

Suicide, the Soldier's Bane



Here's how it happens: you get a text. Or you see a cryptic post about the importance of friendship and "reaching out" on Facebook. Or an email. Then, the phone call comes.

"Hey man. Don't know if you heard, but Jack Smith died."

And you already know what that really means. Gun, drug overdose, poison, car exhaust. One of the many ways to undo or interrupt a fragile system.

Last year I totaled up the number of people I knew, personally, who had committed suicide—people I'd met and hung out with, something

more than a quick
"hello." The number was seven. I knew of three people,
personally, who took
their lives when I was a boy or a young man; two boys killed
themselves in my
orbit when I was in my teens, and a high school classmate and
lacrosse teammate
took his life sometime after college, perhaps in my mid-
twenties.

Since that time, at least four soldiers with whom I served or
whom I knew,
personally, took their own lives.

Not surprisingly, the event that precipitated this
introspection was the
suicide of a captain whom I'd covered while reporting on [NATO
maneuvers in Romania for Foreign Policy](#).

He was the eighth person I knew, personally, to kill himself.
When we'd met, he
was acting as the S3 of an armor battalion as a senior captain
(something I'd
only ever seen done by higher-ranking officers), and he was
highly respected by
peers, subordinates, and superiors. I heard that he had a wife
and kids back
home, in the United States. He'd sat down on train tracks and
waited.

But eight doesn't tell the full story, because those were just
the people to
whom I had a direct connection, who decided to send themselves
West for reasons
only they know. One Sunday in March, after climbing into bed,
I scanned
Facebook a final time (always a mistake) and saw people that I
served with
discussing the suicide of someone with whom I'd served, a

soldier I didn't remember.

And *that* experience—the experience of seeing other veterans process

the untimely death of a friend or loved one that I'd met in passing, someone

with whom I'd stood in military formation, suicide by one degree of separation—is

something I've processed more times than I can remember.

Fifteen? Twenty?

Thirty? It happens, I'd say, around once every two or three months. Making that

calculation conservatively, at once every three months, for the eight years

I've been out of the military, produces the number 32.

That doesn't count the soldier who shot himself rather than return to

prison, or the soldier who got so blinding drunk one night that when he

decided to drive home, he forgot to buckle his seatbelt, and ended himself in a

wreck of metal and glass. They're two of the eight.

It *does* include the brother of a soldier who died in Afghanistan,

himself a veteran, who died of "soul sickness," according to the obituary—and

many others whose families and communities would prefer not to characterize the

death as suicide, though it is. It *does* include a soldier who hung

himself when I was on active duty with the Army. They're two of the estimated

32.

The [most](#)

[recent statistics](#) from the Department of Veterans Affairs says that the

problem of veteran suicide is bad and getting worse. A [story](#) from *The Military Times* from September of 2018 headlined “VA: Suicide rate for younger veterans increased by more than 10 percent” did a good job of quantifying the problem:

In 2016, the most recent data available, the suicide rate for veterans

was 1.5 times greater than for Americans who never served in the military.

About 20 veterans a day across the country take their own lives, and veterans

accounted for 14 percent of all adult suicide deaths in the U.S. in 2016, even

though only 8 percent of the country’s population has served in the military.

Numerical terms, though, are abstract. You read “twenty a day” and think,

maybe, that can’t be right or it’s horrible, or what about the context or those

poor veterans or any of the other socially conscientious things a person

might think when confronted with an impersonal tragedy, and it’s still too far,

too distant.

In the coming months and years, as the remaining soldiers and sergeants and

officers I know transition out into their civilian lives, 32 will increase to

33, and then 34, and so on into the uncertain future. At some point—not too far

off from now—I’ll have lost more comrades to suicide than we lost to the

Taliban. The count will continue its irresistible climb.

Suicide is on my mind not only because of the actions of those

around me,
but because it is something I have considered in the past.

It crosses my mind occasionally, the vigor of its allure weaker than before,
now more an echo of a masochistic urge that is dismissed as quickly as it
arises. But I used to think about it often. I became accustomed to thinking
about death. I fantasized about dying in battle (gloriously) or by accident (absurdly),
and that fantasy conquered and remains in a compartment of my heart. Each time my
heart contracts, pushing blood through my veins, that compartment whispers—"what
if this were all to stop?" Over time, the thought became habit.

It took a lot to break me of that habit. I had to learn not to covet some
brief control over the terms of my demise. PTSD therapy at the West Haven
Veterans Affairs helped, and finding my wife, and friendships, and work.

