



My Life MY STORY



SUSAN



UNITED STATES COAST GUARD

Susan

I would get well, and I'd think, I can have one drink, but you can't have one. "One is too many, and a thousand is never enough."

I was born in southern California. My mom was a nurse at Marine Corps Base, Camp Pendleton. We moved to Vista, which is just east of Oceanside and where I was raised. I have five sisters, three older and two younger. My parents divorced right after the youngest was born. We were very low income – very poor in an upper middle-class neighborhood.

In January of my senior year, we had 'Recruiter's Day' at my high school. My dad told me later (because I couldn't remember), I came home and said, "I am joining the Coast Guard." I graduated from high school and in September 1979, I was inducted into the Armed Services.

Boot camp was at Cape May, New Jersey. This was the first time I was ever on a plane; first time I had ever left home. Two days into boot camp, I called my mother and said, "Mom, this isn't what it was supposed to be. They're yelling in my face and calling us ugly and wondering where our mothers got us." My CO scared the crap out of us girls. My mom reminded me I swore an oath, and I couldn't come home. I told my mom she was right; I had forgotten that little detail.



Boot camp was eight weeks, and it was all girls. I did all the testing in boot camp, and they told me I could do anything in the Coast Guard EXCEPT for mechanical and electrical. I had zero aptitude there, so I became a radio operator.

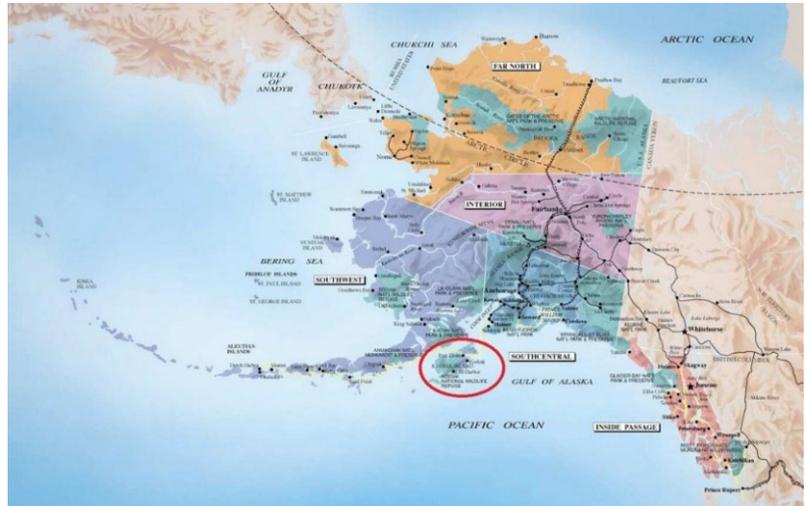


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I went to radio school at Petaluma, California. In the Coast Guard the radio operator did air to ground, radio teletype, landline teletype, and Morse Code during post-Vietnam and the Cold War.

I could receive thirty-eight words per minute and send twelve in Morse Code. School was five months, and I received a Top-Secret clearance.

I graduated a radioman and put in for overseas duty. I really wanted to go to Italy. They sent me to Kodiak, Alaska – the Coast Guard has a sense of humor! They sent me to Kodiak Communication Station (KODIAK COMMSTA).



I have to say, it was the most beautiful place I've ever been but the hardest place because you deal with all kinds of weather.

My duty schedule was three twelve-hour days, then off for two days, then three twelve-hour nights and finally, off for four days. I would work about fourteen days a month on an island that is heinously cold and without much to do. At the American Legion, I worked part-time – first, as the bingo lady and then, I graduated to bartender. There were three miles of habitable area and within those three miles, there were twelve bars.

In the Coast Guard, I mainly worked 90% search and rescue because of where we were located. I also did some work with the fisheries doing mandated fishery reports.



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We were the relay, the communications. We worked on WWII equipment – top notch stuff. At that time, the Coast Guard was part of the Department of Transportation. Now, it is part of Homeland Security, so they have lots of bucks.

