

Just One Phone Call 'to Save Someone's Life'

A VFW member and Iraq War veteran speaks about working with a VFW Accredited Service Officer

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One phone call to Joshua Kampert in 2019 may have saved his life.

Kampert received the call from Iraq War veteran Justin Johnson. Johnson said that he and Kampert talked about their struggles after leaving the Marine Corps. The pair were deployed to Iraq from February to September 2005 with Charlie Co., Combat Logistics Bn. 8.

“After connecting, we promised each other that we would meet up by the end of the year,” said Johnson, a Gold Legacy Life member of VFW Post 5066 in Collierville, Tennessee. “We then met in December 2019 for the silkies hike in Key West, Florida.”

While spending time together and with other friends from their time in the service, Johnson told Kampert about his experience with filing a VA disability claim. Johnson said he worked with a VA-accredited service officer.

“[Kampert] had plenty of questions about filing a claim and how it would benefit him,” said Johnson, a past All-American Post commander (2021-22). “I did my best to answer his questions. I assured him that VA benefits are earned and that he would not be taking benefits from others. At the time, we did not know of the side effects from burn pits from our service in Iraq.”

Johnson said he shared stories about the struggles Vietnam War veterans had related to Agent Orange. He told Kampert that they might be in the “same scenario” with toxic exposure and burn pits from their deployment to Iraq.

Before leaving Key West, Kampert and Johnson vowed to return to the same event in 2020.

FINDING KAMPERT HELP

A year later, Johnson updated Kampert on his VA disability claim and encouraged Kampert

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to contact a service officer for his own service-connected disabilities. Johnson searched the internet and found a service officer near Kampert's home. Kampert said that he promised Johnson he would talk to the service officer.

"I found the contact information for veteran service officer Jesse Cuff, and I was also able to find out that Jesse was also a combat veteran and around the same age as us," Johnson said. "I later found out [Cuff] was a VFW Accredited Service Officer."

Cuff, a member of the VFW Department of Wisconsin, met with Kampert and helped him file a disability claim, which Kampert said gave him VA disability compensation and, more importantly, VA health care benefits. Cuff is the director of the Waupaca County Veterans Service Office in Wisconsin.

Kampert, a Life member of VFW Post 11346 in Waupaca, Wisconsin, said that he believed Cuff truly cared about him and did everything he could to help.

"He was professional and helped me through the entire process," Kampert said. "Him being a combat veteran around my age made me feel comfortable to work with him."

'CONNECTING VETERANS WITH THEIR EARNED BENEFITS'

Cuff is an Army Reserve veteran who served from 2002 to 2012 as a combat engineer. He served in Afghanistan in 2010 with the 428th Engineer Company.

"Our primary focus obviously is connecting veterans with their earned benefits," Cuff said. "But we also focus on improving the quality of life for veterans who work with us. That is what drives me and my team to keep focusing on our veterans."

Cuff said that with just one phone call, he was able to help Kampert with the resources available to him and other veterans. Cuff added that he worked with Kampert on a personal level with his health and well-being rather than focusing on paperwork during the initial contact.

"In my opinion, veteran service officers like Jesse Cuff make some of the biggest and impressionable impacts for our veterans on their decision to receive care and help," Johnson said. "Knowing that my comrade was able to receive the care and help he had earned from his service made me so proud and thankful."

A CLAIM FOR A BRAIN TUMOR

On Dec. 9, 2022, Johnson said he received a phone call from Kampert's wife. It was not good news.

"[Kampert] was in the emergency room for seizures, and the doctors found a tumor in his

brain,” Johnson said. “I talked to him in great length about how the tumor was more than likely service connected from toxic exposure to burn pits in Fallujah.”

Johnson said that at the time he was keeping up with VFW’s advocacy for the Honoring Our PACT Act, which was made into law in August 2022.

“During this time, I remember contacting [Cuff], who started helping me file a claim for my brain tumor,” Kampert said. “I’ve seen a lot of cases of brain tumors from people who were exposed to burn pits overseas, and I know that was the reason for mine.”

‘I THANK GOD I HAVE VA BENEFITS’

Kampert said he went in for brain surgery with Dr. Mustafa Baskaya, a neurological surgeon at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, Wisconsin. Kampert said the doctor was able to remove the cancerous tumor.

“My family and I are extremely thankful for the great service I was able to receive from [Cuff], which helped me receive the care and benefits I needed,” Kampert said. “It just takes one phone call to save someone’s life. I know it saved mine. I thank God I have the VA benefits I have, or I would be bankrupt or possibly not be able to get the treatment I need.”

As of November 2023, Kampert was receiving chemotherapy treatment, which he planned to continue through April.

This article is featured in the January 2024 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Dave Spiva](#), associate editor for VFW magazine.