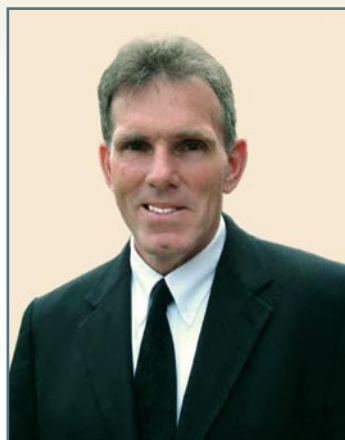


AN INTERVIEW WITH

Charlie Morris

By Kimberly Paetzold, Editor



Charlie Morris grew up in Ohio with the ambition to join the Navy and learn a trade. He married in 1966 and three years later fulfilled his dream of joining the Navy. After completing his training, Charlie was stationed in Vietnam as part of the Navy Seawolves. Eventually he became part of the Sealords, a group that served as a pickup/delivery service to and from Seawolf detachments in the field.

On January 9th, 1971 Charlie was flying a mission in the Mekong Delta with two rookie helicopter pilots. Flying fast and low, the helicopter followed a canal. As they passed a village they noticed something odd – it was empty. All of a sudden they heard small arms fire and, as the crew chief, Charlie tried to locate the source. As he swung outside the door to get a better look, Charlie saw a lone man in the doorway of a hut pointing an AK-47 at the helicopter. As he swung back, he realized he was hit.

Charlie was transported to Long Binh and was prepped for neurosurgery. The result of his injuries included right side paralysis with the prognosis to spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair. After his Navy discharge, through hard work and determination Charlie was able to overcome and manage his physical disabilities and eventually was accepted into Kent State University in 1972. He earned his college degree in 1977.

Charlie became a High School Teacher and taught marketing education for 18 years. Over the years, he endured not only the physical and cognitive issues associated with traumatic brain injury, but also learned to cope with a severe case of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). He retired from teaching in 1995 and

with the help of the VA's Vocational Rehabilitation department, purchased a professional embroidery machine and began a small business. That business was sold in 2006, and Charlie now works as a volunteer splitting his time between the VA helping PTSD survivors and as a counselor for brain injury survivors. In 2006, he published the book *Just A Regular Guy*, based on his life story, and professionally speaks to PTSD Veteran Groups, Brain Injury Groups and TBI Associations.



Charlie (left) and his son Matt

Hello Charlie, Thank you for interviewing with RainbowVisions. Could you tell us a little about your gunshot wound incurred during the Vietnam War?

It's interesting because I consider everything from the time I was shot until I went home to be a miracle and a blessing. I still get chills thinking about it. I was shot by enemy fire—the bullet from an AK-47 went in behind my ear and came out on the top of my skull. I was wearing a plastic jet jockey helmet and the bullet made a small hole in the back and completely shattered the top where it exited. I actually fell out of the helicopter after I was hit, with only a safety strap preventing me from falling to the ground. I hung outside the helicopter the entire way back to the firebase.

*...the bullet...
went in behind my ear
and came out on the
top of my skull.*

Even though the doctors doubted me, I remember the moments right after I was shot. I knew I was hurt bad and I thought that if I closed my eyes that I would die. So I did all I could to remain conscious and awake. When they finally got me to the mobile surgical hospital at Long Binh I was fortunate that there was a brain surgeon stationed there, as I never would have survived the long flight to Japan. The left side of my head now has a plastic plate instead of skull bone. There were so many shell and bone fragments, the surgeon decided to remove a section of the brain instead of removing the fragments.

What were some of the problems that you suffered after you came home?

Aside from working very hard to speak and walk again, the most difficult problem I faced over the years was coping with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). It deeply affected my life. I still suffer with bouts of depression, but with counseling and training I can identify the signs and symptoms before it takes hold. What I did discover going through all of this is that individuals with brain injury and PTSD can get a lot of outside help, but true recovery is up to the individual.

One therapist told me, *“Charlie you’re probably the only person I’ve ever ran into that PTSD counseling made a big difference.”* When someone said I wasn’t capable of doing something, I would get angry and do whatever I could to prove them wrong. I wanted to live a normal life. I didn’t want people to see my disabilities—I just wanted them to see Charlie Morris. In the end, I didn’t turn out to be like everybody else, I actually achieved more than the average person because I did not want my injury to define who I was.

How did you overcome the disabling effects of PTSD?