When a call came in, we sent it to the rescue center. We had paper maps on the walls and had to figure out where the heck they were and if the Coast Guard had any boats out there to do a rescue.

The foreign vessels were huge, and the mom and pops were tiny. When you run out of gas in the San Diego Harbor, it's not a big deal; when you run out of gas up there, with thirty knot winds and twelve-foot seas, it's not good. It was extreme excitement and extreme boredom; there was no in between. I loved my job.



I was there just a little over a year and a half. Because that was considered overseas duty, I got to choose where I wanted to go. I had fallen in love with a musician, and I decided to stay on the west coast, Group Humboldt Bay. It was a small boat station. A small boat station is very different from Kodiak. On Kodiak, I could see Russia on a clear day, and it was very intense and very secret.

While I was on leave during my transfer to Group Humboldt Bay, my boyfriend and I married each other in a hotel room. No official, but we told our parents we got married; I made my second solemn oath, and I was twenty years old.

I went off to Humboldt County, and he took off on a band tour. I had been at my new duty station about five months when my girlfriend and I decided to go to a bar in Eureka. We went to the bar and got a drink. Well, that's when things went sideways.



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There were other Coasties there, and they invited us to sit with them, which we did. There was this one guy there who was talking about some very sick (sex-related) stuff.

My girlfriend and I went to the bathroom and decided to leave. When we got out of the bathroom, there were drinks waiting there for us. We looked at each other; I thought it would be rude to leave when someone bought us a drink. We decided to stay for a little bit longer, and that was the last thing I remember.

I woke up in my house with this creepy guy raping me. I got him to stop, put my pants on, and yelled at him to get out of my house. At first, he tried to talk me into continuing – if you can imagine, but I went into my kitchen, grabbed my baseball bat, walked back out. I told him if he didn't leave, I would call the cops. He said something I don't remember and left.

I called my Chain of Command – as I was taught, and he said, “To hold tight and let me find out what we need to do.” So, I waited and waited. He finally got back to me about twenty hours later and he said, “The CO said there was nothing the Coast Guard could do because it didn't happen on base, and you should call the police.”

By this time, I had already taken a shower, but I did call the police and filed a report. I went to the doctors and got tested for any disease this creep might have transmitted. The police said it was a case of ‘she-said, he-said,’ there was no proof, and they couldn't prosecute.

After this incident, I was so full of shame to show my face at the base. I felt everyone knew what happened, and no one believed I was raped. What I know today is he slipped a drug in my drink causing the mind to black out, but the body is still functioning. I tried to bury this trauma; I could not show up to the base unless I was loaded. I found people that could give me drugs, and I tried to function the best I could.



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Few months after this, one of my husband's band member's called and said my husband was very sick and in the hospital; he was a juvenile diabetic with less than seven percent of his kidneys functioning. He wanted to go home to Tulsa, Oklahoma. I asked the Coast Guard what I could do. Their response was, "Not much." We weren't technically married, so I took leave, ran to Tulsa, and got married.

He then decided he couldn't go to San Francisco where I could have been transferred. He wanted to stay at home; I couldn't blame him. I tried to transfer to Oklahoma City, but they didn't have a radioman slot. The Coast Guard Institute is there, so I said I would take a down grade, sweep and mop, or whatever it takes. I didn't want to leave the Coast Guard; I loved it. I took a hardship discharge from the Coast Guard in August 1982; I had served just shy of three years.

It took a year to lose his eyesight, but he got a kidney transplant at twenty-seven; his mom was a match. They removed the spleen to put in the kidney, which hurt his immune system. We spent six years together. After he was healed, he decided he wanted to become a music minister, and I wanted out. I had no ability, by that time, to give any more. I ran away and got a divorce, went back home, and moved in with my sister.

During all that time of his sickness, I continued my drinking in secret; it was my answer to everything. I started going through treatment centers in 1992. From 1992 to 2004, I had gone to eight treatment centers and numerous detoxes – always trying, but I couldn't get it. I would build myself up, just to tear it all down.

