A silhouette of a soldier in full combat gear, including a helmet and a large pack, standing in a field of tall grass at sunset. The soldier is holding a helmet in their left hand. The background is a warm, orange glow from the setting sun.

# Hearing Loss— the Price of War

**Assistive technology and services (often at no cost) are out there to help hard of hearing veterans take charge of their hearing loss but it's up to them to seek them out.**

**By Stephen O. Frazier**

**E**ver since General Sherman famously said it during the civil war we've all understood that "war is hell," and, in today's wars, hell is a very, very noisy place.

Noise-induced hearing loss is the number one disability produced by combat in war today according to the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Since 9/11, the VA reports that more than 94,000 vets are suffering with tinnitus and another 78,000 have experienced hearing loss. Hearing damage can come from cannons, rockets, guns, aircraft, tanks and, of course, roadside bombs. At the peak of the Iraq war the *San Diego Union-Tribune* cited a survey indicating 28 percent of troops were coming home from the war zones with diminished hearing.

The American Tinnitus Association expects hearing damage among military personnel to increase at a rate of eighteen percent a year with payments totaling \$1.1 billion annually by 2011 for hearing disabled service men and women who could exceed 400,000.

Whether Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines or the Coast Guard, the price paid by many for military service has been permanent hearing loss. Unlike their memories of the war or General MacArthur's old soldiers, hearing loss is not going to "just fade away." It's there for life for those vets and will probably get worse.

### **Hearing Loss Epidemic**

In a story picked up by *USA Today*, the *Chicago Tribune* and others, Reuters reported on a Johns Hopkins study that indicates the United States may be facing a hearing loss epidemic. Returning vets are obviously contributing to the increased percentage of Americans with diminished hearing but, beyond the current wars, some Vietnam vets in their fifties and sixties are just beginning to deal with their hearing loss and even some Gulf War vets have recently come to realize they don't hear well.

Hearing related disability claims in the armed services have more than doubled since 2000, prompting the military to routinely conduct hearing

tests on troops before discharge. The bulk of the claims are from Army vets, who have had combat duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. Over the years, Army vets account for 52 percent of those receiving disability benefits for hearing loss compared to 20 percent for the Air Force, 17 percent for the Navy, and 10 percent for the Marines and "other."

### **U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Hospital in New Mexico**

Jonni Gardey, Au.D, chief of audiology at the VA hospital in Albuquerque, New Mexico, reports that, thanks to increased awareness of noise-induced hearing loss and the issuing of hearing protection by today's military, the degree (but not the prevalence) of hearing loss among returning vets seen in her clinic is not as great as in some previous wars; but there is a larger number of returning vets who have a measurable and treatable hearing loss.

### **Hearing related disability claims in the armed services have more than doubled since 2000, prompting the military to routinely conduct hearing tests on troops before discharge.**

Much of the fighting in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan) involves ambushes and "firefights" that don't allow soldiers time to don their military issue hearing protection. Because of the threat of ambush, soldiers are also reluctant to keep their hearing protection on for fear they won't hear a warning of an attack or be able to replace it if lost during a combat situation. In Iraq and increasingly in Afghanistan, roadside bombs have been a major cause of hearing loss. Their blasts cause a violent change in air pressure that can rupture eardrums and even break bones in the ear.

### **Getting Hearing Aids**

Unless their onset of hearing loss was both rapid and severe, veterans of combat are no different than the civilian

population. For many it can take years before they become aware of or admit to a hearing loss. Unless their hearing loss was identified during a discharge physical, they will go through the same five- to seven-year denial period as others whose hearing is failing.

If it can be established that their hearing loss is service related, whether in war or in peacetime, it would most certainly be worthwhile to rely on the VA for hearing aids even if it involves traveling some distance. The cost of travel could be more than offset by the thousands saved by having top-quality hearing aids dispensed and periodically replaced at no cost by the VA.

A veteran should begin by becoming registered with the nearest VA clinic or hospital. When enrolling, discharge papers (a DD 214) must be presented and documentation of the previous year's income will be used as part of a means test to determine the eligibility and status of the applicant.

