



After A Marine's Suicide, A Family Recalls Missed Red Flags

by NPR STAFF

June 19, 2013 3:46 PM

Listen to the Story

All Things Considered

12 min 56 sec



Courtesy of Long Haul Productions

Last year, more U.S. service members took their own lives than died in combat. And despite the drawdown of troops from Afghanistan, the pullout in Iraq, and hundreds of new programs designed to help troubled servicemen and women, the number of suicides continues to rise.

Nicholas Rodriguez is one such young man. Military service was practically a foregone conclusion for Nick. His family's history in the armed forces stretches back to the Revolutionary War. His grandfather fought in World War II, his father was a Marine and his stepfather's brother died while on active duty in Afghanistan.

So when Nick joined the Marines at 21, he felt he was honoring both his country and his family. He "wanted to go and help the world in some way," explains his stepfather, Michael Geiger.



Courtesy of Anna Rodriguez

More Of 'Coming Home'

To hear "Coming Home: Nick's Story," in its entirety, and for video and audio features about Nick's family and suicide in the military, visit the Long Haul Productions' "Coming Home" website.

Nick left for Afghanistan in 2010. His mother, Anna Rodriguez, was relieved when he returned from combat by year's end. But when Nick came home to Whitehall, Pa., for Christmas, "there were cracks and I started to see them," Anna says. Nick was "jumpy" and "on guard," she says. "I was confused, 'cause my son was hurting and I didn't know what to do."

Nick returned to Camp Pendleton in California in early January 2011. He had headaches. He was troubled by memories. Less than two months later, he took his own life.

"In hindsight now, I look back and think, 'Well, these were all red flags that were going up and we never saw them,' Michael says. "We didn't know they were red flags."

Before Nick's death, Anna and Michael say, they had never heard of post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. By sharing Nick's story, they hope families of other servicemen and women can learn to read the signs that they could not — and can find resources to help.

"Coming Home: Nick's Story," was produced by Elizabeth Meister and Dan Collison of Long Haul Productions.





< After A Marine's Suicide, A Family Recalls Missed Red Flags

June 19, 2013 3:46 PM

Copyright ©2013 NPR. For personal, noncommercial use only. See Terms of Use. For other uses, prior permission required.

ROBERT SIEGEL, HOST:

For the next three days, we're going to look at the growing problem of suicides in the U.S. military. Despite the drawdown of troops from Afghanistan and Iraq, the number of suicides continues to rise. The questions are why, and what to do about it. We'll take you to an Army base in Texas, where a new suicide-prevention program seems to be working. And we'll have that report tomorrow.

Today, we have the story of Marine Nicholas Rodriguez. His family's history of service goes back to the Revolutionary War, so it was no surprise when he enlisted. His mother and stepfather told his story to producers Dan Collison and Elizabeth Meister.

ANNA RODRIGUEZ: My name is Anna Rodriguez, and I live in Whitehall, Pa. I am the proud mother of Lance Cpl. Nicholas Rodriguez.

MICHAEL GEIGER: My name's Michael Geiger. I am the proud stepfather of Nicholas Rodriguez.

RODRIGUEZ: Nick was 21 years old when he enlisted.

GEIGER: He wanted to go and help the world, in some way he saw fit.

RODRIGUEZ: His home base was going to be in San Diego, Calif., at Camp Pendleton. So this was kind of the first time in his life that he was 3,000 miles away. Cried my heart out. (Laughter) And I've been crying ever since.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC, "LADY IN BLACK")

GEIGER: Nick would call me probably every other day or so, just to bat the breeze. And he'd say, well, what kind of music did you listen to when you were a kid? And I would give him these names. One group he became very fond of was Uriah Heep. There was one song in particular, it was Nick's favorite - "Lady in Black."

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "LADY IN BLACK")

URIAH HEEP: (Singing) And I begged her give me horses to trample down my enemy. So eager was my passion to devour this waste of life...

GEIGER: He was with the First Light Armored Reconnaissance. And oh, he was so gung-ho about this. He said it was like he was inside a video game. And this was the greatest thing since sliced bread, to Nick.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "LADY IN BLACK")

URIAH HEEP: (Singing) Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah...

RODRIGUEZ: When he left for Afghanistan, we didn't get to talk that often. When we did, I always got: Mom, it's boring out here; we're not doing anything. And that made me feel awesome. I still came down my driveway and stopped breathing, praying to God I wouldn't have two Marines sitting there. But at the same time, I thought, well, why would that happen? He's not in combat.

I think it was in mid-November, he called from Afghanistan and said, I'm on my way home.

