

## POLITICS DAILY

## SOS from VFW: Combat Vets in Trouble



**David Wood**

Columnist  
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Rick Gershon, Getty Images

Their stories are legion. The stress behind their stories, stress that combat veterans often hold tight inside, can be painful and destructive.

There was the Marine in Afghanistan who told me he has **post-traumatic stress disorder** so bad he can't stand to be safe at home, where he sometimes drops to the floor, thinking a loud noise is an incoming mortar. He keeps volunteering to return to combat, where his hair-trigger reflexes make sense.

Where he's comfortable.

For veterans, telling their stories can be helpful. Having someone listen?

Priceless.

With a new generation of veterans returning from combat and **military suicides on an alarming rise**, listening is the idea behind a global alert from the Veterans of Foreign Wars to its 2.2 million members. Find a vet. Offer to listen.

"The need has overwhelmed the capacity of government and civilian mental health centers," said VFW Commander Glen M. Gardner, Jr., who served as a Marine in Vietnam.

"I urge every VFW member to get immediately involved by seeking out and extending a hand of friendship and help" to local veterans. "Our government cannot battle this enemy alone, nor should that 22-year-old combat veteran," Gardner said in a May 29 appeal to his members.

For most combat veterans, the stress of wartime deployment eases over time.

"Whether people have full-blown PTSD or just some of the symptoms, most people do get better over a short period of time with the support of family and friends," said Dr. Sonja Batten, deputy director of the Pentagon's **Center of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury**.

For returning combat vets, that's called "beer-pizza-sex-sleep" therapy.

For those whose adjustment difficulties persist, acknowledging the problem and accepting help can be difficult. There is a stigma attached to asking for help, even if it's self-imposed.

Military people "are trained to be self-sufficient and strong, and the idea of asking for help can feel like it's going against that training," said Batten.

In fact, being self-sufficient and strong is critical to success in battle, said Dr.

William Nash, a psychiatrist who ran **combat stress programs for the Marine Corps**. "Stoicism is necessary for survival," he told me.

"But everybody has a breaking point."

One night before a combat mission in Afghanistan, Marines were giddy with laughter telling me the story of an Iraqi dog they named Molly who picked up and carried around the leg of a suicide bomber who'd blown himself up at a checkpoint in Ramadi. Laughter was how these hardened combat veterans steeled themselves against the horror of war. "We were going, 'Bad dog! Put that thing down!'" one Marine chortled through tears of glee. "Bad dog!"

There was the GI on patrol in South Vietnam. A sudden 'crack' and the radioman went down, and the soldier turned to see a young boy with huge brown eyes and a smoking .45 taped to his hand by Viet Cong. Without hesitation, the GI stitched the boy in half with his M-16. The patrol resumed. But the soldier was never the same, and held that awful experience deep inside for decades until I offered to listen.

"Until tonight," he said over beers at a smoky VFW Hall, "I hadn't thought about this stuff for 30 years."

But holding it in can be harmful.

A World War II veteran in his 80s held his terrible secret until it nearly killed him.

Landing at **Normandy on D-Day** he fought his way across the beach, but many of his buddies died in the sand. The next day he was assigned to go back to the beach to collect body parts. He soldiered on across France and Germany, came home after the

war, started a family and worked a full career as a firefighter, retiring with honors and grandchildren.

He never talked about his wartime experiences. But one night several years ago he woke up screaming, seeing in his nightmares the broken bodies of his D-Day buddies. The agony continued unabated until he sought help.

VFW Commander Gardner tells the story of a combat veteran who twice weighed suicide before wandering into a VFW hall where a couple of Vietnam vets were standing around the bar. They offered to listen; the Iraq veteran talked – gratefully. Having fellow veterans listen is special – critical, said Gardner. "We have walked in their shoes," he said. "We have to look them in the eye and say, 'Everything is going to be all right.'"

But therapists advise that it's best to just listen – and not try to "fix" a veteran's stress.

"Someone who's always trying to look on the bright side," said Batten, "can be really annoying."

Resources:

Defense Department Suicide Prevention program,

**<http://www.preventingsuicide.com/dodtest/>**

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 1-800-SUICIDE (784-2433)

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