service, but I have several accounts of family members who did serve to develop a well enough view of how many veterans have been treated when they returned.

My uncle is a very interesting man. I have never been to his house in the mountains, even though I have always wanted to go. He always tells stories of the wide variety of wildlife that he sees out there, like how a bear once walked up to his door and started to sniff around.

But despite me never being there in person, it has felt like I’ve been there thousands of times. He is a phenomenal storyteller, so each time he tells me about the latest bear sighting, it feels like a visit to his house.

When I get to see him in person he takes his mountain lifestyle with him. Complaining about the city traffic, showing us more pictures and videos of wildlife from around his house, or just some stories about my mom that she never wants him to tell.

The first words I received when I called to interview him were “Sorry if I cut in and out. You know I got this house up in the mountains with all these trees everywhere blocking the cell signal.” Before we started I asked about his dog Canyon. Canyon is a 13-year-old lab that doesn’t let his age stop him from chasing rabbits or squirrels that dare set foot onto his land. Johnny used to take him hunting with him, and Canyon doesn’t let him forget.

“Hang on,” he adds, “lemme sit down first.”

Johnny received an injury during his service in the army that had a permanent effect on his health. During a training exercise, while climbing a wall, the person above him lost his grip and fell onto him, causing his back to land on top of a 4x4 wooden beam after a large fall. It caused a bulging disc in his spine that was pinching his sciatic nerve, which resulted in extreme pain and numbness from his lower back down. Despite this life-altering injury that happened during his service, the government has not offered a lot of resources to help him and tried to put as many roadblocks as possible in his way.

Johnny served in the army from April of 99 to March of 02. He is from a family of service so he naturally followed. He had been in the army for a few years when they were doing a training exercise. Someone in his squad started to scale the 20ft wall placed in front of them until they froze and refused to go up or come down. Johnny, being the assistant squad leader, started to climb up the wall in order to help them. He had climbed about 15ft up when the person kicked off of the wall.

They landed on Johnny which caused him to lose his own grip and fall down off the wall. He landed on top of a 4x4 post of wood, directly on his back. He felt extreme pain and numbness from his lower back and down and was unable to walk without a cane. He described it as someone taking a blowtorch to the back of his thighs. It took months for doctors to figure out what was specifically wrong with him. Johnny went to California and when the doctor there received his MRI, he said there was one of two things going on. He was either the world's biggest crybaby, or there was something seriously wrong.

While stationed in a desert somewhere, a private runs up to him and says “This call’s for you sir.” The first thought that went through his mind was something happened to his wife or kids because you don’t just receive calls in the army. But luckily, it was from the doctor.

“I got good news and bad news for you,” the doctor starts. “Good news is that you aren’t the world's biggest crybaby. Bad news is you’ve got a ruptured disc, and a few herniated discs pinching your sciatic nerve.”

Johnny finally had his answer. After months of nothing, he was finally given two options. Either get surgery and let him be “reclassified for the needs of the army,” which he described to be the jobs no one wanted. Or he would be medically discharged. But of course, this isn’t what he wanted. He joined the army to become a pilot, and now that it was no longer possible, he saw no reason to stay.

“If I can’t be a pilot, I’m not going to cook stew or pack parachutes,” he adds.

So, he was finally medically discharged and allowed to return home. The government gives him a percentage of his salary that he would have earned in the army every so often due to his discharge. However, he also has to take a “disability test” where he has to prove how disabled he is in order to earn a certain percentage of his salary. But the math that they do to determine the percentage of how disabled a person is works in a way that saves the government the most money possible, and gives the least to the veterans.

“If the math they did made sense, I would be labeled as like 110% disabled. But right now they only have me down as 60%. I’ve got things like hearing loss, tinnitus, lower back problems, all of which SHOULD get me way over 60%, but they don’t want to be giving out that money, so they don’t.”

But it is not as simple as it sounds. In fact, when Johnny first got evaluated, he was only labeled as 20% disabled by the doctors in the army. When he saw another doctor, he was labeled as 40%. His state is clearly 100% disabled, but that would mean that they would have to him more money, so they do all in their power to try and keep the percentage as low as possible. He has tried for 10 years to get his deserved 100%, to no avail. He is currently rated at 60%.

“Is the money they give you enough?” I asked him.