I admitted myself into a VA hospital for mental health counseling. The PTSD caused me to have terrible sleep problems and anger issues. The combination of the two led to some severe depression. To give you an idea of how anger affects individuals with PTSD, let’s assume the average individual walks around with anger level at about 1 (we’ll use a scale of 1 being peaceful and 10 being extremely angry). Then let’s say that individual gets really worked up. They may reach an anger level at about 5. The veteran with acute PTSD starts out with an anger level at about 7 or 8—that’s how they are without being provoked. You can imagine that even small issues can set an individual like that off on a tirade. Then when you add the issues associated with TBI, such as disinhibition, you have someone with real problems. My



Charlie playing tennis



Charlie playing golf

PTSD training on anger management really has helped me. Holding back the issues associated with this affliction isn’t good.

Did you have cognitive therapy to help you cope with the effects of brain injury?

I didn’t have formal TBI cognitive rehabilitation, but I did get support from the VA. I wanted to attend college and only had reading skills at a 7th grade level because of my injuries. A therapist from the VA worked with me to get my skills up to college level so I could apply. We worked hard and I did get into college. My four-year degree was finished in 1977, and I began working as a teacher.

You just recently celebrated your 40th wedding anniversary and your wife, Fran, has been a wonderful support to you.

How did she cope with everything over the years?

I have a PTSD joke I like to tell—When people say, *“Your wife is really something - she must really love you!”* I say, *“Either that or she’s just crazier than me.”*

From the very beginning, Fran was very supportive. In fact, the more I accomplished, the more she expected. Some of our fights were because she would expect things I truly could not do. She



Pictured above: Charlie (right) and his wife Fran on their 40th wedding anniversary.

once when I was working on her car and I needed an extra pair of hands since I only have the use of one arm. She was busy and got really indignant about helping me. I became angry, and finally she remembered that I had only one working arm and really did need her help. It's nice; people close to you look at you the way you want to be seen.

You mentioned that your faith has given you a lot of strength and helped you in your recovery. Can you elaborate?

You look at survivors and wonder why they can't see that it takes faith to recover. When I was in combat in Vietnam, I lost a lot of my belief because of the things I witnessed. Those who lose all faith are all alone. They have nothing to hold on to. If you don't have faith in something or somebody, you don't have anything. I have a speech topic where I speak on what I feel are the four keys to success. Number one is faith, second is family, third is friends, and fourth is fortitude. As nice as it is to have faith, family and friends, when you are disabled, fortitude also becomes a key factor to success. You have to be able to go out there and risk making a fool out of yourself. When you are a TBI survivor, you have to realize that it's OK to fail. You aren't going to succeed at everything. As I get older I realize that we need to relish and celebrate the small successes—not just the big ones. We always focus on achieving big and lofty goals and never give ourselves credit for the daily triumphs because they seem small. As Helen Keller said, *"I yearn to accomplish great tasks, but realize that small tasks accomplished are great."*

If we can take little baby steps in our recovery and don't only concentrate on taking big leaps, then we can feel satisfied and realize that there is much we can do. Another quote by Helen Keller is *"I am thankful for my handicaps—through them*

I found my work, myself and my God."

We can get past the notion that the disability is *"The most terrible thing that has happened to me"* and instead realize that we have the opportunity to change direction.

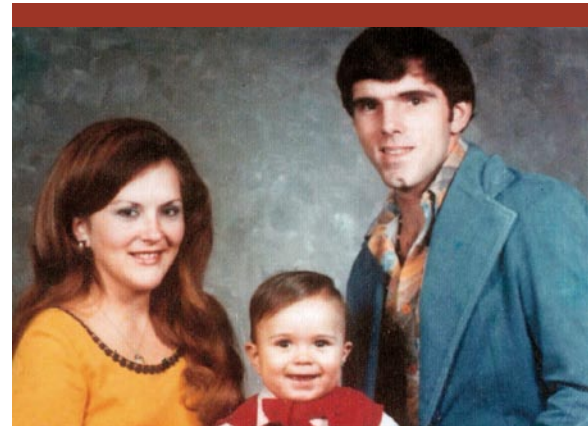
I once heard a man speak and he said, *"I have a BRAIN injury, not a MIND injury."* Our mind still works and our job as survivors is to find a way to tap into it. Maybe you won't be able to go back to college, but perhaps you are artistic or you have some special ability. Perhaps it's listening and volunteering to help others. I have to admit, I get angry with myself that I didn't get involved with helping others suffering with PTSD

Take little baby steps in recovery and don't only concentrate on taking big leaps.

and TBI earlier. I always thought, even when I was teaching school, that maybe I was in the wrong profession. I always felt that maybe I should put my energies into helping other wounded veterans, to help them see the benefits they can bring to their local communities. Hopefully now I am finally making this a reality.

