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In Unit Stalked by Suicide, Veterans Try to Save One Another

Members of a Marine battalion that served in a restive region in Afghanistan have been devastated by the deaths of comrades and frustrated by the V.A.

By DAVE PHILIPPS SEPT. 19, 2015

After the sixth suicide in his old battalion, Manny Bojorquez sank onto his bed. With a half-empty bottle of Jim Beam beside him and a pistol in his hand, he began to cry.

He had gone to Afghanistan at 19 as a machine-gunner in the Marine Corps. In the 18 months since leaving the military, he had grown long hair and a bushy mustache. It was 2012. He was working part time in a store selling baseball caps and going to community college while living with his parents in the suburbs of Phoenix. He rarely mentioned the war to friends and family, and he never mentioned his nightmares.

He thought he was getting used to suicides in his old infantry unit, but the latest one had hit him like a brick: Joshua Markel, a mentor from his fire team, who had seemed unshakable. In Afghanistan, Corporal Markel volunteered for extra patrols and joked during firefights. Back home Mr. Markel appeared solid: a job with a sheriff's office, a new truck, a wife and time to hunt deer with his father. But that week, while watching football on TV with friends, he had wordlessly gone into his room, picked up a pistol and killed himself. He was 25.

Still reeling from the news, Mr. Bojorquez surveyed the old baseball posters on the walls of his childhood bedroom and the sun-bleached body armor hanging on his bedpost. Then he took a long pull from the bottle.

"If he couldn't make it," he recalled thinking to himself, "what chance do I have?"

He pressed the loaded pistol to his brow and pulled the trigger.

Mr. Bojorquez, 27, served in one of the hardest hit military units in Afghanistan, the Second Battalion, Seventh Marine Regiment. In 2008, the 2/7 deployed to a wild swath of Helmand Province. Well beyond reliable supply lines, the battalion regularly ran low on water and ammunition while coming under fire almost daily. During eight months of combat, the unit killed hundreds of enemy fighters and suffered more casualties than any other Marine battalion that year.

When its members returned, most left the military and melted back into the civilian landscape. They had families and played softball, taught high school and attended Ivy League universities. But many also struggled, unable to find solace. And for some, the agonies of war never ended.

Almost seven years after the deployment, suicide is spreading through the old unit like a virus. Of about 1,200 Marines who deployed with the 2/7 in 2008, at least 13 have killed themselves, two while on active duty, the rest after they left the military. The resulting suicide rate for the group is nearly four times the rate for young male veterans as a whole and 14 times that for all Americans.

The deaths started a few months after the Marines returned from the war in Afghanistan. A corporal put on his dress uniform and shot himself in his driveway. A former sergeant shot himself in front of his girlfriend and mother. An ex-sniper who pushed others to seek help for post-traumatic stress disorder shot himself while alone in his apartment.

The problem has grown over time. More men from the battalion killed themselves in 2014 — four — than in any previous year. Veterans of the unit, tightly connected by social media, sometimes learn of the deaths nearly as soon as they happen. In November, a 2/7

veteran of three combat tours posted a photo of his pistol on Snapchat with a note saying, "I miss you all." Minutes later, he killed himself.

The most recent suicide was in May, when Eduardo Bojorquez, no relation to Manny, overdosed on pills in his car. Men from the battalion converged from all over the country for his funeral in Las Vegas, filing silently past the grave, tossing roses that thumped on the plain metal coffin like drum beats.

"When the suicides started, I felt angry," Matt Havniear, a onetime lance corporal who carried a rocket launcher in the war, said in a phone interview from Oregon. "The next few, I would just be confused and sad. Then at about the 10th, I started feeling as if it was inevitable — that it is going to get us all and there is nothing we could do to stop it."

For years leaders at the top levels of the government have acknowledged the high suicide rate among veterans and spent heavily to try to reduce it. But the suicides have continued, and basic questions about who is most at risk and how best to help them are still largely unanswered. The authorities are not even aware of the spike in suicides in the 2/7; suicide experts at the Department of Veterans Affairs said they did not track suicide trends among veterans of specific military units. And the Marine Corps does not track suicides of former service members.

