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# Jim’s story

**Step One:** We admitted we are powerless over alcohol—that our lives have become unmanageable

**We have to surrender to win**

I was born into a military family, and we moved every three years, as my father was reassigned to various bases in various countries. My father was a keen sportsman, who passed on his passion for sports to my brother and me. One continuing theme from my earliest memories was expressed in these mottos: ‘Never quit’, ‘Never give Up’, and ‘Winning is the goal’.

In my teens, I discovered the fun of a few beers after a game. I remember how I loosened up after a few beers, losing my shyness and gaining confidence. I never felt I was one of the boys until I had a few beers in me, and then I could lead the way.

In 1969, I was living in California with my parents and working as a lineman for Southern Cal Edison. My dad and I would attend professional football and basketball games in Los Angeles. One week I would buy the tickets, and he would buy the booze; and the next week he would buy the tickets, and I would buy the booze. So it went until I joined the US Air Force to avoid being drafted by the Army or Marines for the Vietnam War.

Basic training was at Lackland AFB, Texas, and during this period we had very little free time—so not much drinking took place—and that did not seem to bother me. I attended a briefing by a very special group and I decided that was what I wanted to do. I told my dad that I was going to join this group, and he said I would never qualify as the training was too tough. I later learned in AA that the best way to get an alcoholic to do something is to tell him he can’t—and, boy, did it work! Those earlier thoughts my dad planted in my head—‘Never quit’, Never give up’, …—played over and over in my head throughout the training. The training was very hard—both physically and mentally—but over the year and a half of training, there was plenty of drinking time, and this was a drinking man’s paradise. I worked really hard through various schools and drank just as hard to deal with the stress and fear as well as to help soothe the aches and pains. I graduated training in March 1970, and my first assignment was Da Nang, Vietnam. Full of youthful confidence and military bravado, I arrived at Da Nang ready to take on the world.

I soon found the section bar and opened up an account. I did not then know that I was about to enter a world of absolute fear and ego that only vast amounts of alcohol could hope to handle. The next 14 months were filled with combat rescue missions and trips to the club or bar. I would sleep off the booze and go do whatever was on the schedule for that day. Never once did I have the courage to just quit because I was always worried about what others would think of me—and heaven forbid I should quit and the guy that took my place didn’t come back. I would not have been able to live with that, so I flew the missions scared to death and drank the fear away.

I left Vietnam in late 1971, enjoying a short stopover in the States before heading to England for my new assignment. Lovely Suffolk: rural countryside; quiet and no chance of getting into trouble.

I met my future wife in the mess on Hallowe’en. After a few drinks together, I took her to my section party, and that began a lifelong relationship that is still thriving today: through no fault of my own, my marriage has lasted 43 years. We were married in September 1972. She had three children from a previous marriage, and overnight I became a husband and a father with absolutely no understanding of what either was or should be. Three years later, in 1975, I attended my first AA meeting in Ipswich Town. I never got a sponsor and never practised the programme but managed to stay dry for three years. Notice I said ‘dry’ not ‘sober’: today, I know the difference. After three years of not drinking alcohol, feeling physically and mentally better and cutting down on the number of AA meetings I attended because I clearly did not need them, so I thought, I decided that I could have a drink. All went well initially, but eventually I was drunk every time I drank and caused a lot of pain in my family. I had adopted all three children, and we had a son between us; they were suffering the effects of having an alcoholic father. They never knew what state I would be in if I was home, so they never brought their friends around. They were yelled at for things they didn’t do and did not get the help they asked for from me, because I wanted to drink, and they were in the way.

I was to bounce in and out of AA three more times between 1980 and 2009. Each time I would last a little longer, and each time I believed I could do it on my own. No Sponsor, no programme, and no sobriety: just dry.

Finally, in July 2009, after 9 years of being back out drinking, I was arrested for drink -driving and dangerous driving and was taken to Bedford Police Station, where I was kept overnight. I awoke in the morning and simply said to myself and my God as I understand Him today: ‘I can’t do this anymore’. I left the police station and went back to AA. It was the only place where the people told me to ‘keep coming back’.

This time I acquired a sponsor and did the best I could at working the Steps and living the programme; I believe I am ‘sober’ today—not ‘dry’. I have a peace within me that I had never experienced before. While working the Steps, it came to me that throughout my life all the people around me from parents to sports coaches and managers to military leaders and close friends before AA had never given me the idea that it is OK to surrender, to quit.

All my childhood my parents encouraged me to work harder, keep trying, don’t quit. My sports coaches and managers never gave me the impression that it was OK to let the other team win. In my 26 years in the Air Force—from Vietnam, Granada, Panama, the First Gulf War, and Bosnia—not one leader or commander ever told us to surrender or let the other side win today. I took every course the military offered me in 26 years, and not one of them taught how to surrender: the only time surrender was mentioned, the advice was: ‘Don’t Do It!!!’

It is not surprising, therefore, that this was the one thing I could not do when I came to AA, at least in the beginning. I could not understand the paradox of the slogan: ‘**we have to surrender to win.**’ The book *Alcoholics Anonymous* says: ‘we have ceased fighting anything or anyone’.

Two years into this sober period, I was walking up the stairs in my office building when it hit me to just stop fighting: give up, surrender. It was the most freeing moment of my life.

Today I have just over 6 years of real sobriety, and as a result I have my family in my life, a fantastic sponsor, and true friends in and out of AA. I do the best I can to live this programme one day at a time. Every morning I surrender my will and my life to my God as I understand Him. I ask Him for guidance throughout the day and check in with Him in the evening to see how the day has gone, looking for that balance in life that only comes when we practise these principles in all our affairs.