

INTERVIEW WITH MR. STEPHEN COBB

by Maj J. Eric Bermudez (Andrews Deployed News)

Mr. Stephen Cobb is an active member of the Military Order of the Purple Heart (MOPH), an organization which was chartered by congress and which has its origins as far back as 1782. Mr. Cobb is the commander of MOPH Chapter 353, located in nearby Virginia. He and his wife Tanya serve as volunteer greeters for our returning wounded troops at the Aeromedical Staging Flight (ASF) located at Andrews Air Force Base, and have done so since April of 2004. Andrews Deployed News (ADN) recently conducted an interview with him.

ADN: Many of us see you here for each incoming mission at the ASF, greeting the wounded troops and informing them about benefits and assistance available to them. Yet, few of us are aware of the behind-the-scenes work that you and your organization conducts. Can you tell us about some of the many other ways that you're involved in assisting our troops?

MR. COBB: The important thing to know about our Order, is that we at the Purple Heart assist every injured veteran who seeks our help, regardless of whether their wounds are battle-related, or are non-battle-related injuries. If you contact us, you're going to get help. There's no membership requirement either, in order to receive our assistance. However, to be eligible to join the Military Order of the Purple Heart, you have to have a documented battle injury.

One of the most frequent calls for help we receive comes from wounded troops attempting to follow up on their Purple Heart medal, which they have been anxiously awaiting. Normally, a Purple Heart is a non-discretionary award. It does not depend on the favor of any senior officer. You meet the requirements, a battle injury as a result of enemy action, direct or indirect enemy action, and you qualify. But sometimes, especially among Guard and Reserve troops, members don't receive their Purple Heart orders in a timely fashion. It then becomes the individual member's obligation to make a formal inquiry into his/her unit, describing the event and the surrounding circumstances of the battle wound/injury. I also get a copy of this inquiry, and I immediately forward it to the Pentagon. Then, a representative at the Pentagon can direct it through the appropriate channels to get things accomplished!

Earlier today I got a call from a soldier who hadn't received his purple heart yet and it was clear that he had sustained a battle injury. He had been back for more than 60 days. I asked him to send me a copy of his e-mail inquiry. I then forwarded it to a point of contact we have in Washington. Normally we get an answer within a week or two. This guy got his answer (a positive outcome) on the second day - so I know that there was definitely a "General" influence at work there!

ADN: You give out your home and personal cell phone numbers to the wounded troops who come through our ASF. How often do you get called and what kind of services do you provide?

MR. COBB: Tanya and I get an average of 20 to 30 phone calls per week for assistance. Calls come in at all hours. We've had calls come in at 3 a.m. We kid with each other that "we sleep with our cell phones, and occasionally with each other." In addition to calls we receive for questions regarding information on how to get a Purple Heart, we also get calls concerning housing problems, difficulties obtaining appropriate medical treatment, and a whole range of other issues and concerns. We also help veterans arrange transportation for treatment in other states, either through military or veterans service organizations.

It's about taking care of the soldiers. A troop recently called us who was recovering from a non-battle injury and who was having trouble obtaining housing on base for himself and his family. After his call for assistance, I forwarded his request to another point of contact that I have at the Pentagon. Later, the individual called back and thanked me and he informed me that within just a few hours after we spoke, he had received a phone call informing him that his housing request was approved and his problem was solved!

But sometimes we get calls from troops and veterans who just need to talk. We provide lots of reaching out, listening, and informal counseling on an emotional level. Both Tanya and I can talk to them frankly, because we can both relate to them as wounded veterans ourselves. Sometimes it's because a soldier or Marine is dealing with survivor's guilt...because perhaps they were one of only a few to make it out alive from a fire fight, or a helicopter crash. It's the late night calls that we're particularly alert to... because it's often during those hours that someone is the most desperate and needs some kind of connection with another human being who knows what they've been through.

I sometimes have to help guys dealing with this kind of struggle to understand that when you make it through a combat experience and come back alive that you then get the opportunity to chose to live your life in a way that reflects upon those that didn't make it back with you. Your life is not just your own anymore. In a sense you live for them—the fallen ones. You get to experience all of life's joys and pleasures, as well as ups and downs that your fallen comrades will miss out on. And you realize as well that you have even more of an obligation now to reach out to help others; especially to those who have to live with the physical and psychological wounds of combat. If you manage to survive an experience like that you realize that each moment that you're alive is truly a gift.

ADN: You've been injured several times in battle and have received four separate Purple Heart medals for your injuries. Please tell us about how you received each of these.

MR. COBB: My first one was for a gunshot wound to the jaw on November 24, 1968, which occurred in a night fire fight. My second one I received for mortar fragments that I sustained on my back, while I was out on a long range recon patrol mission, in February 1969. My third was for RPG fragments that I received to my whole front side. This happened while we were assaulting an enemy bunker complex and I was dragging a wounded fellow soldier out of the line of fire. The fourth time, it happened on a Friday the 13th, in June of 1969. It turned out to be the luckiest day of my life, because I survived an ordeal in which I should have been killed ten times over. That's when I got to rescue six guys who were under fire in an open clearing. I had to mark my position and hold up a smoke grenade...I repeated this five times...it was during the second strike that I took a hit of napalm to my back.

