

## The Invisible Soldier

*Many veterans living with the invisible wound, PTSD.*

Napanee resident Andrew Godin was officially released from the Canadian military in 2006 but he lived with his invisible wounds from his years of service starting in 2003, and he still lives with those wounds. Godin, like many veterans, lives with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and by telling his story, he hopes he helps others living with it too.

“We are getting better at getting over the hurdle of talking about PTSD, and treatments are getting better too, but there is a lot of work to do, and some men and women will still not talk about it, because they don’t want to jeopardize their careers,” Godin said.

After his diagnosis, he said that he was offered a very different job than the one he’d had as the Office Production Manager and Warrant Officer with the Mapping and Charting division—a new job that he felt he could not do. So he opted to leave the military, and still holds some resentment against those who were not willing to help him continue with the job he loved.

“I was dead to them, and after 20 years of service, it was a difficult decision to leave, but I was being ‘retired’ to this other job very fast, and I couldn’t do it.”

Godin said that he thinks there is still a lack of education and understanding about PTSD and how it affects people. He added that things are a lot better now, but there are things to work on: one of them being a better level of health services and consistency of services.

“There have been some services available in the past that are no longer available, because many thought, or think, the problem is over, that we’ve dealt with it, so it’s time to move on,” Godin said. “Changes to the Veterans Charter [where vets get a lump sum payment rather than a monthly pension] does not work for people with PTSD.”

Godin explained that some choose to self-medicate the symptoms of PTSD—sleeplessness, anxiety, depression, mood swings, etc. with alcohol or drugs, and they become addicts. They need something to kill the pain. When they have access to a lot of money, they are not capable of making rational judgement as to the wise use of those funds, and soon burn through them. Some sufferers with PTSD get to the point where they cannot cope anymore, or they can’t wait for treatment, and they commit suicide.

“It’s not the PTSD that gets you—it’s the other stuff related to it. I know more people who’ve died by their own hands than were killed in rotation. They were just tired of fighting every day. I know families that have been devastated by PTSD, and its effects,” Godin said.

“There is still a real lack of help for family members dealing with a spouse or family member with PTSD.

They unfortunately bear the brunt of the disease and become the front line support for these people and they neither have the support, resources or expertise in which to do so. I'm lucky to have the support of my wife, but I'm also not going to let this [PTSD] get me, so I'm still fighting every day."

Godin said he doesn't know how we have the conversation to talk about this invisible wound that no one really wants to talk about, or deal with. Veterans groups have started their own support groups, and being able to get together with friends at the Legion branch helps.

"It's hard because everyone is off on their own agenda, and there are not enough resources--- money or people---to help," he said. "This isn't limited to the military; it's widespread that mental illnesses are not as well serviced as some physical ones, but we [the military] have to keep our eye on the target: doing a better job of helping our men and women who are dealing with this."

Some programs that are helping offer veterans the opportunity to play golf, go horseback riding, or enjoy other sports. Their teammates are all veterans, so they have some shared experiences. Some of these programs are privately funded; others funded through Legion branches. Currently there aren't any of these programs in this area, but that could change. The Invictus Games that were held in Toronto had many participants who are living with PTSD, as well as those who've been physically injured. Godin said this recognition of the physical and mental illnesses that soldiers deal with helped bring the PTSD to the forefront. He added that he hopes that when people are thinking of veterans on Remembrance Day, they will not only honour the war dead, but honour the living too---especially those living with the invisible wound of PTSD.

"Something like the Invictus Games is great because it gave people a new purpose; a new focus, and it brought attention to the strength that soldiers have---the physical and mental toughness. So that's a positive change for the future. We've come a long way, but there's still a long way to go."