GEIGER: He had to go through some kind of process, like a debriefing. He said that they had him sit down and watch some videos and stuff, and asked him a whole bunch of questions - things like, well, you're going to assure us that when you get home, you're not going to beat your wife; you're not going to call your mother names; you're not going to be nasty to your pets; and things like that. Nick seemed confident that he didn't have any issues that he was worried about, so he flew home.

RODRIGUEZ: I called everybody I knew - Nick's coming home! Nick's coming home.

GEIGER: Just knowing that Nick was returning from combat, I says, please don't ask him how many guys he killed. Please don't ask him how many bombs he saw go off.

RODRIGUEZ: Seems to be, a military person that comes back home from war, you don't ask them stuff like that. That's kind of like - I don't know, maybe the unwritten rule. So we didn't. We knew that if Nick wanted to tell, we would be there to listen. But there were cracks, and I started to see them.

GEIGER: I knew there was something different about Nick. One of the first things he wanted to do when he returned home here was, he went out and bought him a pistol.

RODRIGUEZ: A .357, that's what Nick wanted. His drinking skyrocketed - went through the ceiling. We were at a New Year's Eve party; and there was food, and there was beer.

GEIGER: He was manning the fire pit. And around midnight, one of the neighbors threw an M-80, Nick hit the dirt - belly first, flat down.

RODRIGUEZ: When I saw Nick hit the ground after a firework went off, I knew there was more that went on over there than he was telling me. And then he wasn't sleeping at all. He was on guard. Nick just happened to be outside in the middle of the night - 4, 5 o'clock in the morning - and this truck drives by and throws something at the house. He ran after my newspaper lady.

GEIGER: He jumped over our fence. He ended up face first across the hood of her car. (Laughter) But, she was scared to death. And then he looked and she says, I'm just delivering the paper. And he said everything was OK, and he walked back home. (Laughter) And I called the paper carrier that afternoon, to explain. She says, oh, that's quite all right. Tell him thank you for his service.

I thought, young boy just came home from a combat zone; he's going to be a little jumpy. And that's where I left it lay.

RODRIGUEZ: I was confused 'cause my son was hurting, and I didn't know what to do. I couldn't even identify it.

GEIGER: After Nick left Pennsylvania and went back to Camp Pendleton, he said that things were bothering him. He said that he was getting some headaches. He had talked about an incident where they were patrolling somewhere, and he saw a little Afghani boy come out from behind a wall, and drew a gun on him. All he could remember is his nieces and nephews at home here. And now, he's sitting there face-to-face with an 8- or 9-year-old boy with a gun in his hand. What do you do? Just that quick, he would drop the conversation.

RODRIGUEZ: I says, Michael, that's it. I'm going to show up at Camp Pendleton. I'm going to call him up and say, meet me at the gate; I'm here. We need to talk.

GEIGER: We had told him that maybe he should see a doctor to make sure that there was nothing wrong. He assured us that he would, but nobody there had any record of him ever being seen by a doctor.

RODRIGUEZ: Things just didn't feel right, but I chose not to go. I just did nothing.

GEIGER: And then he called me up - I'll never forget it. It was about 20 minutes till 7, our time. And I was up, getting ready to go to work. He told me that he was so impatient, he had to get in touch with me A-S-A-P. He said that that band that I had turned him on to, Uriah Heep, they're going to be in San Francisco. He says, I'm going to fly you out; and you and me are going to go see this concert. I says, fantastic. We talked a little bit about this and that. He said they were going to redeploy to Afghanistan sometime in December of that year. And he said he was all pumped up.

So took me by surprise - I got home from work early that day, and there were two Marines in uniform, standing there. And I'm thinking to myself, did the kid go AWOL? And they had this real stern and serious look on their faces and - says, is Anna Rodriguez here? Could you go get her because we don't want to create a scene.

RODRIGUEZ: March 1st - I was working the day shift at the shoe store. And I saw Michael walk in through the front doors. He had this look on his face. He didn't say a word. There were customers in my store. I said, no. Not Nick. Not Nick. (Crying) And he said, there's two Marines at the door. You need to come home.

GEIGER: Brought her home here, and they let us know that Nick was gone.

RODRIGUEZ: They found him in the bathroom on base, with a gunshot to his chest. That's all they said.

GEIGER: And they told us that it happened at 4:20 a.m. California time. And I told them they were liars. Right then and there, I told them. I says, that's impossible. I says, you're telling me he got off the phone with me, and he took his own life.

RODRIGUEZ: It was his .357 that he bought when he was home. And that was the weapon.

GEIGER: (Reading) Lance Cpl. Nicholas T. Rodriguez, 23, of Whitehall, died peacefully on Tuesday, March 1st, at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, San Diego, Calif. Nicholas was born Dec. 11th, 1987, in Allentown...