Feeling abandoned, members of the battalion have turned to a survival strategy they learned at war: depending on one another. Doing what the government has not, they have used free software and social media to create a quick-response system that allows them to track, monitor and intervene with some of their most troubled comrades.

Their system has made a few saves, but many in the battalion still feel stalked by suicide.

"To this day I'm scared of it," said Ruben Sevilla, 28, who deployed twice with the 2/7 and now works for a warehouse management company called Legacy SCS near Chicago. "If all these guys can do that, what's stopping me? That's what freaks me out the most. I haven't touched a gun since I got out of the Marine Corps because I'm afraid to."

The morning after Manny Bojorquez tried to shoot himself in 2012, he opened his eyes to sunlight streaming in his window and found the loaded gun on the floor. Through his whiskey headache, he pieced together that his gun had jammed and that he had passed out drunk.

A week later, he stood alongside more than a dozen other Marine veterans at Mr. Markel's funeral in Lincoln, Neb. The crack of rifles echoed off the headstones as an honor guard fired a salute.

Mr. Bojorquez offered his condolences to Mr. Markel's mother after the funeral. He thought about how life seemed increasingly bitter. The thrill of combat was gone. Only regrets and flashbacks remained.

Mr. Markel's mother pressed something into Mr. Bojorquez's palm at the funeral, a spent brass shell casing from the honor guard. Promise me, she said to him, that you will never put your mother through this. Mr. Bojorquez promised.

That began a three-year odyssey in which the deaths of his friends weighed on Mr. Bojorquez, who tried repeatedly to get help from Veterans Affairs but ultimately gave up.

"I was lost then. I still am kind of lost," he said in a recent interview. "I was just trying to look for something that wasn't there. I was trying to look for an answer that I don't have — that no one does."

He was wearing a bracelet etched with the names of four Marines: one who died on the battlefield and three who died by their own hands at home.

'The Forgotten Battalion'

In Afghanistan, after the men of the 2/7 realized the scope of their mission, they began calling themselves "the Forgotten Battalion."

In the spring of 2008, they deployed from their base at Twenty-Nine Palms, Calif., to an untamed stretch of Afghanistan surrounding the city of Sangin.

Their job was to pacify a Taliban stronghold the size of Massachusetts that had never been controlled by coalition troops, or anyone else. Opium poppies grew in fields as vast as those of corn in the Midwest. Roads were pocked with the rusting hulks of Soviet tanks destroyed in a different war.

The Marines were spread out in sandbag outposts, hours from reinforcements, and often outnumbered. With the Pentagon focused on the surge in Iraq, equipment was scant. There was no dedicated air support, few mine-sweeping trucks, often no refrigeration. The only reliable abundance was combat.

"Machine guns, mortars, rockets, RPGs, I.E.D.s, constant fighting. It was like the Wild West," said Keith Branch of Austin, Tex., who was a 20-year-old rifleman who patrolled a village called Now Zad.

In that village alone, two Marine platoons fired more than 2,500 mortar rounds, called in 50,000 pounds of explosives from aircraft and killed 185 enemy fighters, battalion documents show.

Many of the Marines had deployed to Iraq just eight months before. At least two had been shot by snipers and one was hit by a grenade in Iraq, but they were redeployed to Afghanistan anyway. All three later killed themselves.

The I.E.D.s, or improvised explosive devices, plagued patrols. The first convoy arriving in Sangin hit two. In the next two weeks, an I.E.D. hidden in a bicycle killed a medic, an I.E.D. packed in a culvert killed three Marines in a Humvee, and an I.E.D. discovered in a dirt lane killed a specialist trained to defuse the explosives.

Manny Bojorquez spent the tour in a village called Musa Qala, where repeated offensives failed to drive out the Taliban.

One evening his squad was patrolling single file across a field when the enemy ambushed it on two sides. As the squad sprinted for cover, Mr. Bojorquez watched a bullet hit a Marine in front of him, who crumpled to the dirt. Mr. Bojorquez and another Marine grabbed the bleeding man and dragged him to a ditch.

