

Tangible Trust: A Different Focus to Prevent Suicides in the Army

A Monograph

by

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Abstract

Tangible Trust: A Different Focus to Prevent Suicides in the Army, by MAJ Brian H. Choi, 39 pages.

Despite policy changes, mandatory training events, research studies, and novel initiatives across numerous organizations, the US Army continues its battle against suicide. Historical and current suicide prevention measures focus on the identification of risk factors through yearly training; however, the number of inordinate risk variables and complexities of timely identification of suicide ideation or behavior limit this approach. As soldier suicides continue to impact the Army's readiness, the Army requires a change in focus to combat the ever increasing-rate of soldier suicides. This monograph proposes placing a stronger emphasis on tangible protective factors already in place in the Army – the leaders, counseling, and substantiated behavioral health institutions – to create tangible means of trust as a complement to current suicide prevention techniques. Deliberately creating a tangible protective environment by increasing trust one soldier at a time and using that trust as the means to remove the stigma of seeking behavioral health can further contribute to suicide prevention.

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Abbreviations

1LT	First Lieutenant
2LT	Second Lieutenant
ACE-SI	Ask, Care, Escort – Suicide Intervention
ASQ	Ask Suicide-Screening Questions
AUSA	Association of the United States Army
BCT	Basic Combat Training
BOLC	Basic Officer Leader Course
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease-2019
CSA	Chief of Staff of the Army
DoD	Department of Defense
DS	Drill Sergeant
FTX	Field Training Exercise
GEN	General
MAJ	Major
MG	Major General
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
OSUT	One Station Unit Training
PCS	Permanent Change of Station
PDHA	Pre-Deployment Health Assessment
PDHRA	Post-Deployment Health Re-Assessment
PFC	Private First Class
PHA	Periodic Health Assessment
POI	Program of Instruction
SHARP	Sexual Harassment / Assault Response Program
SMA	Sergeant Major of the Army

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Introduction

1LT Daniel Weiss was a model soldier. Enlisting in the US Army immediately after high school, he completed basic combat training as one of the top graduates. As a machine-gunner in Afghanistan, friends and supervisors called Weiss the fastest, strongest, smartest, and funniest soldier in the platoon. Upon graduating Officer Candidate School with three out of the possible four awards, he led his own platoon in Afghanistan. During his third deployment to Afghanistan, he led another platoon in the highly selective 75th Ranger Regiment. In March 2012, a year after returning from his third deployment and in the safety of his apartment, he sensibly placed a piece of body armor under his pillow and shot himself through the head. A note in Weiss's journal stated, "There is nothing anybody could have done."¹

Suicide remains a problem today across all ranks and formations. Since the start of the war in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2009, suicide rates in the Army more than doubled from 9.0 to 22.0 per 100,000.² In the latest Department of Defense (DoD) Annual Suicide Report, the Active Army component rate was 29.8 in 2019.³ Despite policy changes, mandatory training events, research studies, and novel initiatives across numerous organizations, the Army continues its battle against suicide. The DoD has yet to publish statistics for 2020, but DoD senior leaders considered shortening combat deployments following predictions of a 20 percent increase in anticipation of the effects from the coronavirus-2019 (COVID-19) global pandemic.⁴ However,

¹ Dave Philipps, "A Beloved Model Soldier, His Suicide and Its Impact," *New York Times*, 23 September 2018, accessed 23 November 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/09/23/magazine/those-who-cant-forget-weiss.html>.

² James A. Naifeh, Holly B. H. Mash, Murray B. Stein, Carol S. Fullerton, Ronald C. Kessler, and Robert J. Ursano, "The Army Study to Assess Risk and Resilience in Servicemembers (Army STARRS): Progress Toward Understanding Suicide Among Soldiers," *Molecular Psychiatry* 24, no. 1 (2019): 34, accessed 27 August 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41380-018-0197-z>.

³ US Department of Defense, *Annual Suicide Report: Calendar Year 2019* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2020), 10.

⁴ Lolita Baldor and Robert Burns, "Military Suicides Up as Much as 20% in COVID Era," *Associated Press*, 27 September 2020, accessed 23 November 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-air-force-stress-archive-army-2be5e2d741c1798fad3f79ca2f2c14dd>.

suggesting a strong relationship between the Army's suicide rates and combat deployments oversimplifies the cause of active-duty suicides.

Recent research indicates deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq are not as significant of factors in active-duty suicides as commonly believed. The latest DoD Annual Suicide Report instead reports that 41.7 percent of active-duty soldiers who died by suicide in 2018 never deployed.⁵ The Army Study to Assess Risk and Resilience in Servicemembers (STARRS) conducted a more robust research study by aggregating data from 2004 to 2009 and arrived at the same conclusion. The study found 40 percent of enlisted soldiers who never deployed accounted for 61 percent of suicide attempts, previously deployed 29 percent, and currently deployed 10 percent.⁶ These statistics indicate there may be other variables increasing the likelihood of suicide.

Historical rates of suicide during warfare spanning the past century further confound the correlation of suicides to deployments. In a recent study that encompassed the most extensive historical account of suicide to date, Drs. Jeffrey Smith and Michael Doidge found suicide rates decreased across the Active Army component during World War I, World War II, and the Korean War but increased during the wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq.⁷ Further, the study's comparison of suicide rates between the 19th and 20th centuries revealed suicide rates stayed below 20 per 100,000 throughout the 20th century. Doidge believes that "benefits, entitlements, education, insurance, and retirement and greater affluence and opportunity best account for this

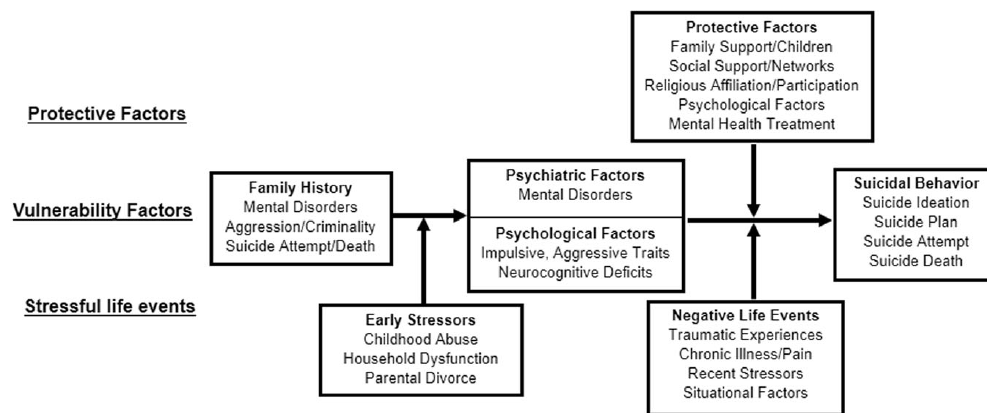
⁵ US Department of Defense, *Annual Suicide Report*, 38.

⁶ Naifeh et al., "The Army STARRS," 39.

⁷ Jeffrey A. Smith, Michael Doidge, Ryan Hanoa, and B. Christopher Frueh, "A Historical Examination of Military Records of US Army Suicide, 1819 to 2017," *JAMA Network Open*, 15 December 2019, accessed 05 August 2020, <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2757484>.

drop.”⁸ These historical drops indicate there may be variables the Army can leverage to decrease the likelihood of suicide.

To better understand suicide, current research studies break down the phenomena into risk factors and protective factors. Protective factors incorporate social, cultural, and institutional support that decrease the likelihood of suicide. In contrast, risk factors integrate the dynamic relationship between vulnerability factors and stressful life events (Figure 1). Vulnerability factors include biological or psychological traits that are either genetic or developed due to an onset of psychological significance. Soldiers with predisposed vulnerability factors are inherently at higher risk of suicide.



With this model in mind, the Army developed several initiatives to decrease the likelihood of suicide by focusing on risk factors. The Army conducts mental health screenings before enlistment and annually during Periodic Health Assessments (PHA) to identify preexisting or developed vulnerability factors.⁹ Specifically, the Army also mandates a Pre-Deployment Health Assessment (PHDA) and Post-Deployment Health Re-Assessment (PDHRA) to determine

⁸ Michael Doidge, “Casualties by Other Means,” Presentation for Society for Military History Virtual Conference, 14 November 2020.

