

'I Didn't Back Down'

After 25 years of VA claim denials, Navy veteran Crista Benner turned to a VFW Service Officer for help

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From the age of 15, Crista Benner, now 57, was set on a career in the military.

"I knew I wanted to join the Navy. It wasn't a matter of if but when," she said. "I graduated from high school, and shortly after, I was on my first plane ride to boot camp."

Working as a hydraulic technician during her first tour in Jacksonville, Florida, Benner fell from an aircraft she was servicing and injured her back.

"It felt like an electric shock went through me. My shipmate asked if I was okay. I said I was, but I wasn't ... I really wasn't," she said. "I had damaged three vertebrae, but I wouldn't know that until years later."

Despite the injury, Benner continued serving and later returned to Jacksonville for her third tour. After finishing up work on a helicopter, she began climbing down the aircraft and lost her footing.

"The next thing I know, I'm going down headfirst," she recalled.

Partially landing on the base of her skull, Benner's headgear protected her head, but her back took a hard hit.

"Since those two falls, I've seen several doctors, both civilian and military, and had several shots in my back and feet," she said.

Because of her injuries, Benner is unable to take part in activities she once enjoyed, like camping, riding a bike and lifting heavy weights. Nearly three decades ago, she began the claims process by herself, compiling all her records and submitting forms on her own.

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“I didn’t understand a thing about the process, and no one explained anything to me. I thought I was supposed to do everything myself,” she said. “I may have had all the evidence, but I didn’t have anyone to explain the system to me. That’s where it’s imperative to have a service officer.”

Unaware that she was represented by a service officer from another organization, Benner persevered alone for years.

“I didn’t even know I had a service officer. No one contacted me. For 18 years, I was left to my own devices,” she said. “I can’t remember how many denials I had. Every time I saw a VA letter in my P.O. box, my heart sank. But I would start over again. Not a day went by when I would say, ‘I don’t think I’m going to win this.’”

In 2016, Benner moved to Washington where she met VFW Service Officer Joe Riener. He explained what documentation was needed, how her case would develop and how it would move through the system. Benner gathered the necessary paperwork, and Riener prepared her claim. After 25 years, Benner earned her hard-fought victory.

“In 2018, I finally received a 30% rating. Now I’m at 90%. When Mr. Riener called me at work with news, I collapsed. The guys in the truck shop thought something was seriously wrong!” she said. “But they were sobs of joy and relief. I always knew I was right, and finally, I had validation.”

Benner encourages other veterans to work with a service officer, knowing the difference they make.

“A good one is worth their weight in gold,” she said. “Joe Riener is my ‘rockstar.’ I tell him every time I see him.”

She also advises, “Don’t give up. Even though I went through 25 years of denials, I knew I was right, and I didn’t back down.”

Although it was a struggle to receive her earned benefits, today, Benner is in a good place. In large part, she credits her fellow veterans for that.

“I loved my time in the Navy and would do it all over again. I’d like to send a huge shoutout to my shipmates. We were young, brave and crazy. We were family,” she said. “I can’t imagine who I would be without them.”

[Learn more about the VFW's National Veterans Service \(NVS\) program.](#)