Pressed against the ground, readying his machine gun, Mr. Bojorquez looked over and saw his teammate Corporal Markel laying down fire — with a steady grin on his face. Together they showered the surrounding fields and houses with bullets, providing cover for a medic. But the enemy pressed harder, another Marine was hit and the outnumbered squad had to pick up and run.

"It's funny. I was never scared. You just act. But it stuck with me," Mr. Bojorquez said.

By the end of the deployment, 20 Marines in the battalion had been killed and 140 had been wounded. Many lost limbs. Some were badly burned; others were so battered by blasts that they can scarcely function day to day.

Others returned unscathed, but unable to fall in with civilian life. Members of the battalion say what they brought home from combat is more complex than just PTSD. Many regret things they did — or failed to do. Some feel betrayed that the deep sacrifices made in combat seem to have achieved little. Others cannot reconcile the stark intensity of war with home's mannered expectations, leaving them alienated among family and friends. It is not just symptoms like sleeplessness or flashbacks, but an injury to their sense of self.

"Something happens over there," said Mr. Havniear, whose best friend from the battalion tried suicide by cutting his wrists after returning home, but survived. "You wake up a primal part of your brain you are not supposed to listen to, and it becomes a part of you. I shot an old woman. I shot her on purpose because she was running at us with an RPG. You see someone blown in half, or you carry a foot. You can try, but it is hard to get away from that."

After Mr. Bojorquez returned home, he started having a recurring nightmare. He was patrolling with his squad when bomb blasts killed everyone but him. As the dust cleared, he looked up to see enemy fighters surging forward. He often sat up in bed, thinking he was choking on his own blood.

One Mission's Toll

Beginning in 2005, suicide rates among Iraq and Afghanistan veterans started to climb sharply, and the military and Veterans Affairs created a number of programs to fight the problem. Despite spending hundreds of millions on research, the department and the military still know little about how combat experience affects suicide risk, according to suicide researchers focused on the military.

Many recent studies have focused on whether deployment was a risk factor for suicide, and found that it was not.

The results appeared to show something paradoxical: Those deployed to war were actually less likely to commit suicide. But critics of the studies say most people deployed in war zones do not face enemy fire. The risk for true combat veterans is hidden in the larger results, and has never been properly examined, they assert.

"They may have 10 times the risk, they may have 100 times, and we don't know, because no one has looked," said Michael Schoenbaum, an epidemiologist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The men of the 2/7 overwhelmingly see a tie between combat and their suicide problem. Not only were all of the men who committed suicide young infantrymen who struggled with experiences of killing and loss, they say, but it is possible to trace one traumatic moment forward and see how those involved are now struggling.

Noel Guerrero and Manny Bojorquez were best friends in the battalion. As two Mexican-Americans from the Southwest, they bonded in infantry school over a love of Mexican hot sauce. In Afghanistan, they would share bottles sent from home.

On one mission, Mr. Guerrero, then a 20-year-old lance corporal, was a machine-gunner atop a truck at the lead of a supply convoy. He said he was good at finding I.E.D.s and over six months had spotted almost a dozen that the battalion was able to avoid. But one day, the truck hit a big one, and the explosion flung him against his gun turret.

Mr. Guerrero crawled from the smoking vehicle, his head spinning. He watched his sergeant's Humvee roll in to help. Then suddenly, another blast swallowed the sergeant's truck in smoke. The truck shot up 10 feet and came down with a crash, falling to its side. Then, chaos. The driver was trapped and screaming, with his arm caught under the wreckage. A medic in the back was pinned by a seat crushed against the truck's ceiling. The sergeant was dead.

Before Mr. Guerrero could get to his feet to help, enemy fire started thudding into the ground around him. He spotted his machine gun in the dirt, where it had landed after being blown out of the truck, and with his vision still blurred, he began to return fire.

Two other Marines, Cpl. Jastin Pak and Lance Cpl. Tanner Cleveland, scrambled into the wreckage. Mr. Pak crouched over the driver, shielding him until a line of Marines could lift the truck enough to free his arm. Mr. Pak and Mr. Cleveland emerged covered with blood, clutching the wounded, then went back for the remains of the sergeant. The platoon was out of body bags, so they stuffed the sergeant's remains into a sleeping bag.

