

FILING A CLAIM

ADVICE TO THE VETERAN:

First let me make things very clear at the beginning. The advice that is given at this website is just that "*Advice To The Veteran*" My perspective and comments about filing a claim came about after four (4) years of filing my own claims and emotionally and mentally slugging it out with the Veterans Administration or the VA (as we refer to it) to get my service connected claims finally recognized. Large volumes of claims are expected in the next few years from Afghanistan and Iraq Veterans. However, World War II, Korea, Vietnam Veterans down the line should not stop from filing service connected claims if you feel you have grounds for a claim. The statements and suggestions here are based on the facts that I have come to understand and my experiences that I have gone through and also observed happening to other veterans trying to file their service connected claims with the VA. Each veteran is ultimately the person who is responsible for filing his or her claim(s), and as such, you make the final decisions on what you put your signature to. You have a right however, to get as much information as you can to prepare yourself for the service connected claims process.

So here is a compact crash course on filing a service connected claim with the VA. If you are ready, pay very close attention to what I have to say and read more of my wit and comments on making the process a little easier....

WHY FILE A CLAIM?

"Why not file a claim?" is my response. The information and advice here is generally for honorably discharged veterans. However, there may be legal precedence for filing a claim while still on active duty for such things as PTSD and Chemical Poisoning to mention just two areas. This will be discussed at a later time, but if you have any information about servicemen and women who have or who are filing any claims dealing with service connection while still on active duty and or are being denied, please email us with any information you might have.

Now, why file a claim? First, because you can! You have earned..., that's correct, you have earned the right to file a claim for a service connected disability if you are an honorably discharged veteran. I personally know veterans, especially Vietnam Veterans, who without a doubt, in my opinion, could qualify for service connected disabilities. They make the excuse that there are other vets who deserve it more than they do. In fact, they make a lot of excuses why they shouldn't file a claim. Whale Manure and again Whale Manure to that thinking. Filing a claim isn't about whether one vet deserves to file while another doesn't or if your fellow vet is worse off than you are. You are not competing against other veterans. You are competing and doing battle with a Federal Government Agency called the Veterans Administration that does not want you to file a claim and will try to deny your claim(s) if at all possible. For whatever reasons they feel do not fit their regulations. I am not saying that every honorably discharged veteran has a service connected claim against the VA; but a great many do, and if you feel you do a valid claim(s) and you can prove it, I encourage you to go for it and enter into another great adventure of your life.

There is a misconception I think among veterans' that you have to have been in actual combat situations to file claims for service connection. I personally was one of those veterans who saw combat and was in fire fights and worse. However, I also recognize that there are situations where support personnel can also have service connected disabilities that are legitimate and valid and have merit.

Let me give two (2) actual hypo theoretical or hypothetical situations where let's say a service connected claim for PTSD could and probably should be filed. First, if you were in the Navy stationed on an Air Craft Carrier and your job was to be on the flight deck as a member of the fire suppression and/or crash crew...And over a period of lets say, eighteen months, you witnessed crashes on the flight deck on landings where fire broke out and you watched the pilot and/or flight deck personal become severely burned from spilled jet fuel and/or died in front of you. Or the cable that stops the jet when in lands breaks and the cable rebounds back and cuts several of your shipmates in half. Or you witnessed on take off a jet aborting take off and the pilot ejected punching him/her through the jet's canopy, perhaps decapitating him/her and the body lands at your feet back on the flight deck spurting out blood from a headless neck etc. etc. etc. and Or, Or, Or. You are not in a combat situation so... do you have a legitimate claim to file a service connected claim for PTSD? Hummm? Hummm? And Hummm? Should you file a claim for PTSD? That all depends. Did what you see and experience affect you in any way emotionally and screw up your thinking process? Did you start self medicating after that? Did your behavior change once you were a civilian again? Did you do this! Did you do that! If you can answer yes to any of these questions and others...my advice is to find a pen, print out VA Form 21-526 and get to work filing your claim(s).

Second, you are at the Morgue in a combat area. You are assigned to inventory the dead bodies in all sorts of conditions and prepare those dead bodies to return home to be buried. After a year of eight to ten hour shifts of doing this you are then honorably discharged. Have you been affected in any way? Again, you are not in a direct combat situation, but you see the aftermath soon after what has happened. Do you have a legitimate claim to file a service connected claim for PTSD? Hummm? Hummm? And Hummm? Should you file a claim for PTSD? Again that all depends. Did what you see and experience affect you in any way emotionally and screw up your thinking process? Did you start self medicating after that; start drinking more, taking drugs or medications? Did your behavior change once you were a civilian again? Did you do this! Did you do that! If you can answer yes to any of these questions and others...my advice is to find a pen, print out VA form 21-526 and get to work filing your claim. The point is that you don't have to see the white of the enemy's eyes to be traumatized and have a legitimate service connected claim for PTSD!