The VA dispenses high-end hearing aids from six different major manufacturers: Phonak, Starkey, Unitron, Siemens, Interton, and MicroTech. While taking the patient's preferences into consideration, the VA audiologist will determine what style and make of hearing aid will most effectively treat that patient's hearing loss.

After a hearing evaluation has been conducted, if it is determined that there is a degree of hearing loss that would benefit from hearing aids and assistive devices and the loss may have occurred as a result of military service, the veteran should contact the VA Regional Office to request a Compensation and Pension Exam (C&P). Once it is determined that the veteran is eligible then he or she qualifies not only for free hearing aids but for free neck loops, FM, or infrared listening devices, amplified telephones, pocket talkers and a myriad of other assistive listening products. If it is determined that the hearing loss is not service related, the veteran can take his or her audiogram to a private dispenser to purchase hearing aids.

If the vet is deemed ineligible but is convinced his or her hearing

*continued on page 26*

Welcome Veterans of Operation  
Enduring Freedom and  
Operation Iraqi Freedom

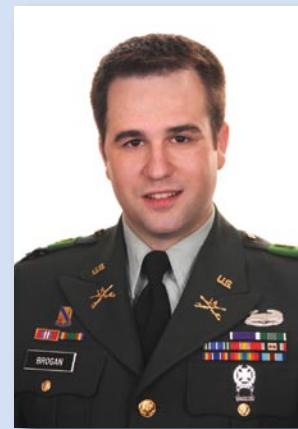
Go to [www.hearingloss.org](http://www.hearingloss.org).

- Find out about free membership in HLAA and complimentary registration for HLAA Convention 2010 in Milwaukee
- Learn more about HLAA's partnership with the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology to address the higher educational needs of veterans of recent conflicts.

## CPT Mark A. Brogan

A hero comes home from Operation Iraqi Freedom with a Purple Heart, a traumatic brain injury, and hearing loss. Where does that leave him? In the September/October 2009 issue of *Hearing Loss Magazine*, we profiled CPT Mark A. Brogan, U.S. Army (Ret.), a veteran's advocate and a commander in the Military Order of the Purple Heart, Chapter 346 in Knoxville, TN.

Download the article in pdf format at  
[www.hearingloss.org/veterans/index.asp](http://www.hearingloss.org/veterans/index.asp).



© Cindy Dyer

### The Price of War *from page 25*

loss is service related, there are appeal procedures in place and decisions to deny the benefit have been known to be reversed.

### Beyond Hearing Aids

In some unfortunate instances, whether their hearing loss is treated at a VA hospital or by a private hearing care provider, the care those vets get, like that of the general public, could possibly end with nothing more than the dispensing of hearing aids. That's simply not adequate. Many people with hearing loss need other knowledge and support to participate fully in society. Unfortunately for some, once they've been fitted with a pair of hearing aids that will probably both help and disappoint them, they're sent on their way, still not able to hear in many situations.

There are many capable, caring audiologists and hearing aid specialists who go out of their way to help people with their hearing loss. Dr. Gardey at the Albuquerque VA hospital is one of them. In addition to dispensing hearing aids, she's a strong proponent of the use of assistive technology to supplement hearing aids. Her exam room is fitted with a loop system and she has neck loops, infrared and FM devices available to demonstrate their use.

Her belief in the benefits of induction loops in their various forms is such that she e-mailed her counterparts in VA facilities throughout the country to remind them that neck

loops and other assistive listening devices are included on the VA's list of dispensable devices. She reports that the VA Distribution Center in Denver was inundated with requests from all over the country for neck loops when patients were told they were available, at no cost, to them.

Dr. Gardey also makes patients aware of other free services such as captioned telephone service and equipment such as amplified phones or alerting devices from the state's telecommunications distribution program, and of the local, nonprofit assistive devices retailer, ATS Resources.

Nationally recognized experts, Carren J. Stika, Ph.D., and Mark Ross, Ph.D., found in their study that less than a third of the nation's audiologists or hearing aid dispensers tell clients about assistive listening devices available to supplement their hearing aids. Fewer than half of the providers make certain their clients understand how the telecoil in their new hearing aids can provide better hearing on the phone or of its many other listening applications. Many hearing aid wearers don't even know they have a telecoil.