When it was all over, Mr. Guerrero picked up a cigarette that had been blown out of one of the trucks and lit it. After he exhaled, he noticed it was spotted with blood. He smoked it anyway.

Since that day, Mr. Guerrero has blamed himself for the ordeal and has tried to kill himself three times. Mr. Cleveland, 26, of Chicago, also tried suicide, and Mr. Pak, of Oceanside, Calif., hanged himself in November.

"You come back and try to be a normal kid, but there is always a shadow on you, a dark shadow you can never take away," Mr. Guerrero, now 28, said in an interview at his home in San Diego.

"Now, when I meet someone, I already know what they look like dead. I can't help but think that way. And I ask myself, 'Do I want to live with this feeling for the rest of my life, or is it better to just finish it off?' "

Lacking Data on Suicides

The first few suicides struck the men of the battalion as random. It was only over time that they came to see the deaths as a part of their war story — combat deaths that happened after the fact.

Cpl. Richard McShan died first. He had survived a truck bomb in Iraq before deploying to Afghanistan. Four months after they returned, in the spring of 2009, he put on his dress uniform after an argument with his girlfriend and shot himself in his driveway.

In December 2009, Pfc. Christopher G. Stewart hanged himself from a door in his barracks.

In April 2010, Shawn Jensen, a sergeant who had just gotten out of the Marines and moved home to rural Washington State to work in construction, shot himself during an argument with his girlfriend and mother.

The Marines tended to chalk up these first suicides to foolish impulses or prewar problems. Then came the death that shook the battalion, and prompted many to ask whether something was wrong not just with the men who killed themselves, but with them all.

Cpl. Clay Hunt had been a sniper in the battalion. After he got out of the Marine Corps in 2009 after his second tour, his disenchantment with the war grew, and he sought treatment from Veterans Affairs for depression and PTSD.

He became an outspoken advocate for young veterans, speaking openly about his problems and lobbying for better care for veterans on Capitol Hill. In 2010, he was featured in a public service message urging veterans to seek support from their comrades.

At the same time, Mr. Hunt was fighting to get adequate care at the V.A., encountering long delays and inconsistent treatment, according to his mother, Susan Selke of Houston.

Friends said Mr. Hunt had felt directionless. "There is so much isolation and lack of purpose. We came home from war unprepared for peace, and we've had to find a new mission," said Jake Wood, who was also a sniper in the 2/7. "He struggled to do that."

Mr. Hunt shot himself in his apartment in Texas in March 2011. He was 28.

After years of lobbying by his family and veterans' groups, Congress in February passed the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act, which provides additional suicide prevention resources for Veterans Affairs.

"When he died, all the guys, we couldn't understand it," said Danny Kwan of San Gabriel, Calif., an ex-corporal who served two tours with Mr. Hunt. "He had done exactly what he had been fighting against."

At the time of Mr. Hunt's suicide, Mr. Kwan was fresh out of the Marines. One night when he was drunk and despondent over a recent breakup, he put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger. He jerked the gun away as it fired, sending the bullet through a wall.

"At the last moment I decided I wanted to live," Mr. Kwan said. "We all have our demons. Some more than others."

No one knows whether the battalion's suicide rate is abnormally high or a common trait of fighting units hit hard by combat, because no one monitors troops over time. In an era of Big Data, when algorithms can predict human patterns in startling detail, suicide data for veterans is incomplete and years old by the time it is available. The most recent data is from 2011.

The Department of Veterans Affairs and the Pentagon say they have introduced a new system, called the Suicide Data Repository, that is faster and more complete.

But Dr. Harold Kudler, chief mental health consultant to the department, said the military and V.A. did not share information that could allow the monitoring of combat units over time.

"Might that be a good idea? It might be a good idea," he said. "But it's not in our ability to achieve. It's not our mission."

A Pact to Help

In December 2012, Marines from the 2/7 converged on a small town in the Central Valley of California for another funeral. A former radioman named Ufrano Rios Jimenez had killed himself with a shot to the heart.