Do you get the point of what I am saying hypo theoretical? Or as my old drill instructor use to say: "Soldier, are we clear on this point?"

YOUR MINDSET OR PERSPECTIVE:

It is very important that you approach filing a claim with the proper mindset or perspective. What I am about to say I mean no disrespect. I love my country and proud that I am a veteran. I just wish that the VA felt the same way. It does not look at you as a human being that served his or her country honorably when you file claims against the VA. Get this in your mind and keep it there....The VA is not your friend! You are a claim number to them. It is all about rejecting your claim(s) and making it as hard as they can for you so you will give up the process, or they will try to assign you the lowest possible percentage rating they can. Simply put, it is a game that you are engaged in and if you know the regulations that govern your claims then almost anyone who files and has a good faith case will win in the end. Now if this all makes sense to you and you like what you're reading, then turn up your funny bone meter and concentrate on the rest of this presentation...

WHY DO YOU NEED A SERVICE OFFICER?

Actually you don't need a service officer to help you file a claim, but I highly recommend it for everyone filing a claim. A "service officer" is someone who is trained in many areas dealing with veterans' issues, especially with filing claims. They have taken classes and know the regulations that deal with working with the VA and getting your claim(s) approved. The VFW, AMERICAN LEGION, and DAV all seem to have very qualified service officers. VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICAN and other organizations are also good resources, but make sure who ever you select to help you that they have training and are in fact a recognized "service officer".

Another reason for have a service officer help you is that they know what they are doing and can save you time, wasted energy and cut down on your frustration time. Besides, their services are free to help you the honorably discharged veteran. That's why I am a life member of the VFW, American Legion and DAV. A good service officer is worth their weight in gold when filing claims. So after you file your claim(s) and send it in to the VA, make sure you start looking for a good service officer to assist you in your area. Check our resources section at this website to find a service officer or how to contact one in your area.

Some very important points here! Always, always, always make copies of every thing you send to the VA and give to your service officer. I have known veterans who have had their entire files lost or misplaced by the VA after two or three years and had to start over. So always make copies, always!! And invest in a large three (3) note book or two and start filing your paper work and correspondence in them.

Next, once you get your claim(s) papers filled out and ready to go to the VA, make two copies of what you are submitting and put one copy in that three (3) ring note book and hold on to the other copy to give to your service officer once the VA responds and acknowledges that they got your claim(s). Remember this: The minute, the date that the VA acknowledges that they received your claim(s) papers, the money meter is running. Although it may take a year or more to process your claim(s) and accept or reject it, the money meter is running. They pay you from the date you filed!

Now don't worry, no matter what happens, unless you get a 100% service connected rating, you will either be rejected and or given a small rating percentage. Anything at this initial stage, other than 100% service connected rating, you appeal. I will discuss this a little later, but just trust me on this. You'll understand as you read more of my wit and humor.

VERY, VERY, VERY IMPORTANT! Your first mailing to the VA, when filing your claim(s), should be mailed as a "First Class Postage Mailing and sent Certified Mail with a Return Receipt Request". Why mail it this way? First, you had the guts and determination to file in the first place. Second, you want proof that the claim was sent on a certain date and you want a return receipt to prove it. It will cost a little extra money up front for you, but it's a great insurance policy. Third, when the return receipt comes back staple it to your copy in a three-ring note book. Fourth, now you go find your service officer and take that copy you made for them and leave a copy of that filing with them. They should then set up a file in their office just for your case. They will also have access to the VA file and computer record system and will know everything from that point onward about your case. Now if any of this makes sense to you continue on to the meat and potatoes of filing a claim....

[VFW Service Officer List \(by State\)](http://www.veteranartistsnetwork.com/pdf/VFW-ServOff-byState.pdf)

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WHAT FORMS DO I NEED AND HOW DO I GET THEM?

Now that's a good question. That's why I'm here putting in my time and effort so I can save you some time and frustration. You don't want to be like the biting aunt in a nudist colony..."you know what you want to do, but you don't know where to begin." First, read this whole epoch I am writing about from beginning to end. You can also print out an entire copy of my humor and with here by clicking on the PDF file. Then come back here to this page and start your claim. The other PDF file for claim forms we have provided here that you can print out is twenty-three pages long. It gives instructions on how to file, how to fill in the blanks for your claims, and what paper work you will need to include. Click on the PDF file and read through the entire mess or pay close attention to me here and short cut to the essential paper form first. Then again, it doesn't hurt to read the instructions. I have PTSD and may forget something.

