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Veteran shares messages of resilience

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Raptor attack jets thunder through an azure sky as they climb over Pete Hawk's North Las Vegas apartment.

The deafening roar is a constant reminder of the Iraq War for the Air Force veteran, and sometimes interrupts the work he is doing.

But he can live with that because he has learned to be resilient.

And his work -- recording audio books for blind veterans and others -- is a labor of love.

"I can hear them right after they take off," he said recently, sitting in his makeshift studio, crammed with recording gear, keyboards and model airplanes.

"All I can do is sit and pause and wait. Unless I can buy a studio or soundproof a room, that's how it's going to be done."

When the gray, radar-evading warplanes leave nearby Nellis Air Force Base they also remind Hawk of the "resiliency traits" -- adaptability, engagement, optimism and pro-action -- which are strengths he has tried to master since he left the base three years ago.

He read about them in the book he is recording, "Reclaiming the Sky: 9/11 and the Untold Story of the Men and Women Who Kept America Flying," by Tom Murphy.

Those are the mental skills that Murphy describes in his colleagues and "heroes" of the airlines in Boston, New York and Washington, D.C., which they used to overcome the enormous loss of friends and co-workers from the attacks. Instead of giving up on their jobs, they found a purpose in life and focused their energy on helping others.

"I read his book and was blown away," Hawk said. "It touched me. It made me think. I thought I had been through a lot, but the people in the book who tell their stories, they were on the front lines of all this. Seeing them get through their issues and tough times gave me so much hope."

Murphy is director of the Human Resiliency Institute at Fordham University in New York, and creator of Edge4Vets, a program to help veterans such as Hawk make successful transitions to civilian life.

Hawk, 45, read "Reclaiming the Sky" for a class during post-military vocational training at Embry-

Riddle Aeronautical University. He wrote the author to ask about creating an audio book to expand its audience.

"His timing was perfect because I was in the process of creating a program to help veterans by applying the resiliency principles from the book," Murphy said.

looking for direction

Hawk hadn't always found that resiliency. He floundered for years before finding direction in the military.

After growing up in Ohio, he dropped out of Wittenberg University after two years.

"I felt I lacked direction and I didn't want to throw my parents' money away," he said.

A guitarist and piano player since childhood, he took a stab at the music industry and learned recording engineering skills. He even considered acting, like his brother, who played a producer in the soap opera "All My Children."

"When I went to the casting I was just terrified," he said about his 1986 audition for the "New Monkees" TV show. "I was just fresh out of recording school and hadn't thought of acting."

Then, he spent a short stint as a bass player with a Southern California band before returning to Ohio to try to finish his degree. His father and stepmother decided he needed to work for a year, and he found a job in a computer store.

But he kept searching again for a better fit in life.

His stepmother said, "Pete, you love airplanes so much, have you ever thought about the Air Force?"

So he talked to a recruiter and signed up in 1988. A year later, he was an aircraft mechanic for C-5 Galaxy transport planes at Travis Air Force Base, Calif. He got married and spent 12 years in the Air Force, including four seeing the world as a flight engineer, until he was honorably discharged in 2000.

He was working as a graphic designer for a pool and spa company in Palm Desert, Calif., when hijackers crashed jetliners into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001.

"From that point on, it triggered something in me to want to be a part of supporting the country again. At that point, I wished I hadn't gotten out."

air force re-enlistment

He re-enlisted in the Air Force. He worked as a senior controller at a maintenance operations center in Dover, Del., before being deployed to Baghdad a few months after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

"I actually got excited about going," he said. "After all, when 9/11 happened I thought it would be pretty wild to be in their land supporting America."

His job at the Maintenance Operations Control Center meant that he lived in a tent at the Baghdad airport.

"So there I was for some crazy stuff, rocket and mortar attacks almost every night," he said. "When you hear the mortars, sometimes you could hear nine in a row, and think, 'Oh, God. Please don't let me die.' Sometimes, they'd land at what sounded to be very close, and my mind would just picture the next tent being hit.

"There was a time I was in the chow tent when we started getting attacked. We'd all get under the tables. I remember looking at faces, thinking, 'I hope I don't have to watch anybody get blown up in front of me.' This would be horrible, so those thoughts just stuck with me."

Hawk was never wounded, but "every time I heard a loud noise I would kind of just cringe over a little bit in fear."

He returned to the United States, where he spent the last part of his career at Nellis Air Force Base. But six months before his discharge date, his job performance slacked and he was having a difficult time at home.

"There were parts of me coming out that I didn't like and (my girlfriend) didn't like. Anger and stuff," he said. "I was getting angry at silly things, just things that didn't make any sense to be angry about.

"I felt like work was becoming more and more like this entity that was crushing me. I felt like I was losing control."

At the suggestion of his boss, he sought help from doctors at the base who diagnosed him with severe-to-moderate depression from post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, the invisible wounds of his war-zone experience. Since his honorable discharge in 2008, he has been in a PTSD counseling program.

It has been a three-year process getting his audio book business off the ground. His past titles include "Living the Law of Attraction" and "The Jeshua Channelings." He said he expects the audio book of "Reclaiming the Sky" to be out this summer.

Now, when those jets fly over his apartment and his audio book work comes to a halt, he pauses for a few minutes and thinks about "Reclaiming the Sky" and how he can help others be resilient.

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