Mr. Rios had lost a leg in Afghanistan. Once home, he struggled with PTSD. But he gave up on treatment at the V.A. and turned to alcohol, painkillers and eventually heroin, according to his former girlfriend, Allison Keefer. After the suicide of a friend from the battalion, Jeremie Ross, in July 2012, he quit work and slipped into a deep depression.

At the funeral, Mr. Bojorquez stood with the others from the 2/7 as they shook their heads and discussed what to do. A battle-hardened former corporal named Travis Wilkerson spoke up.

Once a fearsome team leader in a deadly sector of Sangin, he was now working as a night manager at a sandwich shop. He was one of several men from the battalion who had changed their lives radically in search of peace, growing a bushy beard and taking a vow of nonviolence.

"Real talk, guys, let's make a pact, right here," Travis Wilkerson said. "I don't want to go to any more funerals. Let's promise to reach out and talk. Get your phones out, put my number in. Call me day or night. I'm not doing this again."

His twin brother, Tyler Wilkerson, who had served in the same platoon, stood next to him. After the Marines, he had become a Buddhist and joined Greenpeace. He said he agreed.

Then a three-tour former corporal named Elias Reyes Jr. stepped forward. He had a long ponytail and a degree in philosophy from the University of California, Los Angeles. He was hoping to attend medical school.

Enough of this, he said. One by one, the others joined the pact.

Just over a year later, Mr. Reyes killed himself. In combat, he had been flattened by explosions several times and seen friends maimed and killed.

Back home, he was getting counseling at the V.A., family members said, but faced delays and struggled to find a therapist who he felt understood him. In April 2014, he hanged himself in his apartment.

"He was very religious, a Catholic," his sister, Margarita Reyes, said. "To do what he did, he must have been in so much pain."

News of his death was one more in a mounting pile of problems for Tyler Wilkerson.

After the Marines, Tyler Wilkerson, also a Californian, became part of a commandolike team of Greenpeace protesters. The job combined his love of tactical missions and his vow of nonviolence.

But in March 2013, he was arrested after he and others trespassed to unfurl giant banners that accused Procter & Gamble, the household products company, of destroying rain forests.

In the months that followed, his girlfriend broke up with him and Greenpeace fired him, leaving him alone with wartime memories that he had tried to escape.

He fatally shot himself in October 2014, a few weeks before he was to stand trial for the Greenpeace action.

"He felt like he had lost everything," Travis Wilkerson said. "He said his life looked like this endless mountain he couldn't see the top of."

Other deaths soon followed.

A month later, a mortar man who had served three tours at war, Joseph Gellings, killed himself at his home in Kansas.

He had tried mental health treatment at the V.A., but gave up after delays and other frustrations, according to his longtime girlfriend, Jenna Passio. Instead, she said, he drank and became reclusive. She eventually left him, taking their daughter.

After their breakup, he posted to Facebook, "I'm done with life." Other Marines texted and called to check on him.

"Disregard guys, everything is fine," he replied.

A short time later he shot himself in the head as Ms. Passio looked on in horror. Realizing he was only wounded, he went into a bathroom in his home and shot himself again.

As the news rocketed across Facebook the next day, Mr. Cleveland, who had tried suicide, thought, "It's to the point now where it's like, 'Who is next?' "

It was the friend who had helped Mr. Cleveland pull body parts from a smoldering Humvee in Afghanistan, Jastin Pak. Three days after Mr. Gellings's death, Mr. Pak, 27, hanged himself from a pine tree in the mountains west of his home.

On his desk, Mr. Pak left a completed "stressful incident form" that the veterans hospital in San Diego gave him on his initial visit a few days before. It asked him to list events from combat that were causing him anguish. He filled two pages, starting with the killing of an older man in Iraq who had been unarmed and finishing with placing the remains of the dead sergeant into a sleeping bag.

Failed Therapy

After the eighth suicide in the battalion, in 2013, Mr. Bojorquez decided he needed professional help and made an appointment at the veterans hospital in Phoenix.