OK, I highly recommend you print out the entire PDF file so that when you leave this website you can take your homework to the kitchen table and start filling in the blanks. The first seven (7) pages are instructions. Now here is where we get down to it. Pages eight 8 thru 12 are VA Form 21-526 Part A. This is the must form you need to fill out. It is the general information paperwork that you will need to file. Pages 13 & 14 is Part B of VA Form 21-526. This is the "identify your claim(s) area and explain about why you are filing the claim in the first place Damn it!" I'm sorry to be so blunt about it in my language here, but that is what the VA is saying to you. The good news for you, the veteran is, that here is where you get your chance to really tell the VA why you deserve to have you claim(s) accepted and why you should be service connected at the 100% rating. Part A & B of VA Form 21-526 should be mailed together along with a copy of your DD-214. And remember, always, always, always make copies. I will explain a little later on this section and what to say under the "Explanation" section of Part B. So stay tuned to the broadcast and my comments later.

Pages 15, 16, and 17 is Part C of VA Form 21-526. It is the "Dependency" part of you claim. They want to know if you are married, have children or step-children etc. Basically, the bottom line here is that you get extra money on your service connected claim(s) if approved, and who couldn't use some extra cash for let's say that \$10 a gal gas that's coming. If this section applies to you then include it with Parts A & B when you file your claim(s).

Pages 18 thru 21 is Part D of VA Form 21-526. At this point do not fill this part of VA Form 21-526 out or send it in to the VA. This section is something you need to discuss with your service officer! Don't concern yourself with this part of the claims process at this point. Pages 22 & 23 are the consent VA Form 21-4142 to release your medical records from any medical sources out side the VA Hospital System. Sign and send this form in with your claim(s) paperwork.

Application for Compensation and/or Pension VA Form 21-526, Parts A,B,C, & D

<http://www.vba.va.gov/pubs/forms/VBA-21-526-ARE.pdf>

(PLEASE BE PATIENT - THIS IS A LARGE FILE AND TAKES TIME TO LOAD)

Requesting a DD-214 Report of Separation

<http://usgovinfo.about.com/bldd214.htm>

WHAT CLAIMS AM I FILING FOR?

What claims(s) you are filing for all depends on what War, Conflict, Engagement or scuffle or punch out you were involved in. If you were thinking this same thing, then we are on the same section page. Now, this can be simple or complicated when you go to answer this question. Let's try to keep it simple for those of us who had a public high school education.

There are three areas, or rather two (2) fill in the blanks areas you will need to write about in your claim(s) filing. The third area is related to your over all functioning in life. The VA psychologically evaluates under what is called GAF score or a "Global Assessment of Functioning" that helps them to determine basically where you are rated in life as a functioning human being. Its' basically you verbally filling in the blanks for them in a one-on-one, in person, looking them in the eyes to a qualified VA Psychiatrists, or now generally a farmed out private Psychiatrists that has a contract with the VA to evaluate you during what they call a "psychological evaluation". The rating attached to this GAF score is very critical and you have to know exactly how to approach the interview and what to say. The VA will set up an appointment for a date, time and location for you to meet your psychological play pal. Please read and pay close attention to my advice on GAF and your psychological evaluation to determine your GAF score in this lecture. Please pay very close attention to me now!!!

More details later on GAF, after the basics that follow.

There is what I like to call the short version of why you are filing a claim(s) with the VA and then the long version or "stressor letter" of why you are filing a claim(s) for with the VA. This stressor letter should be as detailed and go into as much description as you can.

First, on your initial application on VA Form 21-526 Part A, page 5, Section X under Remarks...this is where the "short version" of your claims should be filed. Sort of an overview of what you are claiming. I will give a theoretical version of this and also an expanded theoretical "long version of a stressor letter" just a little further along in this work of art.

Second, on your initial application on VA Form 21-526 Part B, page 2, Section III under Explanation (this is where the VA wants to know how your disabilities are related to your service connection). This is where you, the veteran, get the VA to sit up and take notice of you. This is where you file your "stressor letter". If the VA is as dim witted as I and other veterans' have experienced in dealing with them, then they very well may ask you to submit, because they lost the first one or resubmit the "stressor letter again" some where else down the claim line; but by that time you have been expanding and adding details that have now come to your mind and you are now ready to resubmit your even more brilliantly written stressor letter again for the VA. And it will be that much better won't it?

WHAT IS A STRESSOR LETTER?

