

Ron Tallman: An Advocate for Better Hearing and Speech Month

Joining the United States Navy was something of a tradition in Ron Tallman's family. His father and two brothers served in the Navy so it was the natural choice for Tallman when he registered for the draft at 18. Now 66, Tallman served 22 years in the Navy, fighting overseas in the Vietnam War and achieving the rank of Lieutenant Commander.

After retiring in January of 1992, Tallman acquired an electronics degree and began working at Intel in Chandler, AZ. Having been discharged from the Navy, Tallman believed that his days of fighting were long over. But it wasn't until after he retired from Intel in 2012 that Tallman realized he was about to face one of the toughest struggles of his life.

At the time of his discharge from the Navy, a doctor had told Tallman that he had profound hearing loss in his left ear. In fact, a United States Department of Veteran Affairs study reported that hearing problems are by far the most prevalent service-connected disability among American Veterans.

"I retired from Intel mainly because of my hearing loss," explained Tallman. "My wife, Peggy and I were doing all that we could to prepare ourselves for it. Knowing what I know now, you can never really prepare for it. I woke up one morning and my hearing was completely gone. I couldn't hear my dogs bark or my wife calling my name. It was a very traumatizing experience."

Thinking back on it, Tallman said he was constantly exposed to the loud noises that accompany military service. On one ship in particular, he was a telephone talker for gun fire support which required him to have one ear covered by the phone at all times to pass communications between the gun control and the captain. Without any ear protection, he was positioned in close proximity to the gun that was being fired from the ship. He held this job for three years and believes this likely attributed to his hearing loss.

According to the VA, as of 2014, more than 933,000 veterans were receiving disability compensation for hearing loss. In addition, many veterans may score "normal" on hearing tests but have difficulty understanding speech. This condition, called auditory processing disorder, is often associated with blast exposure.

To help combat this, most veterans with hearing loss, including Tallman, qualify under new and expanded VA criteria to receive top-of-the-line hearing aids, cochlear implants and other assistive communication devices, like special telephones, at no charge.

After having gone through a variety of hearing aids, Tallman began looking into other options, so he began researching cochlear implants. After meeting with several people who had them, he made an appointment with his audiologist to get the procedure. Three years later, Tallman has 70% of his hearing back and has since become involved in the hard of hearing community to help others like him.

Tallman now serves as a member on the Hard of Hearing Task Force at the Arizona Commission for the Deaf and the Hard of Hearing and is on the board of his local Hearing Loss Association of America chapter in Sun Lakes. Having also been an avid half marathon runner, Tallman now serves as the co-chair of the Arizona Walk4Hearing event, held each November at Riverview Park in Mesa. This year, the Walk4Hearing is on Veteran's Day, 11-11-17.

May is Better Hearing & Speech Month and this year's theme is "Communication: The Key to Connection." Those who develop hearing loss can begin to feel very isolated, but it is up to the individual to seek out the help they need and stay connected. Think of Tallman, a veteran who has never stopped communicating with his family, his doctors and the VA about what his options are and who continues to remain an advocate for Arizona's hearing loss community.

"My hearing loss has changed my livelihood but not in a negative way," said Tallman. "Sure there are things that I can no longer do but I wouldn't change my life at all. I had a great support system and no one ever gave up on me. If there is one thing I'd want to tell someone who is experiencing hearing loss it is that they don't have to live like that. It may be scary but take the initiative to consult with an audiologist and learn what your options are. It has done a world of good for me."