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Message from the Chairperson of the Board of Trustees

A few months ago PBS aired “The Vietnam War,” a ten-part, 18-hour documentary by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick. In the film the directors attempt to tell the full story of the war using testimony from nearly 100 witnesses. At first, I didn’t want to watch the series as I have seen many accounts of the war over the years that were heavily biased against the warfighter, who to me will always be the real hero.

Veterans of Vietnam were unique in both how they were allowed to fight the war and how our country received them when they returned home. As I watched the series I was again reminded of the sacrifice these young men and women gave in the line of duty. Far removed from the politics of Saigon and Washington, the film shows the reality of war and the consequences of being there.

In watching the scenes of combat, I was struck again by how loud the physical environment was. To put it in perspective, sound levels of 85 dB or lower are considered safe. But a rifle fired from the shoulder can hit 160 dB; an M-60 machine gun 155 dB; a hand grenade at 50 feet 164 dB; and a recoilless rifle tops out at 190 dB. It’s no wonder hearing loss and tinnitus are the top compensated disabilities by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Statistics show that 1 in 3 soldiers coming back from a war zone has hearing loss. Where are these veterans? They are, in a sense, invisible.

I live near Hampton Roads, Virginia, a community with more than 16 military bases in the area, including Naval Station Norfolk, the largest naval installation in the world. Almost daily I see and hear the stories of the deployments and return home of brave young men and women in the area. But it is almost a closed community when it comes to hearing loss. Soldiers on active duty might try to minimize or deny their hearing loss for fear that acknowledging it will cost them their career.

There are many Vietnam War veterans who have hearing loss but are not affiliated with a Veteran’s Service Organization such as the VFW, Marine Corps League, Disabled American Veterans or one of the many others where they could get information to help them. They live with their hearing loss and remain invisible. They are still heroes and patriots, and might even come out to community events and other veterans gatherings, but they are unaware that help is out there.

We want to reach these people in any way we can to offer them support by introducing them to HLAA. For instance, on the local level HLAA chapters can reach out to veterans in their communities and invite them to meetings, where they can tell their own story and realize they are not alone.

Your Board of Trustees will be working on strategies to reach out to many service members who do not yet know about HLAA and to let them know we are here to help and support them.

Semper Fi. **HLM**

Don Doherty, M.A., Ed.S., is the chairperson of the HLAA Board of Trustees. Don served in the Marine Corps for 22 years and retired from the Department of Veterans Affairs in 2016 after 25 years of service. He has been involved with HLAA for more than two decades and is currently president of the HLAA Virginia Beach Chapter. Don resides in Moyock, North Carolina, and can be reached at chairperson@hearingloss.org.