This is a very critical part for you in your filing a claim(s) with the VA. A stressor letter is a written record of your combat experiences and/or things and situations you experienced or saw while in the service which you feel were life threatening to you or have caused you to display symptoms of PTSD. It is absolutely critical that you make this stressor letter as detailed as possible. Remember you are dealing with people at the VA who have marinated their brains in vats of manure. The lower level workers do not go beyond their pay grade level in the ability to think. It's only when your claim(s) starts to slide up the chain of authority that maybe some independent thinking takes place. So right now you have to be like a used car salesman and prove and preach your claims in writing to sell the VA that you deserve to have

your claim(s) approved by them. After all what you are telling them is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Remember again, the VA is not your friend. You have earned the right as an honorably discharged veteran to file a claim(s). Now tell the VA that through your stressor letter!

Stay focused on your actual combat experiences or the things that you observed and went through. The more you can connect the dots for the VA the better it will be for you and a good rating. Here are some things to consider in your stressor letter.

Tell them you are an honorably discharged veteran. Full name, rank, service number, dates of service, dates in a war zone and state that you were actually “in country” from this date until that date (name the country specifically like Vietnam, Iraq etc.), include any and all MOS while in the service, especially if you were assigned a different MOS in a war zone (an example would be that your MOS was a communications specialist, but when you got to say Vietnam or Iraq you became the RTO to the Commanding Officer). Any metals you were awarded like a purple heart, CIB, Bronze Star, Silver Star etc. Metals and accommodations are stressor indicators and support your claims of combat experiences.

While in combat did you kill or see the enemy killed? Be as specific and detailed as possible about what you saw and experienced. This may be hard to do, but it has to be done. I went through this process and hundreds of thousands of other veterans’ have also. So you are not alone here. You need to write about you and not just your unit. If you lost close friends or saw an American(s) killed or severely wounded, mention specific details and describe how it affected you personally. If you can remember real names and dates of KIA’S, this will help your claim because the VA will have their names on record. If not, don’t worry about it.

Mention any civilian casualties that you saw. If you handled dead bodies of Americans’ or civilians provide details. Mention details of combat incidents such as combat assaults, patrols, small arms fire, fire fights, mortar and rocket attacks, artillery fire or air attacks, booby traps and IUD’s, mine fields etc. If you can remember the names of field operations or missions it helps to verify your role as a combat veteran.

Now, two (2) very important things you need to include at the end of the stressor letter. First, where ever you served in the military, if you have medical complications you might suspect like malaria, parasite infestations or other illnesses that you might suspect that could possibly affect your medical condition, give as much detail as you can. Examples are WWII vets who were in the Pacific who had dinghy fever or ear infestations that led to hearing loss years later. Agent Orange poisoning in Vietnam Veterans, mysterious medical conditions that appear in Dessert Storm and Iraq veterans possibly from some form of chemical poisoning or contamination. Describe your symptoms even if not in your medical records. If you have joint pain or feel chronic fatigue all the time etc., note it under your medical symptoms in your stressor letter. If you noticed that you’ve mysteriously developed being sad or depressed on a regular basis for no apparent reason to you after being discharged from military service add it as a detail. Secondly, describe how your life has change since you where in the service and how what you have experience is affecting you today. If you were attacked by a Viet Cong mouse or an Iraq rat make sure you record it in your stressor letter. I was just kidding about the mouse and rat, but you get my point I think.

THEORETICAL SHORT VERSION AND STRESSOR LETTER:

Now its' time to use your eighth grade English skills and get the VA's attention. The theoretical short version might go something like this in VA Form 21-526 Part A, page 5, Section X under **Remarks**. (I will use a Vietnam Combat Veteran as an example).

Short Version:

“After talking with several veterans’ advocates and realizing that I have symptoms that qualify for service connected disabilities, I am submitting my claims for service connected disabilities and a rating of 100%.

I am an honorably discharged United States Army Veteran who served from January 1968 to January 1971. I also served a extended tour of duty from July 1968 to January of 1970 in country in Vietnam and I am also a Combat Vietnam Veteran. My duties while in Vietnam exposed me to many areas of heavy saturation of Herbicide Poisoning. While most of my tour of duty was in the field engaged in search and destroy missions we eat vegetation from the land and drank and filled our canteens out of the local water supplies. My MOS (state here any and all MOS particularly combat MOS you worked as) and strictly acted in and infantry capacity at many levels. During my tour of duty in Vietnam I was involved in numerous fire fights, mortar attacks and ambushes by the Viet Cong and NVA which resulted in receiving two purple hearts, a Bronze Star, and a Silver Star for Valor, CIB, Combat Air Metal and other accommodations.