⁹ US Department of Defense, DoD Instruction 6130.03, *Medical Standards for Appointment, Enlistment, or Induction into the Military Services* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2020), 46.

if previous stressful life events created any type of interplay with potentially developed vulnerability factors during a soldier's deployment. Albeit these recurrent efforts to screen risk factors early and throughout a soldier's career, the latest DoD Annual Suicide Report reveals white enlisted males under the age of 30, who constitute half of the Active Army component, are at the highest risk of suicide.¹⁰ However, suicide remains indiscriminate.

In 2010, Army Public Health Command behavioral health experts developed Ask, Care, Escort (ACE) as the primary suicide prevention and awareness training model to educate every soldier on risk factors, warning signs, and resources.¹¹ After mandating ACE training as an annual requirement for all soldiers and Army civilians, the Army followed up with ACE-Suicide Intervention (ACE-SI) for all junior leaders and first-line supervisors at the company grade and below.¹² Nonetheless, as part of the Army's recent efforts to reduce the administrative burden on brigade and below units, then Secretary Mark Esper eliminated ACE as mandatory training in 2018. The intent was to allow units to focus on enhancing lethality and readiness and leave ACE training up to command discretion.¹³ In other words, the Army believed readiness and caring for soldiers were two separate requirements. Further, the Army assumed commanders would know if their soldiers could prevent suicide. However, executing the ACE action drill predicates soldiers can and will identify warning signs; it assumes soldiers understand and care for each other.

Attempting to identify suicidal ideations or behavior is more dynamic than asking a few simple questions. In 2017, the Joint Commission, a healthcare accrediting organization, implemented a universal suicide risk screening tool called Ask Suicide-Screening Questions

¹⁰ US Department of Defense, *Annual Suicide Report*, 15

¹¹ Jane Gervasoni, "ACE Suicide Prevention Program Wins National Recognition," *Army News Service*, 1 September 2010, accessed 23 November 2020, https://www.army.mil/article/44579/ace_suicide_prevention_program_wins_national_recognition.

¹² US Department of the Army, AR 600-63, *Army Health Promotion* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2015), 21.

¹³ Mark Esper, *Prioritizing Efforts – Readiness and Lethality Update 7* (Washington, DC: Secretary of the Army, 25 May 2018).

(ASQ) for nationwide use when interacting with visiting patients for any type of medical appointment.¹⁴ Soldiers see this tool in use today across Army Public Health Centers when nurses or doctors ask a variation of the question “are you thinking of hurting yourself?” While this tool’s confidence is already dependent upon the respondent being open and honest, recent research further indicates suicidal ideation can change daily – it is not a static thought.¹⁵

Even if Weiss’s parents identified the signs and leveraged the ASQ, timing the intervention at the right moment is also a critical variable. A video from the DoD’s Suicide Prevention Office, “Simple Things Save Lives,” describes monitoring social media activity as another way to identify potential suicidal ideations and behaviors.¹⁶ However, the existence of a social support system in and of itself, whether it be social media platforms, a behavioral health institution, or posting of Army Values, does not provide the tangible means to prevent suicide. The 2018 DoD Annual Suicide Report defines protective factors as personal (attitudes, values, and norms), external (institutions), or environmental (relational).¹⁷ For those suffering from suicidal thoughts, their perception of social support invariably fluctuates at any given moment.¹⁸ This indicates they need something or someone consistent and real to help with understanding their environment at a personal level. Further, for soldiers to trust the institution, they need

¹⁴ “Ask Suicide-Screening Questions (ASQ) Toolkit,” National Institute of Mental Health, accessed 24 November 2020, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/research/research-conducted-at-nimh/asq-toolkit-materials/index.shtml>.

¹⁵ Evan. M. Kleiman, Brianna J. Turner, Szymon Fedor, Eleanor E. Beale, Jeff C. Huffman, and Matthew K. Nock, “Examination of Real-Time Fluctuations in Suicidal Ideation and Its Risk Factors: Results From Two Ecological Momentary Assessment Studies,” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, no. 6 (2017): 734, accessed 23 November 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1037/abn0000273>.

¹⁶ Defense Suicide Prevention Office, “Simple Things Save Lives,” produced by Defense Suicide Prevention Office, accessed 23 November 2020, <https://www.dspo.mil/SimpleThings/>.

¹⁷ US Department of Defense, *Annual Suicide Report: Calendar Year 2018* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 13 September 2019), 41.

¹⁸ Daniel D.L. Coppersmith, Evan M. Kleiman, Catherine R. Glenn, Alexander J. Millner, and Matthew K. Nock, “The Dynamics of Social Support Among Suicide Attempters: A Smartphone-based Daily Diary Study,” *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, vol. 120 (2019): 103351, accessed 23 November 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brat.2018.11.016>. “Social support seems to exert a protective effect against suicidal ideation but does not seem to contribute to daily changes in it.”

tangible examples, rather than slogans, to help rid the cultural stigma of getting help when pervading suicidal thoughts cross their minds.

Although suicide is an individual action, the responsibility does not solely fall on the deceased. There may be some truth to Andy Weiss's retrospection of his son's death: "We are all complicit to some degree in the failure to properly take care of our service members and veterans in general...Danny's death is no different and there is blame to go around, from the top of our leadership down to me as his father."¹⁹ There was something somebody could have done for 1LT Weiss, and it could have started with anybody, not just his parents. Soldiers have a responsibility to be loyal to the US Constitution and the Army. Since people make up this Army, they have a responsibility to be loyal to each other. However, many leaders forget this baseline requirement and do not expose their subordinate soldiers to what that loyalty might look like.

When leaders emphasize Army Values, these values are just an abstraction to soldiers.²⁰ Karl Weick, an American organizational theorist, defines sensemaking as an ongoing self-referential process, where people reciprocally develop an identity based on the benefits or consequences when interacting with their environment.²¹ In the Army, the institutions, the leaders, and the soldiers make up that environment, and when soldiers fail to care for one another with tangible trust, there is a breakdown in unit cohesion that permeates throughout the Army. Soldiers require tangibles to make sense of the Army's culture, and the Army must get the culture right to build protective factors rather than additional risk factors already inherent to the realities of combat. Some of these protective factors already exist in the US Army today.

¹⁹ David Wood, "Military Suicide Leaves Survivors Struggling with Shame, Guilt, Social Stigma," *HuffPost*, last modified 7 December 2017, accessed 23 November 2020, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/military-suicides-survivors_n_3955268.

²⁰ Matthew T. Archambault, Conversation with Instructor, 30 October 2020. "Army Values are just an abstraction."

²¹ Karl E. Weick, *Sensemaking in Organizations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995), 23.

Highlighting the significance of protective factors to prevent suicide is not a new initiative across the DoD. At the national level, the 2012 National Strategy for Suicide Prevention promotes the significance of protective factors through the availability of behavioral healthcare, supportive community environments, connectedness to social support groups, and by building coping and problem-solving skills.²² In line with the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention, the Joint Chiefs of Staff's 2015 National Military Strategy advocates for "a campaign of trust that stresses mutual respect and emphasizes the importance of a positive culture enhanced by quality programs for sexual assault prevention and response, suicide prevention, and high-risk behavior avoidance."²³ Today, the DoD follows this same logic through their "seven evidence-informed strategies."²⁴ However, all these narratives are difficult for soldiers to see as immediate, tangible means to prevent suicide. Opening more behavioral health institutions is not enough; merely reciting Army Values is not enough.

What this monograph proposes is placing a stronger emphasis on tangible protective factors already in place in the Army that promote greater care and unit cohesion as a complement to current suicide prevention techniques. The number of inordinate risk variables and complexities of timely identification of suicide ideation or behavior limit current suicide prevention techniques. Thus, the Army can leverage leaders, counseling, and substantiated institutions to create tangible means of trust. Deliberately creating a tangible protective

²² Office of the Surgeon General (US) and National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention (US), *2012 National Strategy for Suicide Prevention: Goals and Objectives for Action: A Report of the U.S. Surgeon General and of the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention* (Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services, 2012), 15, accessed 26 August 2020, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK109917/>.

²³ US Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The National Military Strategy of the United States of America 2015* (Washington, DC: JCS, June 2015), 14-15.