Although virtually all hearing aids dispensed by the National Health Service in Great Britain include telecoils, *Hearing Journal* recently put that figure at only 62 percent here in the United States. This problem is so prevalent in the United States that three states, Arizona, Florida and New York enacted a law mandating that hearing care providers in their state instruct clients in the applications and use of the telecoil.



## Chat with the Expert

Topic: "Audiology and Hearing Aid Benefit for Veterans"

Guest: Gene Bratt, Au.D.

Chief of Audiology and Speech Pathology Service at the  
Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)

Tennessee Valley Healthcare System, Nashville

January 20, 2010, 9 p.m. EST



Gene Bratt, Au.D.


Go to [www.hearingloss.org](http://www.hearingloss.org) and click on "Webchats" and follow the instructions.

A 2005 HLAA online survey found that more than 80 percent of participants had telecoils in their hearing aids, proof that those "in the know" believe in and use this important feature in hearing aids.

### Take Charge

The percentage of people with hearing loss—17 percent of the public and nearly three times that for recently returning vets—is increasing at a dramatically faster rate than the general population due to baby boomers coming to terms with the damage from their noisy youth and lifestyle. These people need help and if they're not getting enough of it from their hearing care provider they need to take the initiative and search out all the products and services available to them to ease the burden of dealing with hearing loss.

Hearing assistive technology and services (often at no cost) are out there to help hard of hearing veterans take charge of their hearing loss but it's up to them to seek them out. If you

(or someone close to you) are a vet with questionable hearing—it's time to "move out." But, instead of it being a search and destroy mission, this one is search and enjoy. 

*Steve Frazier is the New Mexico State Coordinator for the Hearing Loss Association of America®, chair of the Loop New Mexico initiative and sits on the hearing aid licensing board in New Mexico. As an advocate working for increased awareness of and concern for both hearing loss and noise pollution, his articles on these topics have appeared in national publications such as Advance for Audiologists and the Christian Science Monitor and on the web sites of the Noise Pollution Clearinghouse, the Right to*

© Cindy Dyer



*Quiet Society and others. For more information on induction loop and telecoil technology visit the website of Loop New Mexico at [www.HLAAbq.com/LoopNM.html](http://www.HLAAbq.com/LoopNM.html).*

## The Hearing Pill

According to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, the military may someday have a pill to ward off or repair combat or noise inflicted hearing loss. Navy Captain Ben J. Balough, who is an otolaryngologist at the Naval Medical Center San Diego, is in charge of research on a "hearing pill"—a special formulation of N-acetylcysteine (NAC) on which the Navy conducted a double-blind, placebo-controlled clinical trial in 2004.

The trial found that, when compared to a placebo, NAC reduced permanent hearing loss in the ear closest to the source of acoustic trauma. NAC has also shown potential in reversing other symptoms of acoustic trauma such as tinnitus and balance disorders. The day when you can take a pill to ward off hearing loss hasn't arrived yet, and veterans in ever-increasing numbers continue to suffer the results of the sounds of war.

## What is a Telecoil?

By Steven O. Frazier

**A** telecoil is a small coiled wire inside a hearing aid that picks up the magnetic signal from such devices as a telephone earpiece, an induction loop surrounding a room, or a neck loop. The hearing aid is equipped with a switch that can turn off the microphone and activate the telecoil.

That little coil of wire turns the silent magnetic signal from the phone or other source into sound that is corrected for that person's individual hearing loss via the digital technology in the hearing aid. This simple coil makes it possible to hear a caller when the microphone on the hearing aid won't always do so.

Loud TV volume is one of the biggest complaints people have about hard of hearing people. This technology makes it possible to "loop" a chair or a room, plug the loop and its amplifier into a TV and the individual with hearing loss can listen using the telecoils in his or her hearing aids and understand every word without driving others from the room due to the loud volume.

Loops can take other forms. Neck loops can be plugged into cell phones for hands-free driving with sound going to both ears or into iPods and other devices. This writer plugs his neck loop into the TVs on the exercise machines at the gym and his hearing aids are his "headset." There are infrared and FM systems in theaters, concert halls and churches that can, with the use of a neck loop, be adapted to broadcast to telecoils.