I am hereby filing claims under two (2) categories, one for PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) and the other under Herbicide Poisoning, better known as Agent Orange Poisoning.”

This is what I would call a short statement or remarks. It sets the VA claims person on notice of what you are filing for. Remember, they think you are a dumb veteran and don't know what you are doing, because you haven't taken the Sam Summerwolfe crash course for filing a claim

Stressor Letter Version:

Now, its' time to use your twelfth grade English skills and really get the VA's attention. This theoretical stressor letter version might go something like this in VA Form 21-526 Part B, page 2, Section III under Explanation (remember this is where the VA wants to know how your disabilities are related to your service connection). Now you add the details. Again, there is nothing wrong with embellishing the truth by giving your story some flavor or color. I do not encourage anyone to lie about their service records. The real problem is that most combat veterans’ don't want to discuss what they have been through or do they understand or realize at this stage what exactly it is the VA wants. It is just very confusing for someone with PTSD. That is why I and other Veteran Advocates are here to help you. So here goes the expanded and embellished stressor letter version of the shorter version comments.

“After talking with several veterans’ advocates and realizing that I have some serious symptoms both emotionally and medically that qualify me for service connected disabilities, I am submitting this stressor letter along with my DD-214 and claim forms for service connected disabilities.

I am an honorably discharged United States Army Veteran who served from January 1968 to January 1971. During this enlistment period I also served a extended tour of duty from July 1968 to January of 1970 in country in Vietnam and I am also a Combat Vietnam Veteran. My duties while in Vietnam serving with (name unit or units here and give as exact locations if you can) included LRP's or Long

Range Patrols that exposed me and other service men to many areas of heavy saturation of Herbicide Poisoning. While most of my tour of duty was in the field engaged in search and destroy missions and or working with the indigenous Mountain Yards we eat vegetation from the land and drank water by filling our canteens out of the local water supplies. I was also attached to ARVIN UNITS as an advisor at times and acted as the radio communications liaison for artillery fire support missions while on maneuvers. My MOS (state here any and all MOS particularly combat MOS you worked as) and I strictly acted in an infantry capacity at many levels. During my tour of duty in Vietnam I was involved in numerous fire fights, mortar attacks and ambushes by the Viet Cong and NVA, on OP's or Operation Posts, on over run LZ's or Landing Zones on five occasions which resulted in receiving two purple hearts, a Bronze Star, and a Silver Star for Valor, CIB, Combat Air Metal and other accommodations. I personally witnessed nearly 300 American service personnel either killed or severely wounded in combat situations, as well as, upwards of nearly five hundred dead or dying Viet Cong and NVA. I was also involved in and part of Dust Off extractions and recovery efforts of our KIA personnel.

My physical and medical condition includes chronic fatigue all the time, the possibility of Diabetes and parasite infestation, and Herbicide Poisoning. I therefore am filing service connected claims under two (2) categories: One for PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) and the other under Herbicide Poisoning, better known as Agent Orange Poisoning.”

ATTENTION, ATTENTION! You, the combat veteran will have to describe your own story to the VA, but whatever you do, include as much detail in the stressor letter as you can. I hope this theoretical example is helpful to you.

Global Assessment of Functioning or GAF:

How important is the GAF score or rating? Great question students. In fact, I was two years into my claims process and a year in PTSD counseling before I even knew there was such a thing as a GAF evaluation that I was being rated by. In fact, no body will really tell you how important it is. It's like asking which ingredient is the most important in a vegetable salad. You'll be told that everything is important in evaluating you and GAF is just one of the elements, but in my own opinion it is a very, very important ingredient in getting you the claim you deserve. It is also my opinion if you have PTSD serious enough to be rated, and that means being assigned a percentage to your service connected claim, then you should eventually get a 100% service connection if you are willing to play the waiting game and go through the appeal, appeal, appeal process. I will explain the appeal process later.

Now what diagnostic criteria does the VA use for rating your PTSD service connected claim? Since 11/7/96, the VA has used the DSM-IV Diagnostic Criteria for PTSD or simply GAF. This simply means a qualified VA Psychiatrist, or now generally a farmed out private Psychiatrist that has a contract with the VA to evaluate you during what they call a “psychological evaluation” conducts the interview evaluation and assigns you a GAF score or rating after your meeting which lasts about forty-five minutes to and hour in length. It is an unspoken, but sad fact, even by those working in the VA system that they know the main object of the evaluation is to rate you at such a high level of functioning on the GAF scale so that your claim will be denied. The problem with this is that, again in my opinion, the evaluator asks misleading or target questions to get the answers they want. Plus, the veteran is not prepared for the kinds of questions he or she is asked. This is very critical, listen very carefully here. *You the veteran need to steer the conversation and questions so that they fit your claims for PTSD. This is not dishonest, but it is being prepared for what you will have to endure in this VA interrogation. More prep work a little later.*

Now would you like to know how the VA rates you by percentage on the GAF score? Great Question students! You are rated on a scale from 1 to 100. The lower the rating means the worse off you are and

the greater chance of getting your claim for service connected disability approved. Here is how the VA Psychiatric play pal interrogator will rate you if you fall in one of these definitions;

91–100 Person has no problems or has superior functioning in several areas or is admired and sought after by others due to positive qualities.