He sat down with a therapist, a young woman. After listening for a few minutes, she told him that she knew he was hurting, but that he would just have to get over the deaths of his friends. He should treat it, he recalled her saying, "like a bad breakup with a girl."

The comment caught him like a hook. Guys he knew had been blown to pieces and burned to death. One came home with shrapnel in his face from a friend's skull. Now they were killing themselves at an alarming rate. And the therapist wanted him to get over it like a breakup?

Mr. Bojorquez shot out of his seat and began yelling. "What are you talking about?" he said. "This isn't something you just get over."

He had tried getting help at the V.A. once before, right after Mr. Markel's funeral, and had walked out when he realized the counselor had not read his file. Now he was angry that he had returned. With each visit, it appeared to him that the professionals trained to make sense of what he was feeling understood it less than he did.

He threw a chair across the room and stomped out, vowing again never to go back to the V.A.

In recent years, suicide prevention efforts by the Department of Veterans Affairs have focused on encouraging veterans to go to its hospitals for help, but a bigger problem could be keeping them there.

In interviews, many Marines from the battalion said they received effective care at the V.A. But many others said they had quit the treatment because of what they considered long waits, ineffective therapists and doctors' overreliance on drugs.

Six of the 13 Marines from the battalion who committed suicide had tried and then given up on V.A. treatment, discouraged by the bureaucracy and poor results, according to friends and relatives.

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A 2014 study of 204,000 veterans, in The Journal of the American Psychiatric Association, found nearly two-thirds of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans stopped Veterans Affairs therapy for PTSD within a year, before completing the treatment. A smaller study from the same year found about 90 percent dropped out of therapy.

The therapies, considered by the department to be the gold standard of evidence-based treatments, rely on having patients repeatedly revisit traumatic memories — remembrances that seem to cause many to quit. Evaluations of the effectiveness of the programs often do not account for the large number of patients who find the process disturbing and drop out.

Dr. Kudler of the Department of Veterans Affairs said data showed that 28 percent of patients drop out of PTSD therapy, but that most veterans stay in treatment and report improvements.

He added that dropout is an issue in all mental health care, not just among veterans, and that the department was constantly trying to provide alternative types of therapy, like meditation.

Craig J. Bryan, a psychologist and an Iraq war veteran, said that "the V.A. has done more to try to prevent suicide than anyone has done in the history of the human race." Mr. Bryan, who runs the National Center for Veterans Studies at the University of Utah, added: "But most veterans who kill themselves do not go to treatment or give up. They are not interested. That is the challenge."

Mr. Bojorquez tried the system one more time out of desperation. After the spate of suicides in 2014, he called and said he needed help. The V.A. had him see a psychologist and psychiatrist.

He told them that he wanted therapy but no drugs. Too many friends had stories of bad reactions. One, Luis Rocha, had taken a photograph of all his pill bottles right before shooting himself.

"We get it, no drugs," he recalled them saying. But on his way out, after scheduling a return appointment in two months, he was handed a bag filled with bottles of pills. He calmly walked to his car, then screamed and pounded the steering wheel.

He wanted to get better, so he started taking the medications -- an antidepressant, an anti-anxiety drug and a drug to help him sleep — but they made him feel worse, he said. His nightmares grew more vivid, his urge to kill himself more urgent.

After a few weeks, he flushed the pills down the toilet, determined to deal with his problems on his own.

Fighting the Label

Increasingly, members of the battalion felt that at home, as in Afghanistan, they were still the Forgotten Battalion. So they looked for help from the people they counted on in Afghanistan: their fellow Marines.

In November, Mr. Branch, who was completing a degree in social work in Texas, posted a request on Facebook asking the others to enter their addresses in a Google spreadsheet. That way, if a Marine in Montana was worried about a friend in Georgia, he could look on the spreadsheet and find someone nearby to help.

"All of us are going through the same struggle," Mr. Branch, now 28, said in an interview. "If we can get someone there that a guy can relate to, we hope it will make all the difference."

The spreadsheet is part of a wider realization among young veterans that connecting with other veterans — whether through volunteering, sports, art or other shared experiences — can be potent medicine.

