

It's been three and a half years since Martin Binion dodged minefields, sniper fire and fears of getting lost as he made the 375-mile journey from Kuwait to Baghdad as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Binion, 33, of Chicago, was a mechanic assigned to one of the first mechanized units to enter Iraq following the initial bombardment by U.S. warplanes.

But Binion is still haunted by much of what he encountered on the battlefield, including the horrific sight of dismembered bodies, the unbearable stench of dead bodies cooking in the desert sun, and the image of one Iraqi soldier who died while clutching a photo of his family.

The trauma from the experience, Binion said, has led to night sweats, nightmares, depression, a fear of crowds, uncontrollable anger and other behavioral changes that are telltale signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).



Adjusting back to civilian life has been difficult for Binion.

When he came home from Iraq two years ago, he found that his infant daughter no longer recognized him and would push away from him when he tried to hold her. When he went to sleep, he sometimes had nightmares in which he dreamed he was under attack. On several occasions, he unknowingly struck his wife while having these nightmares. Binion's marriage ultimately fell apart as a result of these behavioral changes.

The U.S. government, however, has twice denied Binion's claim that he has PTSD. And facing an appeals process that regularly takes four to six months, Binion worries that the government may be deliberately dragging its feet so as to avoid paying his medical claims.

"They're just trying to tell me I'm depressed because of my family situation," he said. "But I've spoken to Vietnam veterans and a lot of them have gone through the same thing. They tell me you have to keep appealing because they feel the government often tries to wait veterans out to see if they give up so that they don't have to pay for their treatment."

Binion today is a man feeling a combination of ugly emotions that won't let go. He feels he has been betrayed twice by the U.S. government – first for lying about the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and then again for failing to provide him with the treatment and compensation he believes he deserves.



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Binion's experience is nothing new. A third of U.S. soldiers who returned from the war in Iraq in 2003 and 2004 required mental health treatment within a year of ending their deployment, according to *The Journal of American Medicine*. It has also been widely reported that one in four veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have experienced PTSD.

Most young veterans, however, encounter misinformation, lengthy delays, bureaucracy and other problems as they seek to access the broad range of healthcare, disability, job training and education benefits that were promised to them when they entered military service. A 2004 study by the VA found that its own representatives provided completely incorrect, minimally correct or only partially correct information to veterans about their benefits 85 percent of the time.

Moreover, the Veterans Benefits Administration also acknowledged a 32 percent error rate for initial decisions requiring disability ratings in fiscal year 1999, while veterans who appealed these decisions had to wait an average of 745 days or more than two years to resolve their complaints.

"Instead of doing what it needs to do, which is to compensate these veterans for the pain and suffering they've gone through and are continuing to go through, the government is using loopholes to protect itself," Binion said.

Is there a solution?

Binion, for his part, believes that many changes are needed to improve the nation's veterans benefit system. But he said the government should start by simply owning up to the responsibility of taking care of the health needs of the soldiers it puts on the battlefield.

Binion also believes that the doctors who screen veterans for PTSD and other ailment should themselves be veterans who know what it is like to serve on the battlefield. So far, Binion said, the VA doctors who he has seen have only read about PTSD.

"They know what they know from textbooks," he said. "I think it would make a big difference if they had actually been in a wartime situation."



Meet Martin Binion and many other young veterans Oct. 18-21 in Chicago at the National Symposium for the Needs of Young Veterans

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