

Serving My Country

BY KATHERINE
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I didn't plan on making the Army a career, but as I moved on and found out that I loved what I did, I just kept going. Having this call was so strong I tattooed my body with the Bible verse: Isaiah 6:8: "Here am I, Send me." As I continued to serve, all I wanted to do was stand next to my sisters and brothers in arms and fight until I could not anymore—even if it meant hiding pain and injuries to continue to deploy for as many times as I could.



I enlisted in the Army the summer before my senior year of high school and languished in the Delayed Entry Program for almost a year before I shipped to Basic Combat Training (BCT) just days after graduation. I grew up the daughter of a teacher and a granddaughter of a preacher. I have always had a calling to serve. I didn't plan on making the Army a career, but as I moved on and found out that I loved what I did, I just kept going. Having this call was so strong I tattooed my body with the Bible verse: Isaiah 6:8: "Here am I, Send me." As I continued to serve, all I wanted to do was stand next to my sisters and brothers in arms and fight until I could not anymore—even if it meant hiding pain and injuries to continue to deploy for as many times as I could.

I went to BCT at Fort Jackson, South Carolina on June 20, 1996. I followed that up with Advanced Individual Training (AIT) just up the street to become a personnel management specialist. This is the job field I would serve in for the next 10 years until I chose to reclassify to become a Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) specialist in 2005. I would serve the rest of my career in this field.

My duty stations included Fort Bliss, Texas; Hanau, Germany; St. Louis; recruiting duty in New Jersey; Fort Campbell, Kentucky; Fort Bragg, North Carolina; Camp Stanley, Korea; head of the CBRN AIT at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri and Fort Stewart, Georgia. I recently retired on June 1, 2020, after almost 24 years of service.

I have served on deployments in Bosnia, Hungary, Iraq (twice), Afghanistan and a few other foreign countries. Recruiting duty was by far the toughest, even with all the deployments I have been on and the horrible things I have seen. I was in Edison, New Jersey, from 2002 to 2005, during a tough time for my sisters and brothers who were overseas. I would constantly get phone calls and letters from them about the things they were seeing and dealing with, on a daily basis. It made me want to be there fighting alongside them instead of what I was doing. I made moves to ensure that I completed my duty successfully so that I could move forward and go across the water where I knew I needed to be.

The Source of My Hearing Loss

When I was deployed to Mahmudiyah, Iraq, in 2006, I was involved in a mortar attack that hit the tent I was working out of at the time. The 60mm mortar hit the tent that was serving as our operations center and exploded when it hit the ground. There was a lot of confusion, dust and dirt. I was on the phone at the time with our higher headquarters and my right ear was covered, but my left ear was totally exposed to the full force and sound of the explosion. I was knocked to the floor, hitting my

head on a table on the way down. I called for help over the radio and helped patch up another soldier who was hit. I passed out and woke up in the aid station on the Forward Operating Base (FOB) and I couldn't hear anything. The initial loss lasted about two days and I got the hearing back in my right ear but started to notice the ringing in my ears. My left ear got progressively worse since then. When I woke up in the aid station, I had no idea what was going on. I opened my eyes and the chaplain was standing over me. I thought the worst. "Was he praying over me, what was he saying?" ran through my mind and I was scared. I looked over to the side where they were treating the other casualties and saw a lot of blood on the floor. I was really concerned as I had no idea who was hurt and how bad. Finally, the senior medic, a good friend of mine, came over and started talking to me. I couldn't hear anything. I signaled to him that I couldn't hear him and he took out his notebook and wrote me a note, asking if I was all right and if I had any pain anywhere. I told him my head hurt and I was a little sore. This is the first time I experienced hearing loss. I thought it would be temporary. Little did I know that this would be something that would affect the rest of my life and the way I conduct myself. This incident not only led to hearing loss, but I also suffer from vertigo and migraines.

There was such a stigma in the mid-2000s that I didn't want anyone to know I was hurting both mentally and physically. It would be another 12 years before I would take my health seriously and take steps to seek help and get myself back on track.

Seeking Help

I got my first hearing aid in early 2018. It took some getting used to. Retraining your brain to rehear out of an ear that wasn't working before was a process. I really can tell the difference when I am not wearing it. I didn't want to accept that I had hearing loss and I sure didn't want to tell anyone in my leadership that I was not functioning at 100%. It was my goal to be mission capable and ready for the next deployment that was less than 10 months away. I found some tricks and willing accomplices to help me fake my way through the hearing tests and I was nowhere near ready to seek help for my PTSD. There was such a stigma in the mid-2000s that I didn't want anyone to know I was hurting both mentally and physically. It would be another 12 years before I would take my health seriously and take steps to seek help and get myself back on track.



Katherine with her godson, Roy, when she was promoted to SFC class



Katherine was tasked to escort retired military working dogs back to the U.S. from Afghanistan in 2011.



Katherine with her father, David Yocom, at her retirement ceremony in March 2020

I was so worried that I would lose everything if those in charge found out I had issues that, at the time, were career-ending. I wasn't ready to stop being a soldier, non-commissioned officer (NCO) and leader. I felt like I had to take every precaution to ensure no one knew how much I was struggling. I had already survived so much. I was good at what I did and I loved it. My thought process was, 'Why ruin it?' There was no way I was going to let my fellow soldiers go back in harm's way without me. I didn't feel bad about hiding it—in my mind I felt like I was doing my part and I found ways to get by. I just wanted to keep my head down and do my job.