81–90 Person has few or no symptoms. Good functioning in several areas. No more than “everyday” problems or concerns.

71- 80 Person has symptoms/problems, but they are temporary, expectable reactions to stressors. There is no more than slight impairment in any area of psychological functioning.

61- 70 Mild symptoms in one area or difficulty in one of the following: social, occupational, or school functioning. But, the person is generally functioning pretty well and has some meaningful interpersonal relationships.

51–60 Moderate symptoms or moderate difficulty in one of the following: social, occupational, or school functioning.

41–50 Serious symptoms or serious impairment in one of the following: social, occupational, or school functioning.

31–40 Some impairment in reality testing or impairment in speech and communication or serious impairment in several of the following: occupational or school functioning, interpersonal relationships, judgment, thinking, or mood.

21–30 Presence of hallucinations or delusions which influence behavior or serious impairment in ability to communicate with others or serious impairment in judgment or inability to function in almost all areas.

11-20 There is some danger of harm to self or others or occasional failure to maintain personal hygiene or the person is virtually unable to communicate with others due to being incoherent or mute.

And finally...

1-10 Persistent danger of harming self or others or persistent inability to maintain personal hygiene or person has made a serious attempt at suicide.

Now, where do you fit in?:

Another great question students! I had none of this information or advice that I am now providing for you the combat veteran. It is my personal opinion, but I feel the GAF rating system stinks. However, that is what the VA uses and you have to know how to work or manipulate the interview so that you get the lowest possible rating. Again, I am not telling anyone to lie or be untruthful with the facts. Manipulating the facts is what the VA does, so what you need to understand is that the VA’s perspective and definitions can be turned into your advantage if you present the facts your way and stick to them.

I have known some veterans that do qualify in the 1 to 30 percent rating scale on GAF. These are very severe cases and not the normal garden variety PTSD functional veteran that has a chance at some sort of quality of life in the future and would and probably are candidates to be confined to a mental institution I believe. I mean no disrespect to these veterans.

For our purposes here a rating of between GAF 35 to GAF 55 would probably qualify a veteran with PTSD, in my opinion, to some sort of service connected disability. And if you have other physical medical problems connected to your claims like Herbicide poisoning, those rating percentages will be combined to raise your over all score. You are eventually looking for a rating of about 70% or more by going through the appeals process. This will be discussed in more detail in the “Appeals Process” section later.

Here is a brief overview of how you should present your case in the evaluation process, in my opinion. This is the best advice that I can give any veteran suffering with the PTSD especially combat veterans.

Here is the bottom line. When you get to the point that you are going to your psychiatric evaluation you have forty-five minutes to one and a half hours to make a first and last impression before your meeting is over, you are out the door, and what you said and what was observed is reduced to maybe two pages of written psycho babble with a GAF score attached by the interviewer. They are probably typing in their evaluation of you on their laptop as the door hits your butt on the way out. And don't be surprised if there are some things in your report, if you ever get to read it someday, that quote you as saying things you never did or that was misunderstood by your VA psychological play pen buddy. I know this happens because I had three (3) psych evaluations and read the reports and there were made up statements, things taken out of context, and important things not included. So the bottom line is: that you, the combat veteran who is about to be interrogated had better narrow the conversation down to the issues and how what you experienced in the service is affecting you today! As my old Drill Instructor use to say: “Do I make myself clear here soldier?”

So how do I do that drill sergeant?

Another great question by one of my students. Now pay very close attention to what I am about to tell you. Point of order first. If you had a horrible home life or any type of brutal things happen to you growing up; or lets say your father was a drunk and beat your mother and you and any siblings you had on a regular basis; or you were raped or molested while you were growing up and you were a helpless female or male victim; or you saw your favorite pets killed or tortured in front of you; or your parents divorced while you were growing up; or any number of things happened to you from the time you were born until you went into the service. These are serious issues and should be dealt with through qualified counselors, and I encourage you do to so, but only after you get your service connected rating and you start getting disability money. These issues need to be dealt with and you need to find a good counselor, but in my opinion as far as the claim process goes at this point, that's not why you are at the psych evaluation. You are there to talk about how your time and experiences in the service has changed your life and affected you. That's it! That's what you are there to discuss. Again students: You are there to talk about how your time and experiences in the service has changed your life and affected you. That's it! That's what you are there to discuss. AM I CLEAR ON THIS? I CAN'T HEAR YOU! AM I CLEAR ON THIS!?