But then, many of those soldiers who ended their lives had wives or husbands,
too; they had friends, and children, and jobs. Their Facebook pages were
active. They shared their happy memories of comradeship in times of war—of
exhilaration, and love, and respect. They were not so different. Their hearts,
too, must have asked, "what if?"

That's what makes it all so maddening. Sometimes a person's suicide seems
rational—a response to hardship, or the accumulated result of

smaller bad choices and regrets. When one hears about a promising life gone to drugs and debt, nobody thinks “how could that have happened” (and everyone’s grateful when it doesn’t), and similarly, something about the experience of being in the military lends itself to this type of sensible suicide. Then, sometimes, it makes no sense at all, from a rational perspective, or from the emotional side. There is simply no accounting for it.

And the lack of an explanation for *why* this is happening means we don’t have a good sense of what to do to reduce or resolve suicide. Perhaps we ought to better fund national institutions and publicize hotlines, so those desperate people who find themselves at bottom due to drugs, or alcohol, or gambling, or bad choices can, in spite of it all, find respite—a bed to sleep in, a job to pay the bills. Currently, \$8.38 billion goes to VA Mental Health services and programs, while there is \$186 million dedicated to Veteran Suicide Prevention and Outreach programs; one can only imagine how grim things would look were this number cut, though it’s difficult to imagine things improving substantially were the number much larger. A scandal that unfolded last year about [money unspent](#) implies that greater efficiency could contribute to the mental health of veterans. But on a certain level this isn’t about money, it’s about

despair and solitude, the lack of company. The rich and professionally successful, too, commit suicide.

Meanwhile, if one views the government with skepticism, and thinks that a person's tax dollars ought to go to charities instead, we can prioritize the expansion of regional and local charities to accomplish the same task. This runs into the same problem as expanding the VA, which is to say, the problem of throwing money at a problem human empathy is best equipped to handle.

On that note, on a human level, we can be more available to the veterans in our lives—not responsively, not reactively, but assertively, checking in with them, calling, writing occasionally to see how they are doing. But this is the dearest solution of all: anyone who has wrestled with depression themselves or in a friend or family member understands that there simply isn't time enough to think positively for another human who's gripped by despair; our own lives are consumed with the requirements of job, and filial piety, and the duties of the father, and mother, and husband, and wife. Living our own lives well guards us against dark impulses, but as every new parent knows, it can be utterly exhausting to live two lives for even an hour, let alone every waking hour.

A too-obvious fix of not going into war so casually any more, such as was

the case with Iraq and Afghanistan and could be the case in Venezuela or North Korea, is rarely discussed with any degree of seriousness, though it ought to be.

Adopting all four of these measures will still not solve the problem of veterans committing suicide. They will help, and because they will help, we ought to do them, but veterans will continue taking their own lives. We can't save everyone.

This leads to a more troubling thought. If there are people who cannot be rescued by individual action—who cannot be saved by even the most technologically advanced and intrusive state—who are not saved neither by religion, nor by secular charities—what then? We are left with a group of honorable people who wanted to serve their country, often during times of war, who subsequently commit themselves to self-slaughter. A group of people who are, in one regard, the type of sons and daughters we'd like, and on the other hand, shameful cautionary tales.

Ancient Rome and contemporary Japan viewed suicide as, potentially, an honorable act. There have been other non-Christian societies whose mythology or narratives contain room for people who no longer wanted to live; paths of last resort, obviously, but dignified exits to the next world. If we have confidence

that the life we have created here on earth is more attractive to people than death (and that, surely, ought to be the most primitive, basic idea animating a developed society), surely there ought to be an acceptable place for those folks who can no longer abide here.

Look, we'd all like to help, according to our ability and bandwidth. But the fact is, when it comes to trauma, the damage to veterans is already done. Many combat veterans or those victimized by bullies or sexual assault were lost years ago, and the bill, as they say, is just late coming due. Some of those veterans could probably be saved by aggressive professional and personal intervention, but let's be honest: that's not going to happen.

Instead, it's only a matter of time before the next suicide, which will add itself to the others that came before. And we'll all be left sitting in our chairs with the terrible news ringing in our ears, wondering: what happened to Jack?

That young soldier, jumping down off the front hood, his dusty armor slapping after a long patrol, or seated by a campfire, laughing, full with the power and confidence of their youth? What happened in the intervening years, what caused them to make that choice, in that moment? Could *I* ever do that? What if...?