

Serving my country . . . and paying it forward.

By Donald P. Abrams



Photo Source: Donald Abrams

In August, 1954, when I was 8 years old, I contracted Polio. My Polio was bilateral and affected my right leg from the hip all the way down to my “drop” foot. My left arm was affected as well - especially my triceps and thumb. I was never fitted with braces, but used crutches for about a year.

For the first year, I was treated at Herman Kiefer Hospital in Detroit, Michigan, and had continuing therapy (including Sister Kenny treatments) at the Rehabilitation Institute of Detroit. We purchased orthopedic shoes from the Hack shoe Company in Detroit that had straight laces and had what were referred to as “Thomas” heels. The heel extended below the arch for additional support. It was never easy

wearing brown orthopedic oxfords to school when all the other kids had ‘cool’ shoes! Until I was 18, my progress was reviewed annually by an orthopedic surgeon. He was an advocate of my swimming as therapy and I was enrolled in classes at the YMCA. As a boy, I was not strong enough for organized sports, but played pick up sports including baseball, basketball and football with my other “not so athletic” friends.

I had an Armed Forces physical in 1967 and took my medical records with me. I presented all of these documents to the examining physician at the Fort Wayne facility in Detroit. I remember him observing that my right leg was smaller than my left and that I had a dropped foot as well. He also observed that my left arm was smaller than my right. I felt this should have disqualified me from service but the doctor felt differently and I was drafted into the US Army.

I reported to basic training at Fort Knox, Kentucky, in January 1968. I really struggled with physical training known as PT, but my inability to complete exercises went unnoticed. When the final PT test was given, I finished very low in every event, but somehow moved on to graduation. I was then sent to Fort Belvoir, Virginia, for training as a depot level generator repair and rebuild. Upon completion, I was assigned to go to Vietnam. My journey began in the 101st Airborne Screaming Eagle Replacement Training School where I spent the first two weeks. Ultimately, I was assigned to Camp Eagle near Hue in I Corps. For a year, I served with the 801st Maintenance Battalion, Company A. We were driven tirelessly to repair broken gear for 10-14-hours per day, seven days a week in temperatures that could reach 110 degrees in the shade – except for monsoon season, when it cooled off but brought 12 or so inches of mud.

Physically exhausting? You bet! The only break from this was a three-day R&R at China Beach and a seven-day R&R with my spouse in Hawaii. The 801st received a Meritorious Unit Citation in 1969. I was awarded a Bronze Star (meritorious), an ARCOM (meritorious), a National Defense medal, a Vietnam Service Medal and a Vietnam Campaign Medal.

I retired in 2009 due to the physical demands of my work. At that point, I didn’t know it was PPS. It would be another five years before I would finally get a diagnosis. Constant issues with muscle pain and exhaustion led my primary care physician to refer me to a neurologist who made the PPS diagnosis based on my history, an EMG and high levels of the CPK enzyme in my blood work. He prescribed Xanax and Tramadol. A second neurologist reached the same conclusion and course of treatment.

After a few years, I felt that this wasn’t working out for me. A web search turned up a local rehabilitative physician (physiatrist) and a Post-Polio clinic! I was examined there by the doctor, an internist, a physical therapist, and a prosthetist. At the time, I was fitted with an AFO (for my foot drop) and received physical therapy, replacing the Tramadol for my elevated pain levels. I now am on a course of Lyrica and Cymbalta which is working well for me. I can walk without a cane about one half mile or so before my muscles tell me - enough! I can rest and recover so that a museum or zoo visit isn’t out of the question. I’m still able to share the chores with my wife and do some repairs around the house. Some days I just rest.

Based upon the likelihood that the physicality of my service resulted in my current polio-related health conditions, in early 2022, I made the decision to file a Veterans Administration (VA) disability claim for my post-polio syndrome (PPS). My physiatrist (rehabilitative physician), was most helpful writing a nexus letter with his diagnosis along with the opinion that my military service caused the onset of PPS. (A nexus letter is a

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As a veteran, I was able to search the archives of the VA for PPS claims. Searching back several years, I found that most were denied or remanded. Only two awards for PPS showed up. What I don't know is how many PPS vets were awarded disability without having to appeal. Though my disability claim was awarded without having to appeal, I'm pretty sure that PPS hasn't been recognized by the VA very often. Perhaps the groundwork was set earlier by others.

I am grateful that I was successful in my claim and would like to pay it forward by reaching out to as wide an audience as possible. Since the VA has recognized my PPS as service related, all my care is now received there, which also includes CPAP therapy (which is considered secondary to the PPS). I'm finally on a good path.

Polio affected each of us differently, and I realize that no two experiences are the same. Even so, I would like to encourage other veterans with PPS, who believe they qualify, to work with their physicians and initiate a claim with the VA.

Donald P. Abrams



Don (left) and his two brothers – 1955
Photo Source: Donald Abrams

Donald Abrams story is easily available on the Survivor Story page of our website:
www.papolionetwork.org/survivor-stories.html