Another point: The typical Vietnam Combat Veteran has been married at least three (3) times. There are tons of issues to talk about in counseling about your past marriages, but my best advice is that this evaluation is not the place to start talking about your past marriages. If you say anything just say that your significant other has taken over the finances because you can't deal with that any longer. Don't talk about any other married things during the interrogation. Later, after you get your rating and disability service connection and money starts coming in on a regular basis, then you'll have plenty of time to talk about your life in detail with someone who is gonna spend more quality time with you. Let me be clear here: You are at this evaluation to discuss only your time in service and the experiences you had and how it has affected your life today psychologically, emotionally and mentally. That's it! Nothing else! And go with an attitude. An emotional chip on your shoulder. If the interrogator side tracks your agenda, then get them back on your track. Don't transfer from your train of thought to the interrogator's train of thought.

Theoretical Interview With Psychiatrists' For Evaluation:

Warning: the suggestions given now are for amusement and your enjoyment. If you choose to follow these suggestions, that's up to you the combat veteran. As I see it, no one else is trying to help you with filing your claim(s) the way I am. So you have two choices. Me, the experienced one, or any cardboard advertiser off a freeway exit, asking for a hand out and God blessing you. So if you take my suggestions, remember they are only suggestions and you have to make the final decision. But make the right one!

For the male combat veteran, go in to the interview with a two or three days growth of beard on your face. Wear a shirt and pants that are at least a week old and may smell. Make sure your hair is messy and don't brush your teeth, the worse your breath smells the better. That should set the tone for the interview. For female veterans the same thing except don't wear any makeup. Remember, this is not a "look as good as you can beauty contest", it's about setting a tone for the interview. Now veteran, go in with an attitude that you have rehearsed and know exactly what answers you want to provide. Be pleasant with the psychiatric interrogator at first and then judge your emotional scale from there as the interview goes on.

The interview might start like this: The purpose of the visit, who the interrogator is, and they want to ask you some questions. Keep your answers to a minimum and if you sense something isn't right then ask a question. Pay attention as we go along and you'll see what I mean.

Now stop the interrogator in there tracks by asking "what is their combat experience?" Why ask this? Because you can and you want to find out if they took a refresher course at the local community college recently or really have some experience of someone shooting at them trying to kill them just because they are and American. Surprisingly enough, most VA Psychiatrists' or Psychiatric Interrogator's, like the one you will be sitting across from, don't have any real combat experience. So you need to establish the fact by asking the question. What ever mumbo psycho babble they come back with to explain their qualifications, you should just respond with a simple "I was just curious" from you.

If you are asked about your childhood growing up, you respond that it was a normal, average family life. That's the concept and stick with it. Any issues in this area can be discussed with a counselor later who has the time to discuss in detail those things. REMEMBER: You are there to talk about how your time and experiences in the service has changed your life and affected you. That's it! That's what you are there to discuss.

Next if you are asked about any marriages. Tell them how many marriages you have had. Short answers. If you are asked how you got along in these former marriages you just say something like: "we had differences and grew apart." That's all you say. That's it! You are not there for marriage counseling you are there for what? : You are there to talk about how your time and experiences in the service has changed your life and affected you. That's it! That's what you are there to discuss.

At this point, if you haven't had enough of the twenty questions mentality or you haven't gotten into the real reason you are there for evaluation, then you need to take control and say something like this: "Look you seem to be a nice person, but we are not talking about the real reason I'm here. I'm here because I have PTSD and from the time I was in the service to right now the experiences I went through and observed have affected me to this very moment, here in your office. That's my understanding of why I am here today!" If you say something like that at this point, you have set in motion what will follow. Unless the interrogator says: "OK, let's talk about what is troubling you." Or something like that, then be prepared to walk out and display the angry attitude that you have from getting the run around. If the interrogator makes excuses like they have to understand about your growing up or any of that other crap, then get up and walk out with some statement like "This is just a bunch of crap." Leave and then write the VA and your

service officer a follow up letter stating that all the Psychiatrist was interested in was how many diapers did you go through growing up or something like that. Get the meeting on record and your version of it...AND that you are very, very angry. Make copies of this letter and file in the three ring note book along with that appointment notice. Copy to VA and Copy to your Service Officer.