“I live a real simple lifestyle, bought this house way back when it was dirt cheap so we don’t have a lotta mortgage to pay. But it’s not the most comfortable for sure. I’m sure there’s thousands of people who are in a different living style where it isn’t enough. When I was initially discharged sitting at a 20% rating, it was certainly not enough. The 40% difference from then vs. now is about $1700 a month, which is a LOT of money.”

And if he were fairly rated at 100%? Another $1700 he would receive each month. But in the government's eyes, this is another $1700 a month they could save if they just make the rating system impossible to navigate.

Johnny did eventually get surgery, however, when he woke up he couldn’t feel his left foot. The doctors assured him that it would go away in 6 weeks, and gave him some meds. When the 6 weeks passed and nothing changed, he was assured for sure that another 6 weeks would do the trick and was given more meds. 10 years later, nothing has changed. He doesn’t have feeling in his left foot, and the doctor's solution? The highest legal dose of opioids they could prescribe.

During this time a lot of vets were given a ridiculous amount of opioids for just about anything, leading to a lot of them selling leftover meds. The money they were receiving from the government was nothing compared to the money the opioids brought in, so a lot of veterans continued to sell them. This caught attention fast, which caused the government to come out and say any veteran who had been on opioids for more than 2 years would have 30 days to adjust but then they would be cut off. The government didn’t really care for the aftermath, they cared that the problem stopped immediately. This of course led to a lot of people relapsing and now having extreme pain come back to them, including Johnny. The solution to the problem they created? Teach them to deal with it.

“It was hell. I lost a huge amount of quality of life. I used to go hunting, fish, go into town with the kids, but once the pain came back everything had to stop. I had to wage what this would do to my back, and I couldn’t do nearly as much anymore. They offered us “classes” to learn how to just deal with the pain. But y’know, classes don’t really stop the damn pain.”

Things do not get better as time went on. Johnny went on the mention that they owe him about $6000.

If you are married, then you receive extra each month in order to compensate for the extra person, the same thing with children. Johnny initially was registered as married and received the bonus amount each month. But one month he noticed that there was $400 missing from his payment, and he was confused.

Turns out, for some odd reason, all veterans were sent a letter asking them to send their marriage certificate in order to prove that they were married, and had 45 days to do so before the bonus was no longer sent. Johnny said that he along with thousands of other veterans never received this letter, so when the 45-day period was over, a lot of people lost a big chunk of their payment.

“And y’know losing $400 a month was like a kick in the goddamn teeth, especially when I was already in their system as married.”

Johnny called the VA office, and no one picked up. He called every day for two weeks, and no one ever picked up. He finally got through to someone and found out what was going on, so the same day he sent out his certificate. It took three months for them to receive it, and then another eleven months for them to undo the change. During the total of fourteen months, he was denied $400 of his paycheck because the government figured that they could save $400 a month from thousands of veterans by making them have to redo the process. This is a recurring theme, where the government tries to make every process as tedious as possible in order to deter people into just giving up. The same thing happened when Johnny tried for a disability application. It took 22 months to go through, just to be denied. They want to make the process as hard as possible to get anything done in order to make people give up. Because when people give up, it means less money they have to give out, and more money they can add to their trillion-dollar budget.

“They don’t want to give out a few grand a month to some disabled vet who won’t serve again. They want to save it for the latest robot or newest computer or whatever.”

From Johnny’s experience, the worst of it all was being unable to talk to anyone about any sort of issues in a timely manner.

“The thing that really makes it feel like the government forgets its vets, is the goddamn process it takes to do anything. You do everything right, get all the right paperwork for whatever they want, only for it to take months to actually talk to a human. It’s like you don’t exist to anyone anymore.”

Johnny’s experience is one of thousands of other vets who have returned from service. Those who became disabled during their service, have had their pay squandered by a greedy rating system that ensures people obtain the lowest rating possible. They constantly set up roadblocks to try and make the process of fixing anything close to impossible, so people will stop trying to pursue what is theirs. Once they stop, it’s just more money the government gets to keep. But the worst of all, is that when they have the tenacity to put up with all of the things the government throws their way, they can almost never talk to someone to fix anything. It takes months to reach someone in charge, months to have something take place, it’s nearly impossible for veterans to navigate the system in order to claim what they deserve.