²⁴ US Congress, Senate, Committee on Armed Services, *Servicemember, Family, and Veteran Suicides and Prevention Strategies: Hearings before the Personnel Subcommittee of the Committee of the Armed Services*, 116th Cong., 1st sess., 2020, 11. "These efforts support seven evidence-informed strategies, which include identifying and supporting people at risk, strengthening access and delivery of suicide care, teaching coping and problem-solving skills, creating protective environments, strengthening economic supports, and lessening harms and preventing future risk."

environment by increasing trust one soldier at a time and using that trust as the means to remove the stigma of seeking or receiving behavior health support can further contribute to suicide prevention.

This work mixes applied and pure research to identify relevant practices in society and within the US Army to gain a better understanding of suicide, focusing on soldier vignettes, current Army doctrine and strategies, and theoretical frameworks. While the initial aim was to use unit and national archived materials to demonstrate the significance of contextual factors amid a soldier's suicide, COVID-19 restrictions effectively limited travel and accessibility. Further, units and archival institutions rejected requests for military personnel records unless the request was from next of kin.²⁵ Nonetheless, many primary and secondary sources describing a soldier's suicide focused solely on the individual's risk factors rather than the inclusion of contextual factors that served as protective factors. This finding alone signifies the need to change how the Army and society view suicide.

Therefore, portions of this monograph include fictional illustrations leading to soldier suicide. These include the stories of PFC John Smith, 2LT Dean Doe, and MAJ James Johnson that illustrate and capture contextual factors existent, or non-existent, as tangible protective factors relatable to today's environment. Additionally, this work covers current initiatives and narratives from senior army leaders, and whether these are working to promote a tangible protective environment. The monograph concludes with recommendations on how the Army can leverage these tangible protective factors to complement and strengthen current suicide prevention techniques.

Since assuming duties as the Chief of Staff of the Army in August 2019, GEN James C. McConville's priority is "People First, Winning Matters." He further emphasizes that "people

²⁵ *Request Military Service Records*, accessed 10 February 2021, <https://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records>.

first” is a philosophy, while “winning matters” is an attitude.²⁶ While suicides reduce manning and experience across the force, death from suicide is just as impactful as death from combat. Suicides produce a depressing and cascading effect on friendships, families, and unit cohesion. If people are the priority, then saving the lives of every soldier matters to win, both at home and on the battlefield. Furthermore, the attitude must change. The Army may not be able to prevent every suicide. However, the Army must continually endeavor to protect the lives of their sons and daughters and maintain the nation’s support to win on any battlefield.

Soldiers typically die alone when dying by suicide; yet, rarely does a soldier fight alone when serving their country. From the day a recruit steps off the bus and lines up alongside future battle buddies, a culture of trust forms as trainees attempt to make sense of their new environment. Recruits build trust to fight as a cohesive team with the help of their drill sergeants until they graduate as a soldier. Yet, each soldier leaves this team and attempts to make sense of their new environment at their first duty station, during a deployment, at their second duty station, and on. Soldiers undergo a new culture and yearn for trust and belonging wherever they are.

Socialization of a Soldier

When 1LT Weiss decided to join the Army at sixteen years old, his parents tried to talk him out of it. Growing up playing Little League in an affluent neighborhood of Chicago, his parents imagined his future would reflect his childhood interests in filmmaking, painting, or baseball. Yet, just as Weiss discarded, changed, or built new identities throughout his childhood, the transition to adulthood and his attendance at basic combat training (BCT) was no different. His experiences and relationships during BCT provided a foundation for a new identity as a US

²⁶ Devon L. Suits, “CSA: 'Transformational change' necessary to fight, win future conflicts,” *Army News Service*, 22 January 2020, accessed 28 December 2020, https://www.army.mil/article/231878/csa_transformational_change_necessary_to_fight_win_future_conflicts.

Army soldier. Though after BCT, something may have been missing even amid a thriving career, for not only Weiss, but also many others throughout the Army.

Building the Foundation

The transformation of a civilian into a soldier in a matter of weeks profoundly affects a person's physical and mental attributes. In 2018, the Army decided to extend Infantry One Station Unit Training (OSUT), a combination of BCT and Advanced Individual Training, from fourteen to twenty-two weeks to increase the readiness and lethality of individual soldiers.²⁷ Recent data resulting from this change suggests soldiers now graduating are better marksmen and combat life savers.²⁸ Yet, preparing soldiers for the physical rigors of combat is not the only hallmark of BCT.

The process of building a new identity begins once recruits step off the bus and attempt to make sense of their new environment. As drill sergeants (DS) line up recruits while barking demands in unfamiliar tones, most soldiers never realize the significance of their interactions with DSs and peers in determining their new worldview and identity. Throughout this transformation, recruits undergo a process that Sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann describe as socialization, or the “comprehensive and consistent induction of an individual into the objective world of a society or a sector of it.”²⁹ Consistently for the next twenty-two weeks, recruits would observe, hear, and enact the comprehensiveness of society's sector called the US Army. Yet, their level of identification with the Army and commitment to its values depend on the words and actions of their DSs.

²⁷ Devon L. Suits, “Army to extend OSUT for Infantry Soldiers,” *Army News Service*, 5 July 2018, accessed 28 December 2020, https://www.army.mil/article/207623/army_to_extend_osut_for_infantry_soldiers.

²⁸ Todd South, “New, longer Army infantry training is making better shooters, soldiers and life savers, data shows,” *Army Times*, 15 October 2019, accessed 28 December 2020, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2019/10/15/new-longer-army-infantry-training-is-making-better-shooters-soldiers-and-life-savers-data-shows/>.

²⁹ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1989), 130.

In just over three months, the Army presumes recruits undertake their new identity as a US Army soldier. The Army's BCT Program of Instruction (POI) specifically states it is "designed to provide new Soldiers with an ethical foundation and basic core skills they need to quickly transition into the Army."³⁰ However, it is in fact the socialization provided by DSs and peers, and not solely the POI, which create this foundation. A study published in January 2011 by the US Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences found socialization is based on the recruit's identifications with their battle buddies, DSs, and the platoon.³¹ Initially, the attitudes and stories amongst battle buddies were central to defining what they believed was a US Army soldier. Shortly thereafter, their observations and daily interactions with DSs become more influential in defining that identity. By graduation, recruits identified with the platoon's emergent attitude. Yet, "The greater the degree to which DSs were seen as modeling the Army Values, the stronger identification their Soldiers had with the Army Values."³²

A decade later following these types of studies, the Army transformed the first week of BCT to further leverage the DS's influence during this threefold transformation of a civilian into a soldier. In September 2020, the Army eliminated the infamous "Shark Attack" week. Originating its traditions during the 1960s for a draft army, the Hollywoodized images of DSs yelling within inches of recruits' faces typically left them humiliated. This humiliation created difficulties in building trust. Thus, the Army replaced "Shark Attack" week with the Infantry's "First 100-Yards" and Armor's "Thunder Run," where recruits now run through several leader reaction courses. DSs still yell and scream but with a purpose to create a sense of confusion and

³⁰ M. Glenn Cobb, David M. Sluss, Stephanie T. Muraca, Brandy A. Brown, Margaret S. Salter, and Raina M. Rutti, "Improving the Socialization Process in Basic Combat Training," US Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences (Arlington, VA, January 2011), 1.

³¹ Ibid., 23.

³² Ibid., 24.

chaos, and not humiliation. Further, DSs lead recruits through these team building courses to develop trust and unit cohesion.³³

Whether it be the “Shark Attack,” the “First 100-Yards,” or the “Thunder Run,” the Army’s transformation process takes on the form of building a superordinate identity. Margarita Krochik and Tom Tyler describe this concept in “United Pluralism: Balancing Subgroup Identification and Superordinate Group Cooperation” as the means to create a common basis for shared group membership and motivate intergroup cooperation based on decision-making and interpersonal treatment. However, Krochik and Tyler further explain that while a superordinate identity provides an overarching level of identification, it is in fact the relational information provided by leaders that maintain cooperation and provide self-worth.³⁴ Civilians, soldiers, and leaders alike require consistent relational information to strengthen trust, maintain cohesion, and reinforce their self-identity.

Upon graduation from BCT, DSs stay and prepare for a new class of recruits while soldiers report to their first duty station. With new soldiers now without a DS – the most influential variable that determined their identification as a US Army soldier – soldiers require leaders at their new units that physically and verbally demonstrate the Army Values consistently and comprehensively. As Karl Weick asserts, identity construction is an ongoing process.³⁵ Soldiers require leaders that know, can, and will exemplify Army Values and inherently develop a tangible social support system as they undergo another round of socialization at their new duty station.

