

## **Hearing Loss, Tinnitus and Secondary Conditions**

**Brett Valette, Ph.D.**

I was probably fourteen years old when I started shooting my 12 gauge Montgomery Wards Western Field shotgun without ear protection. Four months out of every year I shot my gun. In the fall up in the Pennsylvania corn fields hunting pheasants with my Dad, and deer in November on the Fort Meade Army post in Arundel, Maryland. I hunted squirrels in the nearby woods and shot beer bottles and soda cans that were discarded in secret hideaways by the local farmers and teenagers. Nobody wore ear protection back then.

I first heard the faint ringing when I was about twenty two. It was September, a quiet fall day in a tree stand hunting deer with my bow and arrow. The forest was silent, except for a few pesky squirrels hiding nuts in the leaves. It seemed like it was suddenly there...inside my head...the same kind of ringing that was usually temporary after a day of shooting my guns. I'm 59 years old now, and the ringing is still there. Luckily my tinnitus is mild; a soft constant 'teapot whistle.' I do find that the 'whistle' increases in tone and volume when I'm stressed. Or if I take aspirin. Or after a couple glasses of red wine. And I also notice that it decreases in tone and volume when I meditate and calm my mind.

Getting blasted with mortars, IED explosions, repetitive rifle fire, is much more impactful on your hearing than what I experienced. Mild TBI and nerve damage can also cause tinnitus. Some Vets have described their tinnitus as a 'roar' or 'crackling, static sound' or 'a high pitched whistle.' Some have even said, they hear "music", or "a radio playing in the background."

Regardless of what caused your tinnitus or hearing loss, this condition can negatively impact your life.

Tinnitus is the most claimed disability in the VA system. Veterans have filed almost 160,000 claims for tinnitus just in 2015. However, tinnitus can and does cause other *secondary conditions*. Secondary conditions that can be service connected.

Hearing loss and Tinnitus can negatively affect your life and cause insomnia, difficulty with concentration, poor work or school performance, irritability, anxiety, and depression. If you have service connection for tinnitus or hearing loss, then all of these *secondary conditions* may be service connected and rated.

The most common diagnosis that can be service connected and rated is ‘Mood Disorder secondary to a medical condition.’ This means that your service connected medical condition (tinnitus or hearing loss) is causing a mood disorder; depression. The VA generally accepts this diagnosis. And, it is a separate condition that can be rated, and adds to your total combined rating. You do not need to have any other mental health condition; all you need is current service connected tinnitus or hearing loss.

If you have service connected tinnitus or hearing loss, and it makes you feel sad, depressed, irritable, or anxious...then you could qualify for a secondary service condition.

I can help you with a diagnosis and the DBQ for the VA.

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