

## A Pilot Grounded: Living with Chronic Back Pain

The editors of *AFP* welcome submissions for Close-ups. Guidelines for contributing to this feature can be found in the Authors' Guide at <http://www.aafp.org/afp/authors>.

Close-ups is coordinated by Caroline Wellbery, MD, associate deputy editor, with assistance from Amy Crawford-Faucher, MD; Jo Marie Reilly, MD; and Sanaz Sara Majd, MD. Questions about this department may be sent to Dr. Wellbery at [afpjournal@aafp.org](mailto:afpjournal@aafp.org).

A collection of Close-ups published in *AFP* is available at <http://www.aafp.org/afp/closeups>.

When my doctor asked me to write about my struggle with chronic back pain, I was hesitant. I find it hard to talk about myself, and I do not want to be viewed as a complainer or difficult patient. As a former pilot who has flown all over the world, I never imagined a day would come when pain would make it difficult just to get out of a chair.

I am 80 years old. I entered the Air Force at 23 years old and became an aircraft commander at 25. The military provided me with a wonderful life. I flew a variety of aircraft, but primarily tankers. I served in Korea and Vietnam and also flew to about 20 other countries, logging thousands of flying hours. I loved flying and ended my career with numerous military honors. My experiences gave me the sense that I was in charge and could accomplish anything.

I was diagnosed with a degenerative back condition about 20 years ago. As time has progressed, the pain in my back and legs has worsened. I have required increasingly more pain medicine, especially over the past five years, as my ability to move has become very difficult. My wife of 53 years died 14 months ago, and there are no words to articulate how that loss has impacted my life. My daughter lives with me and helps with my everyday activities. It is now challenging to walk short distances or do the simplest tasks. Pain has become a constant part of my life. It is very difficult to reconcile who I was before with who I am now.

Having a military family physician has been extremely beneficial. I believe being a part of the military community gives my physician insights into the care of veterans that others might not have. The care is outstanding. He has adjusted my medication as the pain has worsened, and he has responded quickly to any question, request, or problem that has arisen. He has also taken the time to get to know me and my family and, for that, I am very grateful.—A.V.



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### COMMENTARY

Lt Col (ret.) A.V. has been a constant encouragement to me as a military physician. I recently completed a home visit to A.V. and left with immense appreciation and respect for this great American. Little did I know that my patient was a recipient of numerous awards, including the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Bronze Star Medal for his bravery during low-level flight missions throughout Vietnam. Next time you care for a military veteran, take a few minutes to ask about what he or she did in the military. You might be surprised by how much this interest can enhance your care and relationship with the patient.

PHILIP M. FLATAU, MD

The opinions and assertions contained herein are the private views of the author and are not to be construed

as official or as reflecting the views of the U.S. Air Force Medical Department or the U.S. Armed Forces at large.

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### RESOURCES

American Chronic Pain Association  
Web site: <http://www.theacpa.org/default.aspx>  
American Pain Foundation  
Web site: <http://www.painfoundation.org/exit-wounds/>  
United Service Organizations  
Web site: <http://www.uso.org/>  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
Web site: <http://www.va.gov/> ■