³³ Graham Flanagan and Clayton Dyer, “Why the Army Canceled the Unofficial ‘Shark Attack’ Tradition at Boot Camp,” *Insider*, 24 November 2020, accessed 21 December 2020, <https://www.insider.com/army-shark-attack-boot-camp-basic-training-fort-benning-2020-11>.

³⁴ Margarita Krochik and Tom R. Tyler, “United Pluralism: Balancing Subgroup Identification and Superordinate Group Cooperation,” in *Crossing the Divide Intergroup Leadership in a World of Difference*, ed. Todd Pittinsky (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2009), 44.

³⁵ Weick, *Sensemaking in Organizations*, 43.

Leveraging Existing Systems

If one believes that suicide is a problem for individuals, not society, to deal with, then it is easy to ignore. When responsibility is thought to lie in the individual, there isn't a reason to hold institutions accountable.

—John Bateson, *The Last and Greatest Battle*

Inadvertent Loss of Trust – Tangible Leadership

PFC John Smith died alone in his barracks room on New Year's Eve. COVID restrictions prevented soldiers from traveling back home to spend the holidays with their families. Hence, the sounds of video games, movies, laughter, and yelling filled the barracks room. Yet, Smith could not feel more alone. His phone indicated he made a call to his aunt but never connected. His roommate found him hanging from a rope an hour later. Smith graduated Cavalry Scout OSUT just six months ago.

Smith believed nobody trusted him as a soldier. The note on his desk contained apologies to his squad leader, team leader, peers, and aunt for failing as a soldier. His final note included "The squad deserves better...thank you, Aunt Helen. You no longer have to worry about me." Yet, his first-line supervisors never thought he was failing. His peers never told him he was a terrible soldier. Nobody ever told him anything. They just expected him to keep up, know his job, and be a soldier.

Aunt Helen raised Smith alongside her biological children in Nevada. As the youngest child, he felt that his older cousins despised him for receiving more attention than they thought he should. Although he lived in the same house and shared the last name as everybody else in the family, he never assumed he was part of the family. Smith knew Aunt Helen was not his biological mother, but he loved her dearly. Thus, he took on part-time jobs during high school so that he could pay for his own food and clothes and be less of a burden, and then joined the Army as soon as he could.

Smith did not graduate Cavalry Scout OSUT with awards or recognition, but his peers knew him to be as hardworking as the rest of the platoon. They reminisced on a sense of camaraderie within the platoon and respect for DS Beyers who helped transform them into soldiers. DS Beyers also recalled having one-on-one interactions with Smith to help retrain him on a few basic tasks. However, Beyers could not remember which tasks specifically because retraining soldiers individually, or as a group, was part of a normal day. When Smith reported to 4th Squadron, 11th Cavalry Regiment, he no longer had DS Beyers or his battle buddies from his OSUT platoon.

Smith felt invisible since the first day he reported to the squadron. The squadron recently came back from a field training exercise (FTX) and was frenetically preparing for their upcoming combat training center rotation at Fort Polk, Louisiana. The First Sergeant placed Smith in 1st Platoon, Alpha Troop. It was widely known amongst 1st Platoon that they were the best platoon in the troop. They called themselves “QPs,” which stood for Quiet Professionals. Smith was proud to be part of this platoon; he was proud to be part of the Army. He initially posted pictures of himself wearing his newly issued equipment and various uniforms on Facebook. Yet, two months later, he suddenly stopped posting.

While some may see the sudden change in Smith’s social media activity as a warning sign of potential suicidal behavior, he was only attempting to mimic the QP standard. This was the easiest to learn and demonstrate amid a wealth of other unspoken standards. Smith was not a bad soldier, but he lacked some of the implicit knowledge the rest of the platoon knew. He kept up with the rest of his peers during physical training runs, maintained his rifle, and kept his uniform clean, just like the rest of the squad. He learned all of this at OSUT. Yet, he had trouble remembering to dummy cord his multi-tool to his back right belt loop, how to camouflage his face, and using only brown laces to blouse his trousers, all within the QP standard.

Leaders can easily blame Smith for failing to adapt. Yet, the rest of the platoon recalled Smith as part of the QPs as much as the rest of them. Since he was keeping up, why would

anybody have to tell him he was on track? Unfortunately, Smith never knew. He took the small failures to maintain the QP standard to mean he was failing as a soldier. This misunderstanding, on both sides, typically stem from what Peter Senge describes in *The Fifth Discipline* as “leaps of abstraction [which] occur when we move from direct observations (concrete “data”) to generalization without testing.”³⁶ Without engaging in conversation to understand Smith’s logic behind his presumed failures, leaders will revert to leaps of abstraction to believe Smith is either on track, failing to adapt, or weak.

Some people instinctively believe committing suicide is selfish or a sign of weakness. This could not be farther from the truth. Thomas Joiner’s *Why People Die by Suicide* discusses the overlapping conditions of low belonging, burdensomeness, and fearlessness as the interpersonal-psychological theory behind suicides. Joiner partially concedes to the historical theories of suicide that portray the decedent’s actions as altruistic. However, he posits these views are more so due to *perceived* burdensomeness. He further explains that the fearlessness that produces the capacity to commit suicide stems from learned behavior.³⁷ In addition to Smith’s desensitization to violence inherent to combat related training, he perceived himself as a burden to the team. This perception is preventable.

Soldiers and leaders can prevent leaps of abstraction through reflection and engagement. Don Schoen’s *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* promotes the learning one acquires when reflecting on past reflection-in-action that may indirectly affect future action.³⁸ The soldiers of 1st Platoon will invariably remember the loss of Smith. However, no future action can ever bring him back. Suicide prevention training can create this reflection-in-action. Yet, since learning and reflection does always occur on one’s own, Schoen further explains the significance of the

³⁶ Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of The Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 177.

³⁷ Thomas Joiner, *Why People Die by Suicide* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 92.

³⁸ Donald Schoen, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987), 31.

dialogue between a coach and a student. This dialogue occurs through two ways: telling and listening, and demonstrating and imitating. Schoen identifies that coaches typically have difficulty explaining his or her tacit knowledge to students; therefore, coaches have the responsibility to tell or demonstrate in the context of the student's actions to develop her capacity to imitate.³⁹ This relationship between coach and student, leader and soldier, or soldier and soldier, are the tangible means for soldiers to build trust. This capacity for imitation generates from dialogue, which in turn stimulates a soldier's ability for inclusion. The Army cannot rely solely on soldiers calling themselves "QPs" to care for one another. Maintaining self-worth and building trust requires relational information from peers and leaders to use superordinate identities as a team-building approach.

Leaders at all levels have an obligation to coach and demonstrate what it means to live the Army Values as a US Army soldier. Critics may assume the distinct difference between OSUT and combat unit formations is that the DS's primary job is to care for and transform recruits, while team leaders, squad leaders, and company grade officers train and maintain the readiness of the unit. However, the Army does not confine the obligation of care to DSs; it does not stop after OSUT. In fact, Army Regulation 600-100, *Army Profession and Leadership Policy* states "All leaders have a responsibility to develop those junior to them to the fullest extent possible."⁴⁰ The Army already has systems in place, including counseling, coaching, and mentoring. Unfortunately, the lack of dialogue between coach and student is not isolated to junior enlisted soldiers.

A Lost Culture of Trust – Tangible Counseling

2LT Dean Doe died alone in his apartment on a Friday evening. His unit would not find out about his death until noon the following Monday. He missed first formation, physical

³⁹ Schoen, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, 107.

⁴⁰ US Department of the Army, Army Regulation (AR) 600-100, *Army Profession and Leadership Policy* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2017), 6.

training, and the 0900 squadron formation to start Maintenance Monday. The company commander knew something was wrong; this was unlike Doe. She directed a platoon leader to visit Doe's apartment. With the help of the apartment complex manager, 1LT Matt Golden went inside and found Doe with a bullet wound through his head. His suicide shocked Golden and the entire unit.

Doe loved the Army. Or at least his friends and family thought so. During his second semester of undergraduate studies, he signed up for a 4-year Army Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) scholarship without consulting his parents. Although he was usually quiet and reserved, his colleagues would recall how excited he was when returning from a FTX with his fellow cadets. As his ROTC training progressed, Doe believed in the Army, its values, and the oath he took upon commissioning.

