

KQED

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The Story of a Homeless Veteran Who Fell Through the Cracks

Location

 San Francisco

There are about 47,725 homeless veterans in the United States on any given night, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Aaron Hassay is one of these veterans.

He has been homeless ever since he was honorably discharged from the Navy in 2002, after eight years of service as a reservist. In 1998, while still in the Navy, he was diagnosed with musculoskeletal and psychiatric problems at the U.S. Military Entrance Processing Command (USMEPCOM), disqualifying him for military service and in 1999, at the U.S. Navy Medical Center – Balboa, he was further diagnosed with severe depression and bipolar disorder, among other debilitating problems. After being discharged, Aaron also discovered that he had post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Despite all of these diagnoses during the time of Aaron’s enlistment, the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) is denying him health services and other resources on the grounds that he didn’t serve enough active duty time as a sailor.

“He is extremely articulate,” says Jim Wong, a veteran of the United States Marine Corps and chairman of the National Veterans Transition Services, Inc., a nonprofit that helps veterans reintegrate into civilian society. “But a trained eye can readily see the PTSD and some of the other disabilities that have dogged him for many, many years.”

It wasn’t always like this. Aaron was once healthy and capable. Back in 1994, an 18-year-old Aaron was a star athlete who had just graduated high school. Having not been accepted to his first choice colleges, he turned to the military for a post-high school career.

He responded to an ad for the Navy’s Sea Air Mariner Program (SAM) that promised the opportunity to “live the adventure one weekend a month, tuition assistance [and] good part time pay while you train.”

Aaron jumped at the offer and graduated at the top of his recruit class, which earned him a spot on the USS *Sides*, a guided-missile frigate and combatant ship

Life started looking up for him: he was a reservist in the U.S. Navy while attending college and was engaged to his fiancée.

Unlike typical reservists who complete most of their requisite duty in a classroom at a reserve center, Aaron ended up spending his weekend duties and summers onboard an active duty guided-missile frigate, often deployed at sea.

“He learned through [on the job training] which is really tough when you’re onboard one of these very technical ships,” says Wong. “Despite having been meritoriously promoted in boot camp, Aaron was still a junior enlisted man, and without the additional training his non-reservist peers received following boot camp, he ended up being assigned to odd jobs, likely a different job every time he boarded the ship.”

After a couple of years of service, Aaron started to see his time onboard the USS *Sides* severely tax his life.

On multiple occasions, crew members berated and physically attacked him and during one incident a colleague sexually assaulted him, which led to his military sexual trauma. On two other occasions, in what is commonly referred to as “fan room counseling,” a senior-enlisted person physically harassed him and threatened his career in the military – both times, he says, they were in places on the ship out of sight and earshot.

In 1998, halfway through his enlistment, Aaron decided he needed a change so he requested an inter-service transfer into the Army, but he failed the psychological and physical exams conducted by USMEPCOM even though he had aced them just four years earlier. Aaron was classified as a 3P, which indicated that he was unfit for service and constituted a permanent disqualification from the application process and service in general. Since the results were not communicated to Aaron nor his Navy command, he was allowed to return to the USS *Sides*.

“Earlier this summer, by capitalizing on the Freedom of Information Act, Aaron was able to obtain a letter from the Inspector General of the U.S. Army Recruiting Command verifying that he had been permanently, medically disqualified for military service in 1998,” says Wong.

“In addition, this letter informed Aaron that the Army should have notified the Navy of his disqualification. Had this been done, Aaron would have received a medical discharge immediately, sparing him another four years of torment and further injury.”

Now at the age of 40, still unable to work due to his disabilities, Aaron is trying to make a case for himself so he can receive medical and housing benefits from the VA. In order to reap such services from the VA, Aaron needs to have been issued a DD214, a document that allows him to qualify for assistance.

As a reservist, Aaron was not issued a DD214 upon discharge, as he didn’t meet the requirement for two years of continuous active duty service. Another way to obtain a DD214 is by way of being medically discharged. In Wong’s opinion, Aaron’s history of sexual military trauma, musculoskeletal problems, depression, bipolar disorder, and post traumatic stress disorder makes him a perfect candidate for this route; however, the VA argued that his disorders were brought on by his breakup from his fiancée and not attributed to the eight years he served as a reservist.


In addition, in a letter to Aaron, the VA wrote, “A PTSD claim based on...military sexual trauma can be very difficult to pursue for a veteran who has active duty service” and “is much more difficult to substantiate for a member of the Reserves.”

For Aaron, the next battle is to petition the Navy to revise his honorable discharge to a medical discharge, which if successful, would entitle him to a DD214. Meanwhile, he is aware that there are numerous homeless veterans with psychological disorders each with their own story of how the VA denied them services they believe they justly earned.

These veterans, like Aaron, have fallen through the cracks. So, Aaron says he’ll keep fighting for what he deserves and he’s not just doing it for himself, but for each of the 47,000 veterans without homes.

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