One battalion member started an organic farm intended to help veterans heal by growing food. Another leads trips to bring together veterans with PTSD. Mr. Wood, 32, the former sniper, founded a national network of veterans, called Team Rubicon, that provides volunteer relief work after natural disasters.

"We did it because we really wanted to help others," said Mr. Wood, of Los Angeles. "We soon realized it would help us, too."

Less than two weeks after the Google spreadsheet was created, a text message popped up on the phone of a Marine veteran named Geoff Kamp. It was just after 11 p.m. on a Wednesday in November.

Mr. Kamp, who had turned in early to be up for his shift with the Postal Service, reached for the phone next to his bed, read the text, turned to his wife and said, "I'm going to be gone for a while."

An hour earlier, a 27-year-old Marine veteran, Charles Gerard, had changed his Facebook profile photo to an image of a rifle stuck in the dirt, topped with a helmet — the symbol of someone killed in action. In a post, he wrote: "I can't do it anymore."

After surviving an ambush in Afghanistan where several Marines were injured, Mr. Gerard said, he was treated for PTSD by the Marine Corps. But when his enlistment ended in 2011, so did his therapy. He tried to continue at the V.A., but long delays meant it was two years before he got any treatment, and even then, he said, he found it ineffective.

He moved back to rural Indiana and worked at factories, but his anger frayed ties with his friends and family. News that comrades from the battalion had killed themselves pushed him deeper into despair. The night he changed his profile picture, his girlfriend had left him.

Within minutes, the battalion's response system kicked in. Mr. Havniear in Oregon spotted the Facebook post and called a Marine in Utah who had been Mr. Gerard's roommate. They called Mr. Gerard immediately but got no answer. Mr. Gerard was parked in his pickup by a lake outside of town with a hunting rifle in his lap.

Desperate to head off another death, they opened the Google spreadsheet and found Mr. Kamp, 90 minutes away. Within 10 minutes, he was in his truck, speeding north through the late autumn corn stubble.

Mr. Kamp had never met Mr. Gerard. But he, too, had been injured in a firefight, and been dogged by guilt and anger afterward.

"Every one of the guys that's died, I see myself in them," he said later in an interview at his home. "It's like you are always just one bad day away from that being you."

At the lake, Mr. Gerard propped his rifle against his head, closed his eyes and pulled the trigger. There was a click, then nothing.

He took a deep breath and checked the chamber. It was loaded, but the round was a dud.

He decided the universe was telling him it was not his time to die. He tossed his remaining ammunition in the lake and drove home.

A few minutes later, Mr. Kamp knocked on the door.

They talked on the couch most of the night about relationships, work, mortgages, combat, guys who did not make it home and the cold feeling after Afghanistan that you are alone even when surrounded by other people.

"We'll make it through this," Mr. Kamp told him.

Mr. Kamp eventually called the sheriff's office for help, took the rifle for safekeeping and stayed until paramedics took Mr. Gerard to the veterans hospital in Indianapolis.

In March, members of the group used their informal network to intervene with another battalion member in Louisiana. The jury-rigged system is far from ideal, they said, but they are determined to make it work.

Mr. Gerard's experience shows, however, that the system is only as good as the V.A. treatment it is intended to connect to. The night he went to the psychiatric ward at the Indianapolis veterans hospital, he said, he waited and waited for a doctor to see him. After 24 hours, he gave up and checked himself out.

"There was no one there for me," Mr. Gerard said in a quiet voice during a recent interview at his home after a 12-hour night shift at an auto plant.

He looked pale and gaunt, a far cry from the tan and muscular Marine in photos from Afghanistan. Garbage and unwashed dishes were piled up around him. The curtains were drawn.

He crushed out a cigarette. The V.A.? "I've had nothing to do with them since," he said.

A Lifesaving Call

After swearing off the V.A., Manny Bojorquez turned increasingly to friends for support. Late-night calls and texts with guys from the battalion seemed to help more than therapy ever did.

He reconnected with Mr. Guerrero, who still shared his love of Mexican hot sauce. The machine-gunner was living in California, in his last year of college, and he had a baby boy.