Like many of his peers, attending Armor Basic Officer Leader Course (BOLC) provided his first real Army experience after graduating college. It was the first time Doe got into a tank, shot a 120mm tank round, and led platoon-level operations. The training was a firehose of information and experiences, and he knew he had to quickly adapt to become an effective platoon leader. Luckily, his peers were going through the same challenges, and the Black Hat NCOs provided candid feedback and counseling after every training mission. This type of environment empowered Doe's section to create a superordinate identity with strong relationships with their Black Hats, much like it does for trainees during BCT with their DSs. Doe relied on his peers and Black Hats as much as they relied on him to overcome any challenge. Yet, while his experiences and training would remain, this identity was no longer relevant at his first duty station.

Doe's troop commander provided assumption of command orders within a week of his arrival at Fort Patton. The unit recently returned from an Iraq deployment, and ninety percent of the squadron was on post-deployment block leave. His troop commander, ecstatic of Doe's arrival, provided her cell phone number, assumption of command orders, and left the next day for post-deployment block leave. Doe became the troop commander of Charlie Troop, 1st Squadron,

10th Cavalry Regiment before he got to execute any platoon leader duties. The commander never conducted an initial counseling with her expectations. Fortunately, Doe had help from a retiring platoon sergeant who stayed behind.

Upon the unit's return from block leave, Doe became uneasy about his identity. His commander told Doe that he had the most knowledgeable and experienced platoon sergeant in the troop, but Doe rarely saw SFC Mitch due to his medical appointments. Doe's sister platoon leaders always seemed to be productively doing something while he felt all he did was watch his section sergeants discipline their soldiers through various forms. According to his then girlfriend, Doe had difficulty executing the platoon leader duties he recently learned from Armor BOLC. She recalled Doe telling her it was not because his sister platoon leaders, commander, or platoon sergeant did not care, but because they were busy preparing for the upcoming three-month FTX.

Nobody in the troop really knew how 2LT Doe was doing, but he was always smiling and making jokes. The retiring platoon sergeant that once helped him get through assumption of command was long gone, but everybody assumed Doe would do well since he had SFC Mitch as his platoon sergeant. His commander commended Doe for his platoon's performance during the last training exercise, but she never realized it was his platoon sergeant who planned and directed the platoon's operations. Doe attended social events with the other platoon leaders, and they assumed Doe was fine after his breakup with his college girlfriend. In fact, Doe broke up with her so she could attend law school rather than follow him around in the Army. Within 1st platoon, soldiers would recall how 2LT Doe would visit their barracks to check up on them, and that he was always trying to do the right thing. Yet, nobody ever checked up on Doe.

Placing the blame solely on Doe is simple, but it may not be entirely accurate. From one perspective, Doe's suicide stemmed from a failure to ask for help or adapt to his environment. However, this is an oversimplification when incorporating another contextual factor. From the time he first reported to his new duty station to leaving the building that Friday evening for the

last time, Doe's leaders missed innumerate opportunities to create protective factors by leveraging the Army's system of counseling.

The Army's training occurs in three domains: institutional, operational, and self-development. Counseling is but one of many key enablers to support all three domains. Army Regulation 350-1, *Army Training and Leader Development* describes how "counseling and feedback provide clear, timely, and accurate information concerning individual performance compared to the established criteria."⁴¹ DSs and Black Hats provided a baseline and feedback with the trainee or lieutenant in the institutional domain. Yet, upon entering the operational domain, Doe no longer received the same support.

While Doe's troop commander never provided an initial counseling, she may have counseled Doe on several occasions informally and verbally. The Army only emphasizes written records of counseling as evidence for adverse personnel actions, such as barring for reenlistment, denying promotion, or involuntary separation.⁴² Hence, attempting to find data that measures the quality and frequency of performance or professional growth counseling is difficult. In a 2008 RAND Corporation publication titled, *Leader Development in Army Units*, the authors found Army leaders saw the value and frequency of counseling at a much higher rate than their subordinates. Further, the authors suggest that "supervisors know their intentions in each interaction, while the subordinates can only infer them."⁴³ This does not necessarily indicate a failure on the leader's part but illustrates leaders may need to be more deliberate in providing tangible actions to indicate they are coaching, mentoring, and counseling the subordinate.

⁴¹ US Department of the Army, Army Regulation (AR) 350-1, *Army Training and Leader Development* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2017), 8.

⁴² US Department of the Army, Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 6-22.1, *The Counseling Process* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2014), 2-8.

⁴³ Peter Schirmer, James C. Crowley, Nancy E. Blacker, Richard R. Brennan, Henry A. Leonard, J. Michael Polich, Jerry M. Sollinger, and Danielle M. Varda, "Counseling, Coaching, and Mentoring," 43, in *Leader Development in Army Units: Views from the Field*, 41-52 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008), accessed 12 February 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg648a.13>.

An investigation into Doe's death never found the reason for his suicide, much like most investigations into any suicide. His suicide will forever affect the lives of his family, friends, and the unit. An initial counseling and quarterly counseling sessions may or may not have prevented his death, but it is unfortunate Doe's leaders never leveraged this system already in place. Some leaders may justify that there was not enough time for counseling due to the high operational tempo of today's Army. Yet, counseling does not always have to be event or performance oriented.

A simple conversation to get to know 2LT Doe could have produced a different outcome. Recently, Joe Byerly published an article titled, "How to Turn Performance Counseling into a Conversation." Byerly's articles in *From the Green Notebook* are widely read by both officers and NCOs across the Army. He proposed providing an outline of the counseling beforehand to enable the subordinate to *reflect* on past experiences, then discuss *perceptions* of performance, assessments, and priorities to solicit *feedback*.⁴⁴ In line with Schoen's theory of reflection, the leader can then coach the subordinate during the counseling and help develop the capacity to imitate. Hence, instead of merely listing sustains and improves of a subordinate's performance, the counseling would serve as a dialogue between coach and student. If all leaders followed Byerly's suggestion, a culture of conversations that imitate care for subordinates could develop. In other words, a culture of counseling serving as a protective factor would enable soldiers to trust a tangible social support system.

Unfortunately, counseling does not occur as often as it should. Army Regulations instruct first-line supervisors provide an initial counseling within thirty days of arrival and then quarterly for all NCOs, warrant officers up to the grade of warrant officer two, lieutenants, and captains.

⁴⁴ Joe Byerly, "How to Turn Performance Counseling into a Conversation," *From the Green Notebook*, 26 November 2014, accessed 10 February 2021, <https://fromthegreennotebook.com/2019/05/23/turning-counseling-into-a-conversation/>.

However, “Field grade follow-up counseling is on an as-needed basis.”⁴⁵ Who is to say that field grade officers in the ranks of major and above do not require counseling, coaching, and mentorship on a consistent and comprehensive basis?

Attempting to Trust the Army – Tangible Institutions

Major James Johnson died alone in his house on a Tuesday evening. Having just returned from a three-week FTX with his battalion, his wife and children were at his in-laws for the fifth time this year and did not plan to return for another week. Johnson’s neighbors heard the gunshot and immediately called 911. Military police barged through the house and found Johnson with a bullet wound through his head. The rest of the house, though, was in pristine condition. There were no dirty dishes, the house smelled clean, and the children’s toys were all neatly lined on the shelf or inside its designated baskets. For anybody that knew Johnson, he was always motivated, meticulous, energetic, and caring. His wife recalled their last phone call as any other day when Johnson returned from an FTX – “training was great; have to get some rest for tomorrow; love you and see you soon.” Nobody thought he would kill himself.

Johnson commissioned through his university’s ROTC program as a distinguished military graduate. Already labeled as a top performer, he continued to prove this through successful accomplishments as a platoon leader, executive officer, and two-time company commander. He had all the right jobs and never hesitated to go wherever or whenever the Army directed. He and his wife met during graduate school and had their second child just before pinning on the rank of major. He graduated in the top ten percent of his class at resident Command and General Staff School and got his first preference for duty station. His previous superiors all indicated his unlimited potential to be a successful field grade officer.

⁴⁵ US Department of the Army, Army Regulation (AR) 623-3, *Evaluation Reporting System* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2019), 38.