When I finally sought help for my hearing loss it was surreal. I didn't want to accept the fact that in my late 30s I needed a hearing aid. The reality of it was shattering to me. I felt like I was less than. It made me feel incomplete and I was not a fan of it at all.

I remember calling my dad, on the verge of tears, and he said, "Welcome to the Club," and laughed. I was already struggling with coming to grips with my PTSD and a few other medical issues that were deployment-related. Now this. I knew I had to face facts, but it wasn't easy. I just wanted to be a regular soldier and leader. I didn't want anyone to see my weakness. I felt exceptionally vulnerable and open to the world. It's a scary feeling. The only other people I knew in the Army that had hearing loss were my brothers from the artillery and the infantry. They hid it, too.

My first hearing aid was given to me while I was still on active duty. It wasn't as cool as the one my dad had—his connected to his phone. He would make fun of me about how his was "cooler" than mine. I got an upgraded version about four months before I retired, and he was the first person I called to brag about it.

Living with Hearing Loss

A lot of my fellow soldiers who have served or are serving in the military can oftentimes relate and we compare notes and models of hearing aids. Many others seem to feel bad or maybe sorry for me. I think they are mostly upset about how I lost my hearing rather than my actual hearing loss. It can be hard to tell sometimes. My family teases me about it. (I'm still the only person in my immediate family who doesn't need glasses to see, though!)

I have to be very aware of making sure to address my hearing loss as part of my daily routine. I have an adapter on my TV the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) provided which links into my hearing aid, so I don't have to turn the TV up so loud. It also hooks directly to my phone with Bluetooth capabilities. If I don't have it in, my tinnitus is much worse, and I rely

a lot more on lipreading (when possible) or having to tilt my head to the right so that I can hear out of my “good” ear. If I find myself in a large crowd or gathering, it is difficult to follow conversations or be a part of the group because of all of the background noise.

I want people around me to know that it takes me just a few seconds more to get the information and process it. I also want them to know that I am not trying to be rude or disrespectful when I turn my head to hear better or watch their lips when they talk.

Living with Tinnitus

I suffer from tinnitus due to the incident. As the years go by, there have been some other deployment-related exposures, but that was the most significant. Wearing my hearing aid is one of the ways I deal with it. I also leave the TV on at night when I sleep to help drown it out at night.

Sound Advice

I would advise people with hearing loss that just because they lost their hearing it shouldn't stop them from doing the things they love. They just have to understand that they will have to adjust what they do to ensure they are taking care of themselves and protect what might be left of their hearing.

Finding HLA

I found out about HLA from my friend Sgt. 1st Class David Schible. He and I met while I was preparing to retire. He was a good resource in my journey to retiring when he worked with the Pathfinder Program that the USO provides. We started talking about our hearing loss after he noticed I was wearing a hearing aid. He asked me about when and how I lost my hearing. I explained to him about my multiple deployments. He recommended that I join an HLA Chapter. I am not currently part of a chapter, but it is my intention to link in with one in the near future.

Life in the South

After I retired, I chose to make my life in Georgia for many reasons. I like the weather, the quality of life and the way things seem to flow

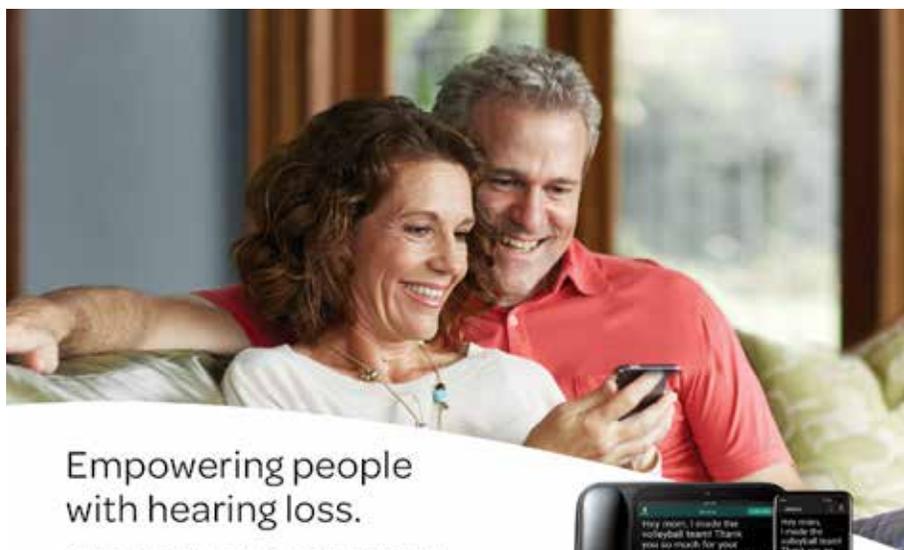
here. I bought a house here and I've been spending my time making it my own and working a few part-time gigs that keep me busy. I grew up in Ohio—there you get all four seasons and the football is better!

A Passion for Classic Cars

I have loved cars since I was little. My dad used to take me to car shows and show me how to do basic things on our family car. Classic cars are my favorite because they have so much character and were built to last. I love to drive something that has so much history and nostalgia. I currently have a 1955 Buick Century. I love driving it—it is therapeutic to get out on the back roads near where I live and just cruise.

Enjoying Retirement

I love sports, music and movies. I am a huge Ohio State Buckeyes fan. My main interests are football, basketball and boxing. I grew up playing basketball and tennis in high school. Music is something that moves my soul. When you hear a song that takes you back to the days that make you smile, it's a beautiful thing. It is also a motivating factor when I am facing new challenges. **HL**



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