

# ‘I Can Feel Again’

## An Iraq War veteran helps homeless veterans through the nonprofit organization Operation Good to Go

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A member of VFW Post 10165 in Diamond Springs, Calif., works for homeless veterans in his community and around the country. He’s doing what he can to make sure his fellow brothers and sisters are “good to go.”

Tracey DiVita, a Marine Corps veteran who served from 1999 to 2003, got the idea to help homeless veterans when he came across a man living on the streets who asked for money.

“I usually don’t carry cash,” DiVita said. “But, that day I just so happened to have \$10, so I gave it to him.”

A couple of days later, he ran into the same man again. This time, DiVita had two bags of cans and bottles for recycling. He offered the man the bags, but the man refused to take them.

“I offered it to him, but he said he had a hernia,” DiVita said. “I got so mad because he was just full of it. I watched him swing a black garbage bag over his shoulder. I just thought that his whole life was in that garbage bag.”

That gave him, what he said was, a “light bulb moment” — he thought of a “sea bag,” or duffle bag.

“I thought about when I was in combat and in training during my entire military career, my whole life was in a sea bag,” DiVita said. “I thought about all the things people need to survive in the field. And, that’s where homeless people are living.”

### ‘BRAND NEW GEAR IS MOTIVATING’

DiVita then started thinking about the items people need to survive — food, clothing, a tent, a sleeping bag and toiletries — and that gave him the inspiration for his project, Operation

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Good to Go. Those items would end up in the sea bags DiVita would eventually give to homeless veterans through the program.

“I have 100 percent disability from the VA, so I started taking some of that money and putting it toward brand new gear for homeless people,” DiVita said. “To me, brand new gear is motivating. I don’t give out used stuff. I pride myself in only giving these people brand new gear, because I’m a Marine, and Marines are motivators.”

Starting out, he would spend about \$125 per bag. After a while, DiVita started taking the homeless veterans to lunch to talk with them.

“I would learn their personal sizes, and that’s when bags started costing about \$200,” DiVita said. “I wanted to buy each of them pants and shirts that would fit.”

Though it has only been two years since the start of the program, Operation Good to Go has already been recognized by Congress. This past spring, DiVita received the Certificate of Special Congressional Recognition from U.S. Rep. Tom McClintock (R-Calif.).

“I’m just really proud of what I have been able to do for these [veterans],” DiVita said. “It just shows what one person can do when they follow their heart. It’s been very humbling.”

#### **‘WE WERE FORGOTTEN ABOUT’**

Before starting Operation Good to Go two years ago, DiVita served with the 1st Tank Battalion, a part of the 1st Marine Division, during the 2003 Iraq invasion. He said Operation Good to Go stemmed from his deployment to Iraq.

“We all had our rock star moment during the time,” DiVita said. “But, I feel like we were just kicked to the curb and forgotten about.”

After returning home, he became a deputy sheriff for the El Dorado County (Calif.) Sheriff’s Department. He worked there (just east of Sacramento) for almost a decade, but retired due to issues with his post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

“I fell hard,” DiVita said. “I just kept asking to get through each day. I just wanted to die, but I also wanted to get through each day. It was so exhausting.”

DiVita said he hit “rock bottom” when he learned that his friend, a former Marine he served with, committed suicide. DiVita said his friend left behind two daughters.

“It’s as if he committed suicide for me, too,” DiVita said. “It just punched me in the stomach. It woke me up, and I decided that enough was enough. I just started thinking that I have to do something, but I didn’t know what to do.”

That is until he started Operation Good to Go, with DiVita working as a one-man organization. His board of directors consists of family members.

“I don’t need money for this,” DiVita said. “I don’t need gas money to give a homeless veteran in Sacramento a bag. I just love helping my brothers and sisters. I can feel again.”

### **HELPING MORE THAN HOMELESS VETERANS**

When the organization first started, Operation Good to Go didn’t have a nonprofit status. But DiVita said people saw what he was doing and started donating money and Walmart gift cards to pitch in. He paid for most of the expenses during the first year of operation.

Now, Operation Good to Go is a nonprofit organization that had raised more than \$16,000 and helped about 80 homeless veterans and veteran families as of October.

“Now that we have a nonprofit status, we can do fundraisers,” DiVita said. “When that happened, that’s when things started going above and beyond.”

DiVita said the vision he has for the future of Operation Good to Go is to be an organization that not only helps veterans but also their families.

“I knew I could do the good-to-go bags, but it also was a bridge to doing another part that I love,” DiVita said. “A lot of people know about the veterans that die each day from suicide. But what isn’t talked about is the family and kids that are left behind.”

DiVita said that when more money for the organization started coming in, he wanted to do something special for the 9-year-old daughter of a veteran who committed suicide when the girl was 2 years old.

“She’s doing really well in school and loves softball, so I got her a pitching and batting coach, brand new softball gear and tickets to a baseball game,” DiVita said. “That’s the kind of thing that I want to do — give back to these families. We have to do something nice for them, too.”

### **‘I’M TRYING TO TACKLE EVERYTHING’**

DiVita believes the main problem with veteran suicides and homelessness stems from their discharge from service. He said “50 percent” of the problem is how the military treats its troops when they leave the service.

“They kick you to the curb after you’re finished,” DiVita said. “We need to find a cure for separation. That is why I’m doing this. Some veterans and families have become tired of trying to get help from [the government], so I’m trying to help who I can.”

DiVita had his own problems with VA. He said he had claims of “well-documented action”

that caused his disabilities, including PTSD.

However, it still took 14 years for DiVita to finally receive his 100 percent disability rating. He said the process was “frustrating.”

“The VA holds a lot of these [veterans] in never-ending holding patterns,” DiVita said. “A lot of them have to wait while they, obviously, need help right now.”

DiVita said he is “very proud” that he is helping veterans and their families in El Dorado County and around the country “when others won’t.”

“I’m just trying to grab every life experience I’ve ever had, and I’m just trying to tackle everything,” DiVita said. “Like they say: If you lead, they follow.”

*This article is featured in the January 2019 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Dave Spiva](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.*