"The guys we served with, they are the only ones we can really talk to," Mr. Bojorquez said in an interview.

But in November, Mr. Bojorquez got a text from Mr. Guerrero that upended everything. "I don't think I can do this life anymore," it said.

Mr. Guerrero had never mentioned it to others, but he still believed his sergeant's death was his fault. If only he had yelled a warning. Or spotted the I.E.D. He was getting therapy and medication for his depression, but still often woke up with a deep dread, as if he were sitting at the principal's office, waiting to be punished. Every day, he wore a bracelet etched with the sergeant's name.

That night, Mr. Guerrero had been watching television with his wife after church when something snapped. He crumpled to the floor and backed into a corner, crying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

He had not smoked since the Marines, but pleaded with his wife to go out and buy cigarettes. The panic and guilt were so excruciating that he decided the only relief was to kill himself. He went onto his porch with shaking hands to text Mr. Bojorquez to say goodbye.

Mr. Bojorquez called immediately. Mr. Guerrero picked up, sobbing, but after a few words hung up.

A fear had crept over Mr. Bojorquez over the last year that he was doomed to watch his friends die one after another until he was the only one left. At times, he saw it as another reason to kill himself. But it was also motivation to break the pattern.

He knew he had to call 911, but hesitated. The call might land Mr. Guerrero in a psychiatric ward or ruin his marriage, already strained. Worse, if the police barged in, his friend might go berserk. Someone could get hurt. But what choice was there?

The police pounded on the door just as Mr. Guerrero put a handful of pills into his mouth. He spent the next few weeks in a private inpatient treatment program for PTSD.

It was far from a cure. He said he was still deeply depressed and ashamed. He still slept on the couch instead of in his wife's bed, and he was not speaking to his parents. But he was alive.

Six weeks later, Mr. Bojorquez drove out to visit him in San Diego. The 911 call had not broken their friendship, but it had broken the long silence in which neither mentioned what he had brought home from war.

They greeted each other in a hug. During a lunch at a nearby taqueria, Mr. Bojorquez talked about the night he had put a gun to his head. Mr. Guerrero talked about watching his sergeant's Humvee explode and being so rattled afterward that he did not care that his cigarette was flecked with blood. They stayed long after the lunch crowd cleared out.

"This is good — us here like this," Mr. Guerrero told his friend. "It's the times when I'm alone that I fear."

They had found small ways to rebuild their lives. Mr. Guerrero had become a rabid marathoner and was leading the youth band at his church. Mr. Bojorquez was studying to join the United States Border Patrol and playing on a softball team with his brother.

At dawn the next morning, Mr. Guerrero took Mr. Bojorquez on his favorite run to the top of a mountain behind his house. He had placed an old metal ammunition box at the top, where Marines could leave letters and sign their names. He dedicated it to the men of the Forgotten Battalion.

As they clambered up the trail, they talked about how hard it was to find balance.

"The death of my brothers consumes me," Mr. Guerrero said between breaths. "It gives me this dark energy. I don't know what to do, so I run. I run all the time. I pray I never run out of trails to run."

It was five winding miles to the summit. When they reached it, the two stood side by side catching their breath and looking out at the dawn spreading over the ocean. Mr. Bojorquez hung his arm over his friend's shoulder. Hummingbirds zipped through the pink light.

Mr. Guerrero broke the silence.

"I'm glad I got to share this with you," he told his friend. "I wish I could bring the whole battalion up here."

Correction: September 23, 2015

An article on Sunday about the high number of suicides among a Marine battalion that served in Afghanistan misidentified the association that sponsored a 2014 study of 204,000 veterans on post-traumatic stress disorder. It is the American Psychiatric Association, not the American Psychological Association.

The Department of Veterans Affairs maintains a hotline for veterans in crisis that operates 24 hours a day. Call 1-800-273-8255 and press 1, go to veteranscrisisline.net/chat, or send a text to 838255.

A version of this article appears in print on September 20, 2015, on page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: A Unit Stalked by Suicide, Trying to Save Itself.

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