

Investigation: Suicide Rates Soaring Among WWII Vets

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SAN FRANCISCO, Nov 11 (New America Media/Bay Citizen) - We call them the Greatest Generation of military veterans, who saved the world for democracy by defeating Germany and Japan and then returned home to build the United States into a superpower after World War II.

By Aaron Glantz

We call them the Greatest Generation of military veterans, who saved the world for democracy by defeating Germany and Japan and then returned home to build the United States into a superpower after World War II.

In the popular mythology, they're practically invincible, rarely complaining about the trauma of war.

But an investigation by The Bay Citizen and New America Media shows there's a vast amount of pain behind that taciturn exterior: In California, World War II-era veterans are killing themselves at a rate that's nearly four times higher than that of people the same age with no military service.

The suicide rate among these veterans is also roughly double the rate of veterans under 35, those who are returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan.

The analysis of official death certificates on file at the California Department of Public Health reveals that 532 California veterans over age 80 committed suicide between 2005 and 2008.

"It's logical," said Ken Norwood, 86, a retired architect who was shot down during a bombing raid over Belgium and spent a year as a Nazi prisoner of war.

More than six decades later, Norwood said he's still troubled by flashbacks. Norwood was tossed out of his B-24 only to wake up in a German field hospital and then be transported across Europe in cattle cars and held alone in an underground cell with only a trench for a toilet.

"Some little incident will trigger a recollection about some event in combat," he said, "like a DVD playing back in my head. I just let it play until it's over. I've gotten used to it."

Norwood said he's never contemplated suicide, but that the flashbacks have worsened over the years, especially since he retired.

“I have fewer activities in daily life now. I don’t have a professional career to pursue or a family to come home to,” he said. “My kids are grown. They have their own lives.”

Age has taken a toll on his short-term memory, but he still has a razor-like recollection of the past.

Kerri Childress, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, said the high suicide for World War II veterans today is at least partially an outgrowth of the lack of understanding of post-traumatic stress six decades ago.

“We didn’t even recognize mental health as an issue when they returned,” she said. “Nobody was recognizing it and nobody was talking about it, and it was certainly not something that they could get care for from the VA.”

Instead of counseling, Patrick Arbore, the founding director of the Center for Elderly Suicide Prevention and Grief Counseling, said most World War II veterans self-medicated with alcohol.

“This was the only way they could contain the trauma,” Arbore said. “They never, never, never talked about it, but they would go to the American Legion religiously and get drunk.”

At Legion halls, “one would hope that they’d be sharing stories and communicating,” Arbore said, “but if you go there you see these older veterans sitting several seats away from each other, just sitting there drinking.”

Bill Siler, the adjutant of the American Legion in California, refused to comment on the high rate of suicide among veterans over 80. “I don't have any reaction,” he said.

“I was a corpsman in the Marines during Vietnam,” he said. “You get really hard against people who die and you just don't think about that.”

Arbore said the toll of the unprocessed trauma of war was evident in his father and uncle, both of whom served under Gen. George Patton. “My dad and his identical twin brother never talked about the war, but they were very, very aggressive with their wives, my aunt and my children.”

And when old age begins to lead to physical maladies and diminished mental capacity, “that defense that they have held on to for so many years begins to slip away.”

“That’s when suicidal plans can kick into gear,” he said.