

THAT OTHERS MAY LIVE: A VETERAN PRIEST'S LIFELONG MISSION

San Diego Veterans Magazine spoke with U.S. Air Force Veteran **Ed McKenzie**, father of two, and a Franciscan priest, to share his story and free retreats he leads for fellow Veterans at the historic Mission San Luis Rey near San Diego.



SDVM: How did your service shape you?

Fr. Ed: 1969 forever changed history and my life. In Vietnam, as a member of the 38th Air Rescue and Recovery Squadron, PEDRO, their motto "That Others May Live" became my salvation, at some level, the unspoken Gospel that we lived by every single day.

56 years later, as a Catholic Priest, I continue to live by those words! They summarize the entire Gospel of Jesus Christ. It's all so very simple! It was the very motto that Jesus Christ lived, suffered and died for.

What we did was no less traumatic and bloody than those who did the actual fighting! Being medivac, combat air rescue, I never had to sight another human being down the barrel of a rifle. Many of my buddies did! I came out of it with no physical wounds. Many around me did not. They are struggling today with scars they picked up fifty-six years ago!

These people are why I do what I do. Advocating and providing retreats to enhance their quality of life.

SDVM: How did your healing begin?

Fr. Ed: The wounds I carry aren't easily seen. To have witnessed the cruelty man is capable of shattered me. The trauma I experienced resulted in PTSD and makes life difficult on a daily basis!

Today, I'm getting help through a therapist. Humpty Dumpty shattered and it takes time to pick up those pieces and put them back together again. Some would say it's impossible, but still we try!

I thank God I'm one of the lucky ones. It took fifty years to seek the help I needed. My goal is to help the less lucky. Those who need help but cannot or will not get it. They will not expose that wound. They "rubbed some dirt into it" and got on with life! And that's unhealthy!

SDVM: What happens at your one-day retreat?

Fr. Ed: It's composed of group discussions where all can share their feelings, "witnessing" a journey to wholeness, and methods of therapeutic guided meditation to aid in recovery. While it's not a "religious" experience, there is a "spiritual" component.

One's denomination or religious affiliation is of no concern. All are welcome! Expect some prayer and conversations around two soldier/saints, St. Francis of Assisi and St. Ignatius of Loyola. Both were involved in fierce combat that resulted in PTSD and moral injury. But, they figured out how to deal with their illnesses on their own. They created therapies that are useful still today. They became "saints" and that demonstrates it is possible to come out of the hole that conflict has many times left us in. One can participate as much or as little as they are comfortable with. No pressure whatsoever!



SDVM: What advice do you have for struggling Veterans?

Fr. Ed: I carried my "burden-stone" for over 50 years. It eventually made a wreck out of me. Ten years ago, I opened up at a retreat and my life has not been the same since! Is all of it working and making my life easier? I think so! Sometimes I am not sure. But then again what does this sort of "healing" look like? That's a difficult question to answer.

I have come to realize this sort of healing is a process and it takes time. It can be a life of taking "baby steps" toward health and wholeness.

I have witnessed life-changing results and heard from many who have said how wonderful this retreat was for them!

Adult family members are also invited. They are just as affected by the PTSD of loved ones.

Near the end of his life, St. Francis gathered his followers saying, "Until now we have done nothing... let's get busy!" What he called "nothing" changed the world! Today, as a Franciscan, the "Coming Home" retreat is my response to that directive! My hope is "That Others May Live" because of it!

SDVM: How has living at The Hacienda shaped your mission?

Fr. Ed: I've met other veterans of similar age! It's my hope to bring them together to share our stories. I discovered a resident who was in my unit. I didn't know him then, but we had the same friends and experiences. He was also driven by the motto "That Others May Live".

Hacienda has given me the opportunity to speak to the entire community about the problem of Veteran suicide and how my retreat is addressing it. Allowing me to do this has given me a new mission in my later years that adds to my search for "meaning". I'm grateful for this opportunity. All of this has aided me in securing my own mental health.

For more information about "Coming Home Retreats" or register for the next on **Saturday, August 9th**, visit sanluisrey.org or call (760) 757.3659



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