

Years of Medical Mistakes Nearly Kill Veteran

Veteran survives aortic dissection, receives benefits with the help of the VFW

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Jason Newcomb wasn't even 40 years old when a damaged heart valve nearly killed him.

"I took my wife Stacy out to dinner. The next thing I know I'm waking up in a hospital bed two weeks later," said Jason Newcomb, Retired Air Force Technical Sergeant.

Newcomb had suffered an aortic dissection. As he described it, his heart valve "peeled apart like a lemon," requiring him to undergo a ten-hour emergency surgery to have the faulty heart valve replaced. He spent two weeks in a coma, unknowingly fighting for his life.

"It's the same thing that happened to John Ritter. It's usually fatal."

As doctors reviewed his medical history, they were appalled by all the medications he'd taken over the years for hypertension caused by his high-stress job—most of which did more harm than good.

"My doctors just kept throwing the pharmacy at me," said Jason. "When things didn't improve, more pills."

After 20 years in the Air Force, Newcomb just wanted to enjoy his time with his wife. Instead he had to relearn to walk, talk and eat. It was a joyous day when he was finally able to go to the bathroom by himself.

As he recovered, Newcomb went seven months without a job. He and his wife lost the home they were going to buy and were living at a friend's house, barely scraping by. He had submitted his claim to the VA but heard nothing.

He checked the VA's website, but there was no sign of his claim. A clerical error had sent his claim back and forth between Baltimore and Winston-Salem. Like his claim, Newcomb was

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in limbo.

“I felt like I had done my time, now just acknowledge me,” said Newcomb. “I would check every single day for an update—nothing.”

That’s when VA Military Service Coordinator Tracey Connell contacted VFW Pre-Discharge Rating Consultant Richard “Rick” Lawrence. Lawrence was able to expedite Newcomb’s claim as a “hardship.”

“Rick hand-delivered my claim and had the process expedited. I had not been seen by a VA doctor, so Rick helped me get all my appointments sorted out,” said Newcomb. “I have no doubt that I would still be waiting if it weren’t for Rick.”

Three months after Lawrence took on the claim, Newcomb was awarded 100% service-connected disability compensation as well as special monthly compensation. This will likely provide Newcomb with tax-free benefits for the rest of his life. He was also able to list his spouse as a dependent, which increased his monthly income.

“I broke down and cried when I got the news. It was such a heavy burden lifted from me. It was a victorious day for me and my wife.”

Newcomb hopes that other veterans will learn something from his experience.

“The VA is not a perfect system. You cannot go it alone. I’ve seen so many veterans try and fail, causing them to fall into deep depression. Just have faith and let the VFW help you.”

As a VFW pre-discharge rating consultant, Lawrence’s primary mission is to review VA rating decisions for accuracy on behalf of separating service members. Lawrence is just one of more than 1,200 VFW-accredited service officers nationwide who stand ready to assist veterans like Newcomb free of charge.

VFW-accredited service officers can be found at many VA regional offices and on 15 military installations, where they help transitioning service members, veterans, dependents and survivors navigate the complex VA benefits system. Learn more at www.vfw.org/NVS.