Now, with the Almighty's blessing if the conversation continues and you don't walk out, this is what you zero in on. Items that deal with the GAF score. You will be giving them information that they can rate you with. Two simple triggers that could set a vet off. For Vietnam Vets' it could be the sound of a helicopter or the smell of diesel fuel; for Iraq Vets' it could be a parked car on the side of the freeway or driving down the street in a city with tall buildings. These could trigger flashbacks of combat experiences and trauma as simple as that sounds.

So here is an overview of things that might bother you if you understand what I mean:

You get depressed at times for no reason

You have flashbacks to fire fights or being mortared

You feel chronic fatigue all the time

If you drink, you seem to be drinking more and don't understand why

You can't talk to anyone about what you went through because they don't and won't understand

You seem to get depressed at certain times, the same times every year (these are called anniversary dates and are usually related to some traumatic event in your life...combat vets have a hard time making the connection).

General anxiety most of the time

You isolate yourself from social situations and have lost interest in things that were important before

Difficulty in responding emotionally to others

Survivor guilt and the dead bodies you saw and combat you experienced

You are constantly aware of your surroundings and don't feel safe in a lot of situations

You check the house doors several times a night or walk around the yard at night to check things out

You have turn over all financial responsibilities to your significant other cause you can't handle that any more...

This should give you a pretty good idea of what you want to establish for yourself in the interrogation evaluation interview. And if you tear up and should cry, well all the better. Reliving these things is getting to you. Sure signs of PTSD. Remember it is only going to last around an hour and you have to direct this precious time to your advantage. Keep your train on your tracks. As my old drill instructor use to say: "*Do you understand me soldier?*"

Now what is the object here?

Another great question. Was that someone in the back row that stayed awake? The object here is to establish in the mind of your Psychiatric evaluator, that you have to see as a mandatory part of your claim(s) process anyway, is to come away with a GAF score of from about GAF 35 to GAF 55. You need to establish or plant in the mind of this person that you have moderate to severe problems in social (especially your significant other or close friends), occupational or school functioning. Moderate to severe impairment in being able to communicate with others in the areas of social, occupational, or school functioning, in your judgment process, thinking and moods. In fact, you need to imply all of these things are present in almost all areas of your life now as a result of what you experience in the service.

Now a last word here: What you do and how you handle this interview process is up to you. What I know and have come to understand is that you can't reach a proper diagnosis of someone with PTSD in one hour. You, the individual combat veteran, has to establish certain facts in the observers' mind and let them go from there. No matter what rating you get or if you are denied your claim, you appeal, appeal, appeal until you get what you deserve and need. My guess is that if you go in prepared and follow my theoretical advice, you will most likely get some service connected rating you can go to the bank with. I will cover briefly the appeal process next. If you feel this information was helpful to you please let us know. If you think other veterans would benefit from our website please let them know about us.

WHAT CAN I EXPECT IN THE FILING PROCESS?

You soldiers' and service people really ask good questions. No KP for you tonight! Filing a claim(s) is an ordeal by itself. The old saying is that "if you didn't have PTSD before you filed a claim(s) with the VA, you sure as heck would have it after going through the process."

Its all about attitude and perspective. The VA has had at least 40,000 claims filed with them for PTSD alone since 2003. What is about to happen with claims now that the Afghanistan and Iraq Veterans get smart and file their claims will make the struggles of the Vietnam Veterans pale in comparison. The latest evidence now is that that there may be as many as 50% of Vietnam Veterans with PTSD that are also prime candidates for developing epilepsy that very possibly might be related to the effects of explosions. The point I am making here is that new information is coming to light all the time about service connected possible issues. The attitude the VA has, in my opinion and based on my experience and the experiences of other veterans I know personally, is to either deny the claims if at all possible or give the lowest percentage rating with a thank you and hope the veteran goes away and they can close their file. Your attitude is to appeal, appeal, appeal any decision unless you get a 100% service connected rating and then you still need to talk with your service officer for their advice. Now, if and when you get a rating of 60% or higher ask your service officer about filing for "unemployability". They can explain it to you, but it is another thing you can do to get yourself to 100% service connected.

Your job now is to file your claim(s), submit those claim(s) as I have described, and find a good qualified service officer to help you. Remember the minute you file, the cash meter is running and when you do get a claim approved by the VA they will start the direct deposits for your service connected disability entitlements to you. If you have any further questions in the future lets us know. You this information helps you with your claims process and you get your deserved service connected disability entitlements lets us know. Good luck my fellow Veterans.