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May 8, 2009

Nation

Record High Army Suicides Prompt Action

by Blake Farmer

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Blake Farmer for NPR

Spc. Timothy Hanley's widow, Markel, and their son, Tim Jr., sit on the porch of their home in Hopkinsville, Ky. Hanley killed himself in September 2007, a year after returning from Iraq.

"In some instances, you could tell by the commander's words that he wishes somebody had done something different, that they might have precluded it had somebody paid a little bit more attention. Yet in other cases, the chain of command did everything absolutely perfect, absolutely perfect, yet the outcome was the same."

*Gen. Peter Chiarelli,
vice chief of staff of the Army and
head of the Army's new suicide task
force*

In Depth

- Feb. 6, 2009
[Army Suicides At Highest Rate](#)

[All Things Considered](#), May 6, 2009 · A U.S. soldier is now more likely than a civilian to take his own life. The Army crossed that threshold at the end of 2008 — a year in which 140 soldiers killed themselves — a record high. And the situation is getting worse, not better.

The Army counted 64 possible suicides in the first four months of this year, 11 of those were at Fort Campbell, Ky. — four suicides in January, three in February and four in March.

The stories from this sprawling post on the Tennessee-Kentucky line are tragic and disturbing. Sgt. Jeremy Duncan deployed from Fort Campbell to Iraq with a soldier who killed himself last year with a shotgun.

"And his fiance and his kids were there," Duncan says. He says he would never have known his friend was in trouble. "We don't know what his reasons were. He was like normal, daily life and just called it quits."

The Army has commissioned a \$50 million study to help explain the rash of suicides. With so much unknown, officers have been pleading with soldiers to watch each other.

"Make sure they are in touch with that ground of reality, and that they're not thinking of doing something stupid, like killing themselves," says Chaplain Kevin Wilkinson to a briefing room full of 101st Airborne Division soldiers. He says the greatest deterrent to suicide is sitting beside the person as he struggles for a laugh at a pre-deployment briefing.

"Killing yourself is a bad thing. Really it is. It's not good," Wilkinson says.

Imaginary Buddies

Light-hearted pep talks like Wilkinson's haven't helped, so now the Army includes an interactive video in these briefings, where soldiers role play with an imaginary buddy in crisis.

Here's a scene at a bowling alley: Two friends home from Iraq, one hasn't been acting himself, and in the video he lashes out at his wife after she tells him to slow down on the drinks.

"I'll have another beer if I want to and I will have 15 more," the imaginary buddy says.

"Whoa. Things just got a little awkward," the announcer says. "And you think you should do something, but you're not sure just what. So..."

The scenario then prompts the service member to choose "ask your buddy if you could go with him to see a counselor" or "brush off the episode."

"You make the right decisions, you save his life. If you don't make the right decisions, you find yourself at his funeral," says Vice Chief of Staff Gen. Peter Chiarelli, who heads up the Army's new suicide task force. He's begun receiving in-depth reports on the actual suicide victims and what attempts were made to intervene.

Since 1980



Soldiers now use an interactive video to role play as the buddy of another soldier in crisis. The choices made at the end of each scene lead either to finding help for this imaginary soldier or attending his funeral. Will Interactive

"In some instances, you could tell by the commander's words that he wishes somebody had done something different, that they might have precluded it had somebody paid a little bit more attention," Chiarelli says. "Yet in other cases, the chain of command did everything absolutely perfect, absolutely perfect, yet the outcome was the same."

Missing The Signs

Markel Hanley sifts through the mementos of her husband, Spc. Timothy Hanley, who died in late 2007. Her husband's mementos, including a Purple Heart, are stashed in an antique china cabinet. That award came after a brush with death in Iraq. When her husband came home, she says, he wasn't the same — he'd fire guns in the house and get raging drunk. On a more subdued day, Hanley remembers a phone call.

"[He] gave me the phone and told me 'I'm going to go shoot myself in the f***ing head.' And he walks to the back to our bedroom. He shuts the bedroom door. Locks it. And a few seconds later, you hear a shot," Hanley says.

Though the young widow pieces together the warning signs now, she never suspected suicide. But, Hanley says, Fort Campbell counselors and psychologists, who regularly canceled appointments, didn't act too concerned either.

"They considered him to be depressed. They considered him to have problems with alcohol, but they never considered him to be suicidal," Hanley says. "They sent him home with some medication and told him to be good, basically."

Re-Examining Army Operations

The military's top brass admits to a growing shortage of qualified mental health professionals.