I was finally suicidal and living in Truckee, California. A girlfriend took me to the VA hospital in Reno, and that's where they ended up asking me the question about being a veteran. "Well, yes, I'm a veteran."



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I did detox here at the VA. They invited me in and did a history evaluation. I told them, don't let me go; I will die. I get these waves of gratitude; they didn't let me go.

I must have had a doe-eyed look. They knew this was my seventh treatment, so they held me in the inpatient for three weeks till a bed became available at NorthStar Transitional Housing. I had no license, no vehicle. I went into the IOP, intensive outpatient, at the VA; and I would walk from the treatment facility to the VA daily.

I would go to the AA Triangle Club for the early morning meeting, then back to the hospital, then again to the Triangle Club, then to the AA Driars Club, and finally back to transitional housing.

Once again, nine months later, I relapsed. Within a week, I woke up from a blackout; I had never blacked out before. I was on a bus back to Colfax, where the madness is for me. This lasted another four or five months and then, I came back to Reno for good in December 2005.

I have over thirteen years of sobriety. My God was always with me; I just didn't know it. I am an active member of AA. I was also in the Compensated Work Therapy Program starting in December 2005. I did that for a year and then developed enough self-worth I could apply for a job. I got a part time position at the VA in the kitchen. After a month, it went full time. I got promoted twice and was a Wage Lead in the kitchen. I was there six years.

A position came up for a peer specialist, and the only requirement was you be in recovery from mental illness and/or substance abuse. I got goosebumps – that feeling when you know something is right. I applied, but I didn't get the job. Within a year, there was another opening in Healthcare for the Homeless Vets (HCHV), and I got it. I had experienced being homeless from 2001 to 2005. My family had said they were done – enough was enough. They did an intervention on me, and it was tough love.



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I started working at the VA in April 2007. I have been with Health Care for the Homeless Vets for over five years.

You can't con a con. I've changed; I'm not that person anymore, but I know what it is like. I know that there is hope out there, but the addiction – it rules you. It is such a mental thing plus, you have that physical addiction too.

You see no other way; the blinders are on until providence comes in. An act of providence is the only thing that makes us stop and say, "This isn't good anymore. I can't do this one more day." For everyone it is different, and some never get there. I have been there several times.

When I was working in Kodiak Alaska, I wasn't at that level yet. Working in the bar, drinking was social. It wasn't till later, after that trauma happened, that I went sideways. I heard, "You can do this on your own; you don't need any help." I didn't really have the support or the coping skills. I forget sometimes how far I've come.

A huge part of my sanity is helping others. Addicts and alcoholics like it when I talk with them; they respect me. They know I am not a therapist just blowing smoke up their ass. Veterans who have PTSD or mental health issues, and who have lived the military culture don't ask for help. We are soldiers. There are a lot of veterans in AA, and it is hard to get them in to talk.

The weird thing for me is I'm able to do this job and get paid for it. What a blessing. The VA and the nation have seen the benefits of one alcoholic talking to another. Someone capitalized on it. The whole peer specialist in the mental health area has exploded, and I am very, very fortunate and blessed.

I am also in therapy. PTSD finally reared its ugly head two years ago. I didn't realize it, but I think, working in the mental health field for the last five years is what brought this shit up.



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Now, I am really active in recovery; I work the program. My head will still tell me after all these years, "It's ok to have a drink." I was at a family wedding in Mexico, and everyone was drinking. I had to go back to what do I know. "What do you know, Sue?"

You forget sometimes; you can't handle it; you can't have that drink. That is what I want my doctors to know, I am vigilant. If they want to help a veteran with addiction, remember it isn't a moral issue. I know they see the veteran come in over and over; it took me eight times. What would have happened if they saw I had been through six different times and decided not to take me. The combination of the mental obsession and the physical addiction is a lot.

The VA saved my life. I can't thank them enough. I owe the VA and AA my life. I am a walking miracle. My God was with me through it all.