When Johnson became the battalion S3 for 3rd Infantry Battalion, 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), he could not have been happier. As per protocol, he first met with the battalion commander. Having already studied Johnson's officer record brief, the commander asked about Johnson's family, who he has worked for the in the past, and provided his expectations as the battalion S3. He also told Johnson the Army scheduled 3-501 PIR for a deployment this summer. He was ecstatic. This would mean he would be the one to recommend, plan, and schedule required training leading up to the deployment and manage the fight downrange. This was exactly what he hoped for when preferencing Fort Marshall as his number one duty station on the marketplace.

After a few months went by, Johnson became the go-to guy across the brigade. He was effective and dependable. Hence, not only did his battalion commander demand more from him than his executive officer but Johnson was also willing to look for more things to do. Nobody ever saw his ambition as self-serving; he was a selfless servant that just wanted to improve the unit and its systems. Johnson counseled all his subordinate officers and NCOs on a quarterly basis and encouraged them to do the same for their subordinates. As a perfectionist, he burned the midnight oil on many weekdays but never made his subordinates stay late. Yet, the lack of sleep and over-exertion caught up with him on occasion. Johnson sometimes illustrated this by losing his train of thought during training meetings, but the battalion staff and company commanders never faulted him. They knew being one of the only two majors that ran this battalion was a hard job.

The lapse in memory was only a start from Johnson's perspective. His wife recalled how he became more and more worried about the decisions he made throughout the day and had trouble sleeping at night. She mentioned one of his specific fears of misinterpreting the battalion commander's intent for how the battalion main command post should be set up for the three-week field training exercise. This was typically the battalion executive officer's job, but the commander told him to plan it. He was apologetic to his wife and children for not even sharing one meal

during the weekdays, but she anticipated this because Johnson warned her how the next two years were going to be especially harder than before. She saw Johnson struggling with self-confidence, but he always appeased her worry with “don’t worry; I got this.”

Having no experience in the Army herself, she did not know if Johnson’s condition was serious or just part of the job. Yet, all his previous superiors ranked him highly throughout his career. She thought Johnson may need to get help, and was sure he at least thought about it too, but she never thought it would be up to the point of killing himself. She remembered him sharing what getting help could potentially mean. It could mean losing his job as the battalion S3, which in turn would result in a poor evaluation, and then potentially ruining his entire career. Instead of getting help, he decided to row harder. While all these risk factors existed, the fact is that nobody will ever know the exact reason why Johnson killed himself. However, what is important, but often overlooked, is that Johnson feared for his career from the thought of getting help.

Attempting to correlate Johnson’s risk factors to his suicide is the common method to identify the cause of death. Yet again, many of these attempts may only be leaps of abstraction. Johnson was happy his in-laws lived nearby. Having already experienced seven Permanent Change of Station (PCS) moves before arriving at Fort Marshall, Johnson and his wife were happy to be finally living near their extended family. They deliberately planned the visits in line with the battalion’s FTXs to provide her parents a chance to spend more time with their grandchildren. Perhaps Johnson could not get over the fact that he misinterpreted his commander’s intent with the main command post, but the commander and staff treated the tear down and stand up simply as another jump exercise, and never thought poorly of Johnson. Lastly, perhaps all the added pressures, lack of family contact, and the burden of responsibility as one of only two majors in the battalion were too great for Johnson.

This significant increase in burden of responsibility when transitioning from a company grade to field grade officer is an unwritten rule in the Army. So much so that while many caring leaders attempt to inject such advice before officers pin on the rank of major, not every field

grade is fortunate to have received counsel. Recently retired MG Tony Cucolo posted similar guidance in *From the Green Notebook* advising that “the expectations of a Major are very different than those of a Captain, and not everyone knows what these expectations are or the impact they have on personal and professional success.”⁴⁶ He expounds on this statement by illustrating how majors must navigate the ambiguity of life as a field grade through more intrinsic goals, anticipated expectations, and humility through selfless servant leadership.⁴⁷ Yet, although field grade officers are expected to care for and mentor their subordinates through selfless leadership, what is to say they themselves do not require care and mentorship?

The assumption that leaders are doing well because they are checking on their subordinates is not true. Since suicide is indiscriminate, even mentors are subject to suicide. In December 2018, Captain Tessa Knight received a funny text from Major Chris Nogle, an old supervisor and mentor from her previous unit in Hawaii. The two kept in touch even after the Army assigned her to the Old Guard. Just two months prior, Nogle visited Knight during a training session in Washington, DC to share a meal. Knight recalled being concerned after noticing his impassiveness during their conversations; however, she assumed this text may have been an indicator he was fine. They exchanged texts asking how their families were doing and wishing each other a Merry Christmas. Later that day Nogle killed himself.⁴⁸

Sometimes friends, peers, and superiors miss the warning signs. Other times there are no warning signs. Yet, the lack of consistent and comprehensive care for the Army’s majors, let alone all field grade officers, are just as concerning as the lack of leader engagement with PFC

⁴⁶ Anthony A. “Tony” Cucolo, “In Case You Didn’t Know It, Things Are Very Different Now: Part 1,” *From the Green Notebook*, 1 March 2018, accessed 10 February 2021, <https://fromthegreennotebook.com/2018/03/01/in-case-you-didnt-know-it-things-are-very-different-now-part-1/>.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Joseph Lacdan, “The Survivor: Soldier Overcomes Battle With Suicide,” *Army News Service*, 9 September 2020, accessed 11 September 2020, https://www.army.mil/article/238891/the_survivor_soldier_overcomes_battle_with_suicide.

Smith and the lack of counseling for 2LT Doe. Without tangible engagements, conversations, and accountable systems to illustrate care and mentorship, the Army inadvertently subjects field grade officers to a higher risk of suicide. In fact, army regulations indicate sponsorship as optional for the grades of major and above during a PCS move.⁴⁹ Making this optional further creates an expectation that field grades officers can and should do everything by themselves.

With unwritten field grade expectations aggregated with the stigma of visiting behavior health, field grade officers have become less likely to take care of themselves. In a recent posting on *Twitter* by a field grade officer selected for battalion command, he admits “I know 6 LTCs who postponed surgeries & nursed old wounds [because] they didn't want to go to BCAP w/ profiles.”⁵⁰ If current field grades are hiding physical wounds because they perceive the Army will not select them for command, what other wounds are they willing to hide?

Current Army Regulations further confounds a field grade’s decision to either seek help or hide their invisible wounds to continue service. The latest version of AR 623-3, *Evaluation Reporting System* attempts to protect soldiers by stating, “A rated soldier who voluntarily seeks mental health counseling...that have not been detected by the chain of command will not have such participation in a behavior health treatment program mentioned in an evaluation report.”⁵¹ However, the regulation further mentions that once the Army identifies a soldier as receiving mental health counseling, with the information obtained from outside of the health care profession, the chain of command will include either evidence of successful treatment or ongoing treatment in the evaluation report.⁵² While the intent of these requirements is to safeguard the

⁴⁹ US Department of the Army, Army Regulation (AR) 600-8-8, *The Total Army Sponsorship Program* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2019), 6.

⁵⁰ Stoney Portis (@StoneyPortis], “Postponed surgeries,” *Twitter*, 13 August 2020, 10:29 a.m., accessed 26 August 2020, <https://twitter.com/StoneyPortis/status/1293932749338877962>. BCAP is the Army’s new Battalion Commander Assessment Program to augment the annual board’s selection of officers for battalion command on the Centralized Selection List.

⁵¹ US Army, AR 623-3, 60.

⁵² *Ibid.*

well-being of the soldiers and those around them, the latter's requirement does not necessarily promote seeking help in the first place.

There is a fine line between removing the stigma altogether and the understanding that receiving behavior health support may result in the Army ending the soldier's career. In July 2014, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff asked then MG Gregg F. Martin, President of the National Defense University, to resign. The chairman's decision derived from anonymous complaints regarding MG Martin's behavior for the past several years. In fact, doctors diagnosed MG Martin with bipolar disorder ten years after its onset. The high stresses of commanding a brigade during the 2003 Iraq invasion triggered his latent bipolar potential to an active bipolar disorder. In retrospect, MG Martin completely agrees with the chairman's decision: "He was taking good care of my own health and welfare, as well as his university's welfare and mission success."⁵³ For the sake of the well-being of the soldiers and the Army, sometimes leaders need to remove soldiers from the Army due to behavioral health issues. However, just like in the case with MG Martin, the Army may inadvertently miss developed vulnerability factors on the PHA, PDHA, or PDHRA. It took anonymous complaints a decade later to finally allow him to get the help he needed.