Gen. Chiarelli has new recommendations following an eight-day suicide tour to Fort Campbell, Fort Bragg, Fort Drum and others. He suggests moving counselors out of Army hospitals and into smaller clinics, and expanding a program that allows soldiers to meet confidentially with mental health professionals off post.

Chiarelli also endorses a marriage enrichment program offered by chaplains at some posts, which deals with a common thread in soldier suicides.

"Over 70 percent — 72 percent of the cases — you have one constant and that was a problem with a relationship," Chiarelli says.

But the Army is also *depending* on some relationships — that of those between soldiers.

The "buddy system" is nothing new, says Fort Campbell's suicide prevention coordinator Joe Varney, but it remains a soldier's greatest hope.

"The best thing we can do is be alert, to watch the guy next to us for any signs or symptoms of suicidal tendencies, and then be courageous enough to ask that person, 'Are you thinking about killing yourself?'" Varney says.

The point-blank question is just the start. The challenge then becomes tactfully guiding soldiers at their wit's end — each with a unique history and personality — to seek out help. And while the Army's prevention efforts have no-doubt had a positive effect, soldier suicides are on pace to hit a new record high this year.

Recent First



[tom shields \(cheftom\)](#) wrote:

Im an older MARINE! What the public doesnt know is that we are not robots! We have families,we have children, we have parents! We are highly trained to do our jobs!! These young MARINES and (SOLDIERS) have left their families behind to do their JOB!!! The divorce rate for these WARRIORS is about 50% when they return home.... While they suffer the rigors of WAR people at home go about their daily life. The wife gets lonesome, and JODY is always willing to comfort her. I KNOW IT HAPPENED TO ME!!! This story shows you the unsung heros of WAR that GAVE UP! Don't judge them until you've walked in their shoes !!! RIP GUYS AND GALS I WISH SOMEONE WAS THERE FOR YOU!!!!!!!

Friday, May 08, 2009 12:08:58 AM

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R F (laffalot) wrote:

The sad part is that every one of these posts is correct. I have deployed multiple times and have my share of issues as well. The following is a list of things I think need to be addressed:

- 1) Acceptable culture is too narrowly defined. "Army way or the highway" when it comes to the differences among us: language, sexuality, relationships, emotions, etc.
- 2) Deployments change people, yet the Army expects that person to be exactly as they were before they left. (Sorry, but after 15 months in the box, I don't give a S#!&T about your neatly groomed lawn after seeing all of that.)
- 3) End one way communication. The chain of command rarely listens, period. Critical decisions are too often made based on statistics and what will improve them. (That is a direct reflection of the pressure the officer corps feels to compete for promotion.)
- 4)End use of Chaplains as the primary mental health triage professionals. Yes, they get some training. No, they are not qualified for it.
- 5) Every "leader" needs to learn to ask why. They see 1 for 1 relationships in all behavior. (Soldier uses THC, therefore Soldier is dirtbag.) They don't stop to think that their horrible leadership may be part of the problem.

Thursday, May 07, 2009 7:32:52 PM

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Chewbacca the Wookiee (Chewie) wrote:

The best way to minimize military suicides is to only use the military when it is absolutely necessary. It is no secret that warfare has a tendency to mess people up psychologically: you kill, you see your friends die, you get injured . . . How could that not affect you?

Are our current wars absolutely necessary?

Thursday, May 07, 2009 2:54:08 PM

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Franklin Cook (fjamesc) wrote:

"Culture of Stigma Is a Key Cause of Military, Veteran Suicides"
-- <http://tinyurl.com/StigmaMilitary> -- highlights countering stigma as an essential response to this tragedy. It challenges military leadership to go beyond merely issuing orders about stigma and, in addition, to actually change its policies and practices. The military could take a huge step forward, for instance, by reviewing recruitment, promotion, and retention practices that discriminate against people with common and treatable mental illnesses and by pro-actively instituting policies to avoid retaining or promoting officers and NCOs who have a record of intolerance or ignorance about the mental health needs of service members.

Franklin Cook, Editor and Publisher
"Suicide Prevention News and Comment"

<http://tinyurl.com/SPNAC-about>

Thursday, May 07, 2009 1:43:29 PM

[Recommend \(1\)](#) ↑

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robert bond (juvenal) wrote:

1-2-3-4, what are we fightin' for, don't know & don't give a dang,
next stop afghanistang...

Thursday, May 07, 2009 9:36:50 AM

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