

The Life Changing Impact of Military Reunions

Sitting around the banquet table in 2012, a veteran told me the story of his son-in-law. It seems he had a bit of trouble adjusting to civilian life. A call from his daughter described a frustrated man, who had become distant and withdrawn. It was not the man she married. Father and husband met over a beer sharing stories of military life that had remained private until that evening. They shared tales of combat, chow, and what it was like to miss home. Although twenty years separated their time served, the stories were close to identical. As the evening wore on, they both felt better because of the opportunity to talk to someone that understood.

My veteran friend shared his son-in-law's struggle and contended it was not in only dealing with his experiences while in the military, but the compounded loss of the military community he had long been a part of years. "Enlisted men and women are trained from the beginning to be a part of something larger than themselves. They protect their own and have their six. Their world is filled with structure, and protocol. Their lives are literally in each other's hands. They have a mission, and a purpose." "When they come home, the memories are still there but the community is gone. This combined with reacclimating to civilian life can lead to some pretty serious issues." Veteran and Warfighter Boone Cutler said it best. "The first couple of years after discharge are critical. You assimilate, isolate, or die." His intimate knowledge of veteran suicide led him to write the Spartan Pledge which is a call to veterans to reach out to their battle buddies before taking their own life. His statements were a wakeup call to me. Why are veterans dying after they return home? What can we do to stop it?

The current veteran suicide rate is over 7,000 per year, according to the most current Veterans Administration report published in August, of 2016. The most troubling to me, of the statistics cited, was the 65% are veterans 50 years and older. Research shows Veterans connected with VA services were less likely to become suicide casualties. It can be argued this is result of receiving the care they needed. I would argue it is more than that, it is also about connection. Veterans going to the VA are among their own.

For the past three years, I have had the opportunity to speak with veterans about the healing power of connection in the form of military reunions. The Military Reunion Network holds classes across the country on planning military reunions. Lunchtime topics circle around to why they get together in the first place. The responses while worded differently, were always the same. "They get me, they understand what each of us as individuals and as a group have experienced. They get what I have been through, what my wife and kids have been through."

Third Marine Division Association reunion planner, Ron Deverick, said, "There is a bit of smack talk between branches, but at the end of the day we all have each other's back regardless of the patch on our sleeve as we have all been there. We all understand."

My interviews included veterans who had contemplated or attempted suicide as well those struggling with PTS. There appears to be a link between suicide rate and veterans staying well connected following military separation. The experience of serving our country brings up honor, patriotism, pride, and duty. It also brings up Traumatic Brain Injury, Disability, Post Traumatic Stress, and Survivor Guilt. Over the course of round table discussions, Veterans have alluded to one or more of these characteristics in some form or another. They shared the challenges of their service or transitioning back to civilian life. Some discussed PTS triggers that would set them back. "The sound of a ringing phone is still tough for me.", said veteran Dr. Art Schmitt, in a recent interview. Among other duties, Dr. Schmitt flew rescue helicopters in Vietnam. A phone call set each mission in motion. He details many of his missions in his book, "A War with No Name". It is one soldier's story about dealing with and surviving PTSD.

Another veteran Cleo DeLoner attempted suicide multiple times before finding the right treatment and support. She served in Somalia during Operation Restore Hope. Cleo's first suicide attempt was a gunshot to the face. She too struggles with PTSD. She now travels the country speaking out about veteran suicide and PTSD awareness.

When interviewed, Boone Cutler, Cleo DeLoner and Dr. Schmitt all agreed, "staying connected has a positive impact." In Cleo's case, she felt isolated physically and emotionally. The "suck it up" military attitude limited her ability to reach out to family and friends in her community. When she separated from the military, she lost touch with her battle buddies. "Staying connected could have made a difference as they all lived through what I did."

Social media has allowed veterans to stay in touch in greater numbers than ever before. Private Facebook groups provide an outlet for communication and support groups struggling with situations like PTSD, VA benefits issues, or employment. A veteran's post about a recent PTSD trigger generated over 100 comments from other veterans that had experienced a similar situation. Social Media can be tricky though because it does not completely satisfy one's need for human connection. Only face to face interaction can do that. Enter Military Reunions.

When veterans get together for a few days every year something happens. They share stories, which, according to their spouses, get more exaggerated as the years go by. They laugh. They remember. They forget. They pause for those gone. They break bread. They create new memories together. Most importantly, and perhaps without knowing it, they heal because they are among those that "get them". It is the same for their spouses. Quiet conversations of struggles after a recent VA visit or upcoming event may be take place. These conversations are next to impossible on social media because they happen organically beginning in the buffet line or at banquet table in the hospitality space.

Having witnessed the power of veteran connection face to face over the last six years prompted my efforts to confirm that staying connected and getting together for military reunions is an integral part of keeping our veteran community off the path to veteran suicide. While it seems basic and simple, it is critical.

The mission of The Military Reunion Network is in part to remove all obstacles a veteran may have in wishing to learn more about military reunions and/or connecting with other battle buddies be that education, travel support or event registration assistance. Our goal is to help you stay connected!