



After
20 years
of service...

Only One Regret

By SGM Kevin M. Skelly

As I complete my 20th year of service to the United States Army, I find myself reflecting back to see if there was anything in those previous years I would change if given the chance. I certainly wouldn't change my serving with all of those super soldiers I came to know over the years. I wouldn't change any of the great duty stations I served at—forts Lewis, Sam Houston and Bragg, to name just a few. Nor would I change the opportunity to have served my country overseas in Asia where I was able to learn another culture. Then there were all the opportunities for personal and professional development I received through the Non-commissioned Officer Education System and the Army Continuing Education programs. I'd be crazy to change any of that.

While reminiscing, I'm distracted by a noise in my ears. It's a ringing noise I'm all too familiar with and it grows louder the longer I concentrate on it. It's a sound I must live with because I have no choice—it's a part of me now, a part of my life. Every minute of every day for

the rest of my life I'll have this high-pitched distraction in my ears.

Yes, that's it! If I could change one thing from the past 20 years, it would be the constant ringing in my ears I live with now—all because I didn't wear hearing protection when I should have.

It probably began that time I went to the rifle range without my earplugs. I was young and figured it would OK just this one time. Besides, my leaders weren't really checking anyway.

Or, maybe it was one of those times I was around the artillery pieces when they were firing and I figured I could get my fingers in my ears quick enough...I couldn't.

When I left Field Artillery, I went Airborne and joined the Special Forces. I can recall many times I'd climb into helicopters thinking the ride was too short to bother with earplugs. I was too hoo-ah for earplugs anyway; we all were.

My hearing loss also could have been the result of driving multitudes of Army trucks without taking the time to insert protection in my ears.

In truth, it's probably a combination of all of the above. As a result of my ignorance, I am now the proud owner of

hearing aids at the ripe old age of 37 years. Army doctors have provided me with a fancy pair of \$2,000 earplugs. That's because they said my hearing deficiency is permanent, just like that high whine in my ears.

Permanent.

The hearing aids aren't too uncomfortable...once you get used to them. My friends eventually got used to seeing me wear them. Now they only remind me that I'm too young to have them. I caution them not to make the same mistake I did or they'll get a pair, too. I only wish some of my previous leaders had taken that extra moment to ensure we had earplugs—and used them!

Now that I'm a leader, I take that extra moment. I see the looks on the faces and I hear the grumbling, but I don't give in. I know

that as a leader I sometimes have to make unpopular decisions. Through my experience, I must override the youthful exuberance and ignorance of some of my soldiers to ensure they do the smart thing.

I also take the time to explain why earplugs are so important. Today's soldiers are intelligent and deserve a better explanation than "because I said so." Then I tell them about the ringing, every minute of every day...ringing that never stops. That's what usually does the trick. I can see it on their faces and in their eyes.

Regrettably, my choice has already been made. The only thing I can change now are the batteries in my hearing aids.

However, you still have a choice. ALWAYS, ALWAYS, ALWAYS use hearing protection. Ignore any ribbing you may get from your buddies.

If you're a leader, make hearing protection mandatory and please check your soldiers. It only takes a moment to inspect their ears, but the ringing lasts forever.■

Skelly is sergeant major, Joint Special Ops, Force Integration, Ft. Bragg, NC.