Charlie, you are so positive and energetic, I think that's why you've been so successful. How can other survivors reach your level of achievement?

It's not a special quality that only I have. It's in ALL of us. There is nothing so special about me. Dig inside yourself and look for your own personal successes. Don't constantly look at others and compare. Realize that failures are inevitable. If I would have taken the attitude, *"I got a*



CHARLIE'S BIO

FAMILY: Charlie Morris (59) is married to Fran, his wife of 40 years. He has one son—Matthew (33).

HOBBIES: Charlie loves the outdoors & sports: Golf, tennis, camping and fishing. He also enjoys cruising in his vintage Ford Torino.

PETS: The family has a Britney Spaniel (5 years old) named Winstin.

brain injury so now I'm not going to try anymore" where would that have gotten me? That attitude doesn't make sense to me. People shouldn't spend too much time blaming others, their situation and their life status. You can't change things unless you change yourself.

Charlie, in your experience volunteering to help TBI & PTSD survivors, how does a dual diagnosis affect individuals trying to recover?

Those attempting to help TBI survivors must take it slow and make sure they truly understand what the therapy and groups are trying to accomplish. Due to memory loss, that becomes difficult and reinforcement is necessary. Even those suffering with PTSD can have memory

loss, making group sessions and therapy difficult. I am currently involved with groups of veterans that have PTSD and we are using the PTSD manuals to also help TBI patients. We want to help them with their relationships and coping abilities. There are a lot of veterans out there with

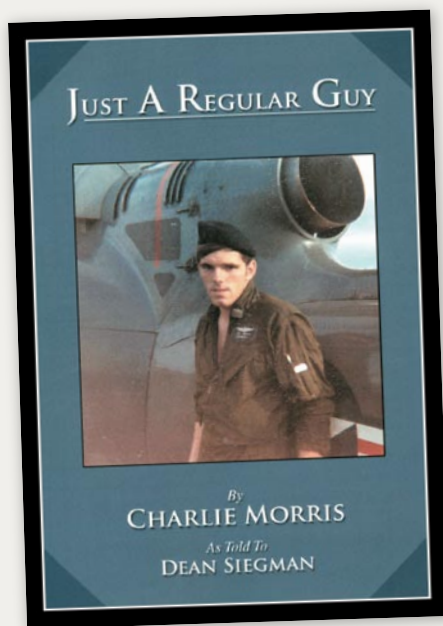
coping issues, and they want to become successful in overcoming them.

The one thing I have found to be constant is that survivors can have all the help in the world, but until they decide to help themselves, there is nothing that really can be done. PTSD and TBI will not go

away. Just like someone with alcoholism, they will always have to deal with it. But if you can adapt and use the coping tools available, when problems arise you will be in control and succeed! ♦

"An inspiring survivor story!"

JUST A REGULAR GUY



The story of Charlie Morris growing up in Ohio with the ambition to join the Navy, learn a trade and raise a family. His life took an abrupt turn when, in 1971 while serving in Vietnam, he was hit by enemy sniper fire while on a helicopter mission in the Mekong Delta. The result of his gunshot wound in the head was right side paralysis with the prognosis to spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair. Through hard work and determination Charlie was able to overcome his disabilities and eventually earn his college degree. Despite his physical limitations his desire was to fit into normal society without standing out from the crowd. His belief that life's hardest battles were behind him was shattered when the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) invaded his life. This book is a heart-warming story of a traumatic brain injury and PTSD survivor that managed to flourish and help others along the way.

"One of the people I admire most is Helen Keller. My favorite quote from her is one of her most famous: *When one door of happiness closes, another opens; but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one which had been opened for us.*" – Charlie Morris

"Charlie is quite a person. How he changed from someone who really hated school to becoming a High School Teacher AFTER incurring his injury is amazing. I think the Navy gave him purpose and pride."

"It has been interesting to see the reaction from readers who personally know Charlie. It's like a light bulb went off—Charlie does have a disability. It was such a shock for people to read this story because he never outwardly displayed that he was having any difficulties." – Dean Siegman, Writer

Dean Siegman currently works as a free-lance writer. He began working with Charlie on the book "Just A Regular Guy" in 2005. He conducted interviews with Charlie for approximately three months and spent nine months compiling the information. The book was published in May of 2006.



Dean Siegman