Field grade officers are not impervious to suicide. With greater unwritten expectations from both superiors and subordinates, this is more the reason to ensure the Army is providing field grades with tangible engagements through conversation, counseling, and mentorship. Further, the stigma of visiting or receiving help from behavior health is intransigent across the Army's formation albeit its change in focus to "People First." The Army requires something different; the soldiers require something tangible they can observe, understand, and imitate to understand what "People First" really means.

⁵³ Gregg F. Martin and Philip Martin, "Removed From Command: A Two-Star General's Mental Health Disaster and Fight to Recover," *Task and Purpose*, 12 March 2021, accessed 13 March 2021, <https://taskandpurpose.com/opinion/bipolar-disorder-gregg-martin-military-veterans/>.

A Different Perspective

The most important thing that we do as leaders every single day is set the culture, climate, and tone of our organizations, so America's sons and daughters come inside of our formations ... and know that they are safe.

—SGM Julie A.M. Guerra, People First Task Force

This is My Squad

Shortly after taking over as the Sergeant Major of the Army (SMA), Michael A. Grinston launched a new campaign called “This is My Squad” at the 2019 Maneuver Conference.⁵⁴ As a new initiative to complement “Not in My Squad” that focuses on preventing sexual harassment and sexual assault, “This is My Squad” takes a more holistic approach that aims to build more cohesive teams with a theme of ownership.⁵⁵ As a subset of the “People First” strategy, SMA Grinston and GEN McConville published the “The Army People Strategy” in October 2019 with a vision “to build cohesive teams for the Joint Force by maximizing the talents of our people, the Army’s greatest strength and most important weapon system.”⁵⁶

The strategy defines cohesive teams as the means to “build upon the positive and powerful aspects of current Army culture, creating a people-focused Army culture that destroys harmful behaviors and builds trust across our formations.”⁵⁷ Instead of reacting to a select few symptoms socialized by media at the time, such as poor housing, extremism, sexual harassment/assault, and suicide, the Army’s top leaders attributed the root cause of these

⁵⁴ Michael A. Grinston, “SMA: Maneuver Warfighter Conference 2019,” filmed 5 September 2019 in Fort Benning, GA, Fort Benning Television, accessed 29 December 2020, <https://vimeo.com/358166805>.

⁵⁵ Christopher Dunlap, Joshua M. MacNary, Jacob Miller, Andrew Porter, and Josephine M. Pride, “Ownership: This is My Squad,” *NCO Journal* (September 2020), accessed 17 January 2021, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/nco-journal/images/2020/August/BLDP/TiMS-BLDP.pdf#:~:text=of%20the%20Army%20%28SMA%29%2C%20Michael%20A.%20Grinston%20set,grater%20team%20cohesion%20than%20traditional%20Army%20units.%20Their>.

⁵⁶ US Department of the Army, *The Army People Strategy* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2019), 3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

symptoms as a break in trust (Figure 2). In view of this holistic perspective, it was not surprising when SMA Grinston took the failures in Fort Hood's leadership and its soldiers personally.

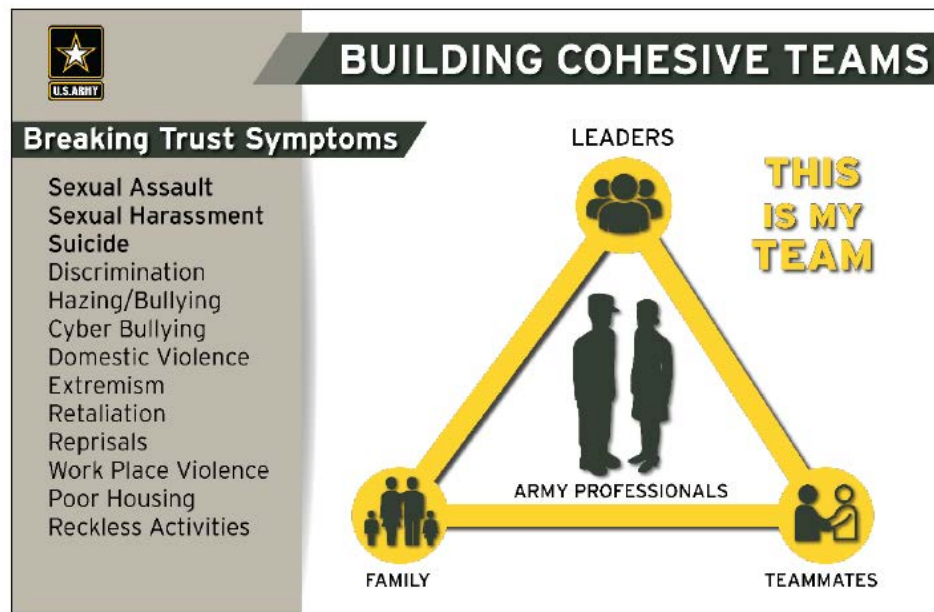


Figure 2. Building Cohesive Teams. US Department of the Army, *The Army People Strategy* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2019), 12.

In the summer of 2020, a joint search spanning just under two months with the US Army Criminal Investigation Department, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Texas Rangers, Bell County Sheriff's Office, Killeen Police Department, Belton Police Department, Texas Parks and Wildlife, and the US Marshals Service found the dismembered body of PFC Vanessa Guillén.⁵⁸ A series of investigations followed that led to naming two suspects in connection with her murder. While one civilian suspect is still under trial, Specialist David Robinson fled Fort Hood and shot himself before official authorities could attain a testimony.⁵⁹ Guillén's sister, enraged by the findings, asked the public: "How could this happen on [a] military base? How could this happen while she

⁵⁸ US Department of Justice, "Killeen Woman Faces Federal Charge in Connection with the Disappearance of U.S. Army Specialist Vanessa Guillen," *US Attorney's Office: Western District of Texas*, 2 July 2020, accessed 29 December 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-wdtx/pr/killeen-woman-faces-federal-charge-connection-disappearance-us-army-specialist-vanessa>.

⁵⁹ Kay Jones and Ray Sanchez, "Pfc. Vanessa Guillen bludgeoned to death on Army base, family attorney says," *CNN*, 3 July 2020, accessed 29 December 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/02/us/vanessa-guillen-fort-hood-disappearance/index.html>.

was on duty?”⁶⁰ By September 2020, a total of twenty-six soldiers at Fort Hood had already died, including six by suicide.⁶¹

Following these incidents, a Fort Hood Independent Review Committee, appointed by the Secretary of the Army, published a report in November 2020 on the findings of Fort Hood’s command climate and culture. While the 136-page report illustrated numerous failings by leaders across the installation, the first and last findings of the report pointed to the lack of trust in the Army and amongst its soldiers. Finding #1 found that the Sexual Harassment / Assault Response and Prevention (SHARP) Program existed at the division level and below, but the program’s core elements were barely functioning.⁶² Hence, the existence of a SHARP program alone does not constitute tangible means for prevention. Finding #9 further compounds this break in trust where the report found the command climate at Fort Hood was permissive of sexual harassment and assault.⁶³ “This is emblematic of a broader problem that may require [a] further focus on personal development, adjacent to leadership development...with reciprocal appreciation for the worth of their fellow Soldiers.”⁶⁴

In January 2021, SMA Grinston voiced his disappointment in the wake of these findings at an Association of the United States Army (AUSA) Noon Report conference. While the findings of the report led to several senior leader dismissals at Fort Hood, SMA Grinston emphasized junior leaders and soldiers have as much to share in these failures. Recanting his desires for “fit, disciplined, well-trained, and cohesive teams,” he expounded by stating that the

⁶⁰ Jones, “Pfc. Vanessa Guillen bludgeoned to death on Army base,” *CNN*, 3 July 2020.

⁶¹ Megan Vanselow and Eric Franklin, “26 Fort Hood soldiers have died this year, officials say,” *KWTX*, 1 September 2020, accessed 29 December 2020, <https://www.kwtx.com/2020/09/02/26-fort-hood-soldiers-died-this-year-officials-announce/>.

