



Marine Sergeant Major Jim Kuiken with Freedom

TANYA DVORAK/K9S FOR WARRIORS

BY K.C. BAKER [@kcbaker77777](#) • originally published [04/15/2015 AT 12:10 PM ET](#)

For more than a year, retired Marine Jim Kuiken spent his days sitting alone in a chair in his living room, barely able to function.

“I would get up out of the chair maybe twice a day to go get food,” the highly decorated former Marine Sergeant Major tells PEOPLE. “I would be in my PJs for days at a time. I didn’t interact with other people. I didn’t even interact with my family. I was in a real bad place.”

Like thousands of veterans, Kuiken has suffered silently for decades from PTSD, which slowly eroded away his life, preventing him from going out, keeping in touch with family and friends – or even talking to his wife, Celia, and their children.

Kuiken saw plenty of combat during his 30 years of military service in six war zones, including Iraq and Afghanistan. He was severely wounded several times; one explosion left him with a traumatic brain injury (TBI). He also sustained lung and heart damage, spinal injuries and hearing loss, among other health issues.

“I was in bad shape,” he says.

After retiring from the military in 2003 and later from his job at the Department of Homeland Security in 2009, his PTSD only got worse.

“It was progressive,” he says. “It really became noticeable after I returned home from the Gulf War in 1991. It got to the point where I couldn’t get up the energy to get out of my chair and go get food. Sometimes I would go a day here and there without eating.

If someone called or came to the door, he says, he would fly into a rage. “I didn’t want anyone around me or coming at me. It was a hard downward spiral.”

Kuiken says he has suffered from PTSD since 1977, but like so many other veterans, he felt like he would be “weak” if he sought help, especially since he had been such a high-ranking military man.

“I had been the Sergeant Major of Marine Forces Pacific, the highest Combatant Command in the Marines, overseeing two thirds of the combat capabilities of the Marine Corps,” he says. “I had also been a president and CEO in the corporate world and a former candidate for United States Congress.”

“I knew I had posttraumatic stress,” he says. “But I felt like I was strong enough to manage it on my own. I thought that I didn’t need any coddling or help from anyone else.”

“The problem was, I was sinking further into the chair.”

When he was told that he had a serious case of PTSD, “I realized that I had been pretty much sitting in my chair the whole time since I retired.”

Tired of living in isolation, Kuiken started searching online last spring for a canine companion, thinking that might help him to overcome his PTSD.

One organization kept popping up: [K9s for Warriors](#), which pairs specially trained service dogs, mostly rescue animals, with active-duty troops and post-9/11 veterans suffering from PTSD, helping them transition back to civilian life – at no cost to them.

The program has worked miracles for Kuiken, who applied to the program and began his training in January. “I have a service dog now, which is very different than a companion dog,” he says. “He has significantly changed my

life,” he adds.



Marine Sergeant Major Jim Kuiken

JANINE CAMPBELL/JANINE MARIE PHOTOGRAPHY

Freedom for Kuiken

On the second day of the program, in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida (K9s for Warriors is moving to a new state-of-the-art facility in Nocatee, Florida, at the end of April), Kuiken was introduced to an affectionate black lab named Freedom.

“I instantly loved him,” he says. “He came out and licked my hand and sat next to me while I put the leash on him. He lifted his face to me and put his paws on my legs. Here I am, a 30-year, multiple-war Marine Corps vet, and he melted me with just one look.”

He was further touched when he learned that [K9s for Warriors](#) rescued Freedom from a shelter in Kentucky. “Freedom was within a week or two from being put down before they pulled him out of there,” says Kuiken. “K9s for Warriors saved his life, and without him, I’d still be in a really bad place right now.”

During his three-week training program, he saw firsthand how Freedom could help him cope with his PTSD. “My triggers are helicopters and loud sharp noises,” he says. “Unlike a lot of PTSD sufferers, my reactions are not to try to avoid those triggers. Whenever I hear a loud noise, I turn and get instantly aggressive in that direction.”

From the moment that first happened, Freedom leaned into him and put his paws on his lap, letting him know he was there for him.

“At first I thought he was being a pest, but then I felt bad and started paying attention to him,” he says. “He was distracting me. Every time he would see me react, he would do something to bring me back and the rage would subside.”

During his training, K9s for Warriors exposed him to many different situations to help him cope with his PTSD.

“The trainers there, who are experienced combat vets, know what you are going through,” he says. “They know the choke points and watch for them.

They pull you out or walk you through it to help you navigate that situation.”

They were there for him during his first trip to a mall, which he dreaded. “I had a complete meltdown there,” he says.

“I don’t like anything moving around above or behind me. I didn’t realize it, but I was hugging the wall and staying under the top level. As we walked into the open, I felt exposed. I couldn’t do it.”

He huddled in a doorway with Freedom. “He put his paw in my lap and let me hug him,” he says. “The staff took me outside let me breathe a little bit. Then we went back in.”

Over time, outings like this got easier, he says. “By the end of it I was able to go to the mall fairly easily, which I hadn’t done in a long time.”

A New Life

Life has changed dramatically for Kuiken, now that he is back at home in Virginia with Freedom, who goes everywhere he goes.

“I actually talk to people in the house, which I never did,” he says. “I go shopping with my family and walk around the mall. We go out to dinner.

Holding back tears, he says, “It’s overwhelming to have my life back.”

More than anything, he wants to help others overcome their PTSD. “If I can step out and say I need help, then I am hoping others can, too,” he says.

Bayer is trying to pair more vets with service dogs. Through May 31, when

dog owners purchase K9 Advantix II ®, Bayer will donate \$1 per package – up to \$150,000 – to K9s for Warriors.

RELATED: *True Blood's* Carrie Preston: ‘How I Spoil My Dog, Chumley’

AROUND THE WEB



SCRIBOL

Someone Buried This Dog Alive, But They Didn't Bank on Her Being...



DIGITAL TRENDS

Absolutely Awesome Camper May Be the Coolest Thing on the Road



LOST WALDO

Houses Built in Seriously Odd Places