RODRIGUEZ: Most of this was written by me. The "died peacefully" - I didn't do that. I think the funeral home didn't know what else to say. That has always bugged me. Everybody who knows how Nick died, knows it wasn't peacefully.

GEIGER: Nick never indicated to anybody that he had ever thought about it, or considered, taking his own life. It wasn't until later - and it was much later - where they put two and two together and said that it had to have been PTSD.

RODRIGUEZ: I never heard of PTSD. I had no idea what it was.

GEIGER: Nobody ever said that we needed to be on the lookout for different behaviors. And we thought, you know, nine months in a combat zone, he's going to be a little bit changed. But we never had any reason to think it would be long-term. He came home to us physically intact.

RODRIGUEZ: I started counseling through the VA immediately after Nick had died. I ended up getting the perfect counselor, too. She's the one who explained PTSD to me. And that's where I was educated - after he died.

I found out through a couple military personnel that the little boy that came around the corner with a gun - well, it was a 12-year-old boy with an AK-47. And he was shooting at Nick and Nick's unit. And Nick is the one who put that child down. I also know that Nick was dealing with losing his best friend over there. I remember hearing somebody say that Nick was kneeled down next to him when he died.

GEIGER: In hindsight, now I look back and think, well, these were all red flags that were going up. And we never saw them. We didn't know they were red flags. I think somebody from the military should step up and come to the families' homes before that child is returned, and let them know that if you see anything like this, here's a number; contact somebody. 'Cause we don't know what we're dealing with.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUFFLED BACKGROUND NOISES)

RODRIGUEZ: Hi, Nick. How are you, honey?

We're at the Cedar Hill Memorial Cemetery, where my Nick is buried. Anywhere between once and twice a week, I come down here to see Nick.

GEIGER: It's a silent killer, is what it is in my eyes, because in the paper you read about, this guy was killed by an IED; this guy was killed by gunfire. And it's not to take anything away from those boys or girls because they're all heroes. (Crying) But what about all the boys and girls that are coming home, but they're not together - they're not whole, that they lost it mentally? You don't see anybody talking about them.

We go and see all these memorials and monuments to these brave, young boys and girls that are sacrificing their all out there, in the field. My son's name ain't on those memorials. Why? He died as a result of that war. If he wouldn't have gone to Afghanistan, he wouldn't be under the ground now.

RODRIGUEZ: I still deal with a lot of guilt. Hell, yeah. I might have been able to change the outcome. I'm his mother. It's the first time in my entire life when my kid needed help, and I wasn't there. (Crying) I feel like I failed my son.

(SOUNDBITE OF URIAH HEEP RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED BAND MEMBER: Here's a song called "Lady in Black."

(CHEERS, OPENING GUITAR CHORDS TO "LADY IN BLACK")

GEIGER: We played this for Nick at his funeral. These here are the lyrics, and when I listened to them more closely after Nick had passed away, it gave me a little more understanding; this was what Nick felt.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, LADY IN BLACK)

URIAH HEEP: (Singing) She asked me name my foe, then. I said the need within some men...

GEIGER: (Reading) She asked me name my foe, then. I said the need within some men to fight and kill their brothers without thought of love or God. And I begged her give me horses to trample down my enemy so eager was my passion to devour this waste of life. But she wouldn't think of battle that reduces men to animals so easy to begin, and yet impossible to end.

And it just goes on - (Singing) Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah...

SIEGEL: Nick's case was investigated by the Marine Corps, and the report concluded this: "He received an adequate amount of suicide-awareness training not only from his chain of command, but through the battalion chaplain's warrior transitioning training received both in Afghanistan, and upon his return to the United States."

Tomorrow, we'll take a look at one promising program in Texas. Coming Home, Nick's Story was produced by Dan Collison and Elizabeth Meister for Long Haul Productions, with support from the National Endowment for the Arts, KCRW's independent producer project and Iraq war veteran songwriter Jason Moon and his Warrior Songs project. There's more about Nick's Story at NPR.org.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SIEGEL: You're listening to ALL THINGS CONSIDERED, from NPR News.

Copyright © 2013 NPR. All rights reserved. No quotes from the materials contained herein may be used in any media without attribution to NPR. This transcript is provided for personal, noncommercial use only, pursuant to our Terms of Use. Any other use requires NPR's prior permission. Visit our permissions page for further information.

NPR transcripts are created on a rush deadline by a contractor for NPR, and accuracy and availability may vary. This text may not be in its final form and may be updated or revised in the future. Please be aware that the authoritative record of NPR's programming is the audio.