⁶² Chris Swecker, Jonathan Harmon, Carrie Ricci, Queta Rodriguez, and Jack White, *Report of the Fort Hood Independent Review Committee* (Fort Hood, TX: Fort Hood Independent Review Committee, 2020), 17, accessed 03 December 2020, https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/forthoodreview/2020-12-03_FHIRC_report_redacted.pdf.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 115.

attitudes of junior leaders and soldiers should be: “I don’t let soldiers harm my soldiers...that’s what it means to be in my squad.”⁶⁵ He further explained that the People First Strategy does not mean the Army will not train its soldiers, but that “we have to do better...and actually listen to what [soldiers] say.”⁶⁶ Retired GEN Carter F. Ham shared a similar sentiment in a recent *War on the Rocks* article: “These critics somehow believe that readiness and caring for soldiers are two separate requirements. They are not.”⁶⁷

Since August 2019, SMA Grinston has accentuated the narrative for building trust through cohesive teams in line with the CSA’s “People First” and his “This is My Squad” initiative. Yet, Grinston conveyed his personal failures by rhetorically asking, “What did I fail to communicate that’s so important for our small unit leaders to understand their people...maybe I didn’t communicate it enough.”⁶⁸ While Grinston can only be at one place, leaders at every echelon across the Army enterprise can also communicate this narrative. The Army’s leadership doctrine explains “relationships built on trust enable leaders to empower subordinates, encourage initiative, reinforce accountability, and allow for open communication.”⁶⁹ Yet, for soldiers to build trust and share a narrative or slogan, they need to see tangible actions that provide meaning to it, much like Army values.

⁶⁵ Michael A. Grinston and Daniel A. Daley, “AUSA Noon Report – SMA Grinston,” Association of the United States Army Noon Report Webinar, 12 January 2021.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Carter F. Ham, “After Fort Hood, The US Army Will Succeed or Fail on Trust,” *War on the Rocks*, 23 December 2020, accessed 28 December 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/12/after-fort-hood-the-u-s-army-will-succeed-or-fail-on-trust/>.

⁶⁸ AUSA Noon Report.

⁶⁹ US Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2019), 5-9.

Trusted Narratives

When every soldier feels so strongly about each other, they will do anything to care of those soldiers. That's what it's all about. That's what makes us the greatest Army in the world.

—General James C. McConville, 40th Chief of Staff of the Army

Narratives are just an abstraction. Without tangible means to demonstrate its meaning, soldiers may misinterpret the purpose or required actions within its intent. Porter Abbot describes how people may underread, overread, or attempt to fill in the gaps when interpreting a narrative.⁷⁰ As an Army of a combined strength of over one million people touching every corner of the world, reciting a few lines heard by Army senior leaders during professional military education, safety briefings, and virtual training sessions will only go so far to only those who are listening. Even when they do, the interpretation of “People First” or “This is My Squad” may not resonate in the ways Army senior leaders intend for these narrative campaigns. If soldiers did, the Army may still have 1LT Andy Weiss, PFC Vanessa Guillén, or many others in its formations.

On September 27, 2012, the Army conducted an Army-wide suicide “stand down” after receiving a report of twenty-six active-duty suicides in July, the most ever recorded in one month since the Army began formally tracking suicides.⁷¹ The “stand-down” allowed every Army installation to stop scheduled training for an entire day and directed leaders to discuss suicide prevention with their soldiers. On the eve of this stand-down, the Army News Service posted an article describing then SMA Raymond Chandler’s interview with GEN George Casey for the SMA position. SMA Chandler candidly admitted that he has been in behavior health counseling

⁷⁰ Porter Abbot, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 90.

⁷¹ Wallace McBride, “Suicides Prompt Stand-Down,” *Army News Services*, 27 September 2012, accessed 13 January 2021, https://www.army.mil/article/88060/suicides_prompt_stand_down.

for the past two years; however, GEN Casey saw that as a source of strength.⁷² While this story reverberated throughout the Army, soldiers and leaders to this day still cannot shake the stigma of seeking help from behavioral health institutions.

In the Fort Hood Independent Review report, one of the written observations discuss how some soldiers still fear the stigma of seeking help. While 523 of the 647 interviewed soldiers, or eighty-one percent, stated they would feel comfortable seeking behavioral health assistance, many of those that indicated they were not comfortable “did not believe that their communications would be kept confidential” or they feared it would “negatively impact their career and possibly follow them into civilian life.”⁷³ Even with the existence of multiple resources at Fort Hood, to include Military and Family Life Counselors, free counseling with an off-post mental health provider through Military One Source, or even embedded behavioral health officers assigned at the brigade level during deployments, soldiers are reluctant to seek help. At the time of the report, Fort Hood had the third highest suicide death rate.⁷⁴

Soldiers and leaders today live in a connected world and are in constant contact with competing narratives. Every time a soldier picks up their smart phone, they are unwittingly fighting an information battle. One way to win these battles is to provide soldiers with tangible leaders and systems that consistently and comprehensively build trust in its leaders, its institutions, and the Army. Further, slogans and narratives alone will not work. A trusted narrative works when people see the narrative's tangible effects in action by those they can see, feel, and trust.

⁷² David Vergun, “SMA On Suicide: ‘It’s Ok to Seek Help,’” *Army News Service*, 27 September 2012, accessed 13 January 2021, https://www.army.mil/article/87975/sma_on_suicide_its_okay_to_seek_help.

⁷³ Swecker, *Report of the Fort Hood Independent Review Committee*, 116.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Trust in the Army is built one Soldier at a time.

—Lieutenant General (R) Carter F. Ham, AUSA President

A death by suicide, dismissal of a senior leader, or an investigation should not serve as the encouragement to execute our obligations to take care of soldiers. This is not just a leader issue. It is a soldier issue. The Army requires all soldiers to fight and win the nation's wars, and it requires every soldier to get skin in the game. This is what the "Army People Strategy" advocates. Yet, the previous vignettes illustrate Army leaders and soldiers alike, counseling systems, and behavioral health institutions, whether apathetically or inadvertently, lacking the tangible care soldiers need to trust that the Army will take care of them.

Protective factors already exist in the US Army. One of them are the soldiers and leaders within its formations. However, the Army cannot solely rely on its current suicide prevention measures through ACE to identify another soldier's risk factors without having built a relational foundation of tangible trust. Building this relationship requires engagements with subordinates and developing their capacity for reflection-in-action. This skill further requires relational information provided by leaders or peers to understand what "Quiet Professionals" or "Not in My Squad" means. Only then will soldiers such as PFC Smith know they are part of the team, and only then will leaders know their soldiers. Leader engagement, whether to teach, discipline, or motivate, is not limited to drill sergeants or officers. Every soldier has an obligation to engage, understand, and trust each other to build a cohesive fighting force.

Another existing protective factor is counseling. Counseling can serve as a protective factor to enable soldiers to trust a tangible support system while better understanding each other. However, this requires leaders at all levels to counsel. The Army should not limit mandatory counseling by rank but make counseling accountable and mandatory for all soldiers, to include general officers, to provide a consistent and comprehensive engagement to all soldiers and

leaders. Only then will leaders such as 2LT Doe's commander better develop and understand their subordinates professionally and personally. Further, sponsorship should be mandatory for every rank during a PCS. Not only does sponsorship provide accessibility to assist in a soldier's transition to a new post, but more importantly, it provides the first impression that the unit cares by welcoming the soldier to the team.

Lastly, Army behavioral health institutions and narratives go hand in hand. Their current capacity to serve as protective factors are limited by unsubstantiated narratives. Soldiers and leaders themselves do have a personal responsibility to ask for and seek help when pervading suicidal thoughts cross their minds. However, the Army must build an environment where asking and seeking help are normal. The Army must first provide examples of current soldiers within its formations that sought and received care without attribution, unless warranted due to significant danger to self or others. This can also start by making behavioral health visits mandatory in line with the yearly PHA rather than indicating one's mental health on a scale of 1-10.

The Army may not be able to prevent every suicide, but the Army must do better. The nation's people understand the risk of sending their sons and daughters to the Army is potential death from an enemy combatant, but never from suicide. As suicides continue to rise, not only will it reduce a formation's readiness and experience, but also the overall trust from the nation. If nothing is done, this breakdown in trust will only continue to undermine the Army's operational readiness to defend the nation.

With a focus on tangible protective factors through leaders, counseling, and substantiated behavioral health institutions, the Army can complement current suicide prevention techniques. With a focus on building tangible trust within these existing protective factors, the Army will do better to better identify risk factors and prevent soldier suicides. The Army builds trust one soldier at a time. Building that trust is an everyday endeavor that starts with getting to know your soldiers.

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