ADN: Please tell us more about the circumstances surrounding your fourth battle injury?

MR. COBB: During my first tour in Vietnam, I started out serving as a cavalry platoon leader, then I became a company commander, and then finally I spent my last few months as an assistant public affairs officer. I was a lieutenant at the time and it was my job to escort news correspondents covering news stories of battles. I managed to get one correspondent from each network (ABC, NBC, CBS) wounded while I was working in that job!

Just near the end of my first tour, we were escorting an NBC news correspondent when we ran into a North Vietnamese (NVA) heavy weapons battalion. We were outnumbered more than five to one. That's when I was able to rescue six wounded men under enemy fire and then ordered bombs and napalm on my own position to prevent us from being overrun and to stop the NVA from shooting captured and wounded American soldiers. I then ordered a counterattack to clear an emergency landing zone so that we could extract our dead and wounded. The end result was a Silver Star and a battlefield promotion to Captain, my fourth battle wound and a wounded NBC correspondent—who had been wounded four times in less than 10 minutes, whom we evacuated.

At one point during the battle a fellow soldier suffered a concussion from a 500-pound bomb, which had just blown him out of his cover. He was laying there exposed and the next airstrike was already coming in. So I just ran over and covered him with my own body and that's when I caught the napalm. It got all over my neck, shoulders and back area. It's very painful and makes the skin burn until you wipe it off, which you have to do as quickly as you can. Napalm is in a gelatin form and as soon as it's exposed to air it starts to burn whatever it touches. I refused the medical treatment, because there were so many other men around that were more seriously hurt than I was who needed the medics' help. But at one point, a forward observer came over to me and gave me some flash grease, which is what artillery guys use for flash burns they receive from their weapons. We put it on my exposed neck area, which by then was red with burns and I was able to keep going. The term I coined that day, and which I said to the others, is "Hey guys, I now qualify as the original 'Vietnam Redneck.'" That got the guys all laughing.

In my first Vietnam tour, I lost 10 out of 12 of my closest friends. So after that I was slow to make friends for quite a while. You don't want to make new friends because it hurts too much when they don't make it back with you.

ADN: Please tell us about Tanya and how you two met?

MR. COBB: Tanya is a tremendous help to our Order and she was the National Community Service Chairman for the Ladies' Auxiliary of the MOPH and is the newly elected Region I President. As a wounded veteran herself, Tanya can really relate to the injured soldiers and veterans that we counsel and provide assistance to. Tanya served in a foreign army but worked in several peacekeeping missions with the U.S. Marines in Eastern Europe. She calls herself the 'mother of all troops and troubles.' We met in Minsk, Belarus, in the former Soviet Union. I was a colonel by that time and was there doing work with the U.S. Army supervising the destruction of SS-20 missiles. I also performed medical and food supply relief missions for Chernobyl victims. It was the Russian winter and I was there serving in the field with the Red Army. It turned out it was the first time that an American Army officer was deployed in the field with the Red Army since December 1944. So it was a fluke in a way and it turned out to be a lucky break that created the circumstances needed for me to later meet my wonderful wife.

ADN: Besides being a wounded veteran yourself, what compels and inspires you to devote so much time and energy to supporting our injured troops?

MR. COBB: Anyone that has survived a battle and seen combat experience deserves some kind of help. They deserve all the help and consideration we can give them.

During our time working with injured troops returning from the Iraq conflict Tanya and I have been involved in so many touching—as well as inspirational cases together. One time a Marine came through the ASF during the Fallujah battle and he had 16 pins sticking out of his leg. He was awaiting transportation over to Walter Reed Army Medical Center where he was to have his leg amputated. I promised to come visit him and later when I did he got up out of his bed for the very first time and it was in order to give me a hug and a salute. He told me that it was his goal to return to active duty in the Marine Corps, although he had just underwent an above the knee amputation. He later ended up getting a ‘sea leg’ (our term to say that you have a ‘peg leg’), but one that had a moveable knee. The irony is that he’s now running five-and-a-half minute miles; he’s literally running circles around many of the other Marines and he’s now back on active duty as a gunnery instructor!

But also we are able to keep our sense of humor and joke around with guys and gals who return from combat. That’s important too. I like to tell the guys that I got hit four times before I learned how to duck. I’m a slow learner. The Marines and Army Infantry have a term for it: I’m a walking dumbsh-- on the battle field. The relationship and bonding is instant among guys who have been wounded in battle.

ADN: What things can you tell us regarding benefits available to those who have been injured in combat?

MR. COBB: Well, one of the first things that I tell the returnees is that “You gotta get your Purple Heart license plate...it’s the best stay out of jail free plate in the USA...!” But in addition to this, there’s also such a thing as a combat veteran’s plate, so that even if you don’t have a Purple Heart, you can get a combat veteran’s license plate if you’ve served in combat, aside from whether you’ve been hit or not.

Everyone with a Purple Heart has free tuition at hundreds of colleges and universities throughout the United States and that’s over and above the Montgomery GI Bill benefits. Plus, wounded veterans get a lifetime 10-point advantage when applying for any government job. There’s a lot of support out there for wounded veterans. There’s generations that have come before who have lobbied and fought for these benefits, so I tell guys and gals to take advantage of them. They’ve earned it.

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