

RAY SANTANA

[An Hoa], Vietnam – April 1969: Battle weary soldiers from the 2nd Marines 5th Division were encountering heavy fire. Embedded in the jungle's rough terrain for weeks on end, lists of casualties staggering... wounded soldiers cried for help and struggled to hang on. The situation worsened... Viet Cong closed in and soldiers lost their lives while attempting to evacuate their wounded brothers to safety. Lance Corporal Raymond Santana was among the soldiers medi-vac'd that day. In those pivotal moments, his life was changed forever.

Ray Santana spent three months in the Long Beach Naval Hospital. Military debriefings and emotional assistance were non-existent. Cpl. Santana was unable to move, see or talk to anyone. Surgery to mend his damaged spine was 'pending' and physical rehabilitation 'temporarily on hold.' After three months, Santana was discharged and sent home to recover. Unbeknownst to Cpl. Santana, his medical records were lost. VA doctors were no longer authorized to take care of him.

Physically and emotionally battered, he sought help from the VA... there was nothing on record to prove that he was a combat Marine in Vietnam. Cpl. Santana was given an honorable discharge and ordered to 'go home and move on with his life.' He was 20 years old.

Over the years, the injuries Ray sustained in combat resulted in 15 neck, spinal and knee surgeries. Flashbacks and nightmares were relentless. Finally, in 2004 someone listened. Copies of his medical records were found and he was hospitalized and diagnosed with Post Traumatic-Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Ray is continuing his courageous journey. His story echoes thousands of Vietnam veterans. They were soldiers. They were young. They were brave.

--Written by Linda Santana