



FROM THE WIP

February 15, 2010

Veteran Suicides: *The Toll of Service and Search for Answers*



by Melissa Hahn
- USA -

"The one thing you can never ask yourself is 'why', because with suicide there is never an answer." Though my 83 year-old grandmother's advice rings true, the question haunts me nonetheless: why did my cousin Kevin, a 26-year old Marine Lance Corporal, take his own life after returning from his second tour in Iraq?

I search for answers with his immediate family, but few clues are forthcoming. My father's brother, a retired Navy pilot, is grieving quietly. My aunt, so proud of my cousin when he wore his dress uniform, is angry at him for being "so stupid." Meanwhile, my own family stands lamely on the periphery – wanting to show our love and support, but incapable of entering that inner sanctum shared by those in the armed forces.

Well below civilian rates for decades, military suicides are now catching up with alarming speed. Five soldiers attempt to kill themselves *every day* – a five-fold increase since before the Iraq War began. Between 2003 and 2008, more than 600 soldiers and Marines - the equivalent of a battalion task force - committed suicide. Self-harm and attempted suicide are also rising: between 2002 and 2007, the number of soldiers who attempted to kill or deliberately harm themselves rose from 500 to 2,100.

The statistics are equally harrowing for veterans, who account for over 20% of the 30,000 U.S. civilian suicides each year. According to a leaked internal VA email, there are approximately 18 suicides committed every day by America's 25 million veterans. That amounts to a staggering 6,570 per year. My cousin was in the highest-risk age group: between 2005 and 2007, the rate for those aged 18-29 rose an astonishing 26%.



• U.S. Army Soldiers assigned to the Arizona National Guard work security on a street in Sharana, Afghanistan. Photograph by Staff Sgt. Dallas Edwards, flickr user [The U.S. Army](#) used under [Creative Commons licenses](#). •

Many point to the stress of extended tours and multiple deployments, but 40% of soldiers and 35% of Marines who commit suicide were *never deployed* to Iraq or Afghanistan. Equally confounding, the majority of those in Iraq or Afghanistan that commit suicide do so during their first tour. In response, the *Navy Times* suggests that it's the constant relocation – coupled with the financial and relationship stress this causes – not the destination itself.

Mental health may also play a critical role. The current pre-deployment assessment only nominally screens for psychiatric problems, in the form of a single question asking whether the departing soldier "has sought counseling or mental health care" within the past two years. A recent military study revealed that over half of all deployed soldiers previously diagnosed with a mental illness fail to disclose that information on the form - a particularly troubling trend since those who do not report a history of mental illness are unlikely to ever be referred for treatment.

Yet despite such under-reporting, in the Army alone, 19% of those deployed to Iraq, and 11% of those deployed to Afghanistan, have reported mental health problems. In light of an ongoing struggle to meet recruitment targets – a critical step in decreasing extended tours of duty – the military may be recruiting soldiers who are mentally and/or emotionally unfit for battle.

Another factor is the ready access to firearms, which veterans use to commit suicide at over two times the rate of civilians. Unlike other forms of suicide such as overdoses, attempts by firearm leave very little opportunity for intervention, and therefore survival.

Jeff Staley, a veteran Marine Sergeant who served for six years, emphasizes the disillusionment many soldiers feel when returning home and a failure to transition effectively to civilian life.

"Leaving the military without the skills or education which they were expecting to obtain, some find themselves stacking cans of Coke or working two jobs while living in a trailer in their dad's yard." Missing the structure, camaraderie, and sense of purpose, they decide to re-enlist. Citing six friends who were prevented from doing so because of PTSD diagnoses, Sgt. Staley says the fear of burning bridges by accessing mental health services is very real.

This tense dynamic is only further complicated by survivor's guilt.

"You're thanking God that you made it home so that you can see your family," he explains, "but you feel guilty because you left everyone back in the dirt. You're constantly wondering why it was that you were spared, but everyone else in the Humvee wasn't...You're taught never to leave anyone behind, but the irony is that at some point you *must*, and it's even worse [when] they're not dead."

Adding that "most men are closer with the guys in their platoons than with their own wives," Sgt. Staley says that the loss of a fellow soldier can be as traumatic as that of a spouse.

Carol Levine, LCSW, is the founder and board president of [Returning Veterans Project](#), an organization that provides free counseling and other services to veterans and their families. She sees that many veterans have lost the capacity for joy in their life, and cautions that "nobody's paying attention to [their] outright grieving." She criticizes the contrast between the intense preparation for battle and the lack of decompression afterwards.

"They are not prepared for what they have to deal with: shame, numbness, loss of a friend, a moral compass turned inside out, grief for their lost innocence, and being confronted with an ugly part of themselves."

Acknowledging that military service can irrevocably change people, she says the homecoming itself can be a source of stress. "They see their family, and it's not like they expect. They don't want their family to know that they've done atrocious things. Talking about it gives credibility to the incredible."

She adds that many veterans have a difficult time simply coming down from the adrenaline high. "What helped them survive now complicates their lives," she explains.

Veterans must also cope with anxiety, flashbacks and insomnia – some of which don't start for months or years after their return home. Many start self-medicating or drinking to help themselves sleep, thinking that they only have a temporary problem.

Returning Veterans is perhaps unique in that it offers not only counseling but chiropractic and naturopathic medicine in addition to massage therapy and acupuncture. Ms. Levine says that while there is a stigma associated with mental health care, there is none associated with other types of care.

"It is easier to go to see a doctor for back pain than it is for pain of the soul. Many veterans are so tense, and this kind of alternative approach can help them wind down." After beginning to heal physically, many are prepared to begin healing emotionally as well.

In addition to seeking therapeutic support, I ask her what families can do.

"You can say, 'I know you've been through a traumatic experience that I can't understand, but I care.' With 1% of our society involved in this war, veterans feel disconnected and out of sync. The important thing is not to turn our backs; the key is connection with one's community."

About the Author

Melissa Hahn is a freelance writer and world traveler whose projects include foreign affairs analysis, children's literature, and creative nonfiction. Born and raised in Phoenix, Arizona, she completed her B.A. in Russian Area Studies at St. Olaf College in Minnesota, and studied at Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland. She was previously an associate analyst at the Power and Interest Report and an editorial intern at The WIP. She currently writes for the English-language edition of the Pan-Korean Peacemaking Webzine. A photojournalist and artist, Melissa dreams of helping Americans overcome their myopic view of the world.

TAGS: [Afghanistan](#) [Health](#) [Iraq](#) [Mental Health](#) [Military](#) [PTSD](#) [Suicide](#) [Weapons](#)

[ADD A COMMENT](#) | [RECOMMEND THIS! \(1\)](#) | [more from THE WORLD](#) | [EMAIL THIS ENTRY](#) | [PRINT THIS](#)

local voices. global stories. | [The WIP® Internet News Service](#)

Copyright © 2009 The Women's International Perspective