



# The Way Forward

By SSG Ben Betts

*This article reflects the author's professional opinions and interpretations. It does not represent the official views, positions, or policies of the Field Artillery Commandant or Field Artillery School.*

**U**nless you've lived it, the bond between soldiers is hard to explain. We aren't just colleagues. We're family, and for us, family runs deeper than blood. Every one of us accepts the risk of death in combat. We train for it. We prepare for it. We understand that the price of our service may be a flag-draped coffin. The Army spends billions to ensure we are ready for war, but what it cannot prepare us for is the war that begins once we come home.

That war is silent, but it is killing us. Between 2019 and 2025, Department of War data shows 3,306 service members lost to suicide—and the numbers for 2024 and 2025 aren't even complete. To put that in perspective, 2,465 service members were killed over two decades of combat in Afghanistan during

Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Freedom's Sentinel. Twenty years of war claimed less than the number of lives that suicide has taken in just six. That doesn't even account for the veterans who once stood shoulder to shoulder with us. The scope of this crisis is staggering. We owe it to every one of them to do better.

## Department of Defense Suicide Statistics (2019–2025\*)

All data are from official Department of War (DoW) Annual Reports on Suicide in the Military (ARSM) and Department of Defense Suicide Event Report (DoDSER) releases. 2024 and 2025 figures are provisional.

*A wintry scene of Trout Falls on the La Crosse River in the Pine View Recreation Area is shown Dec. 16, 2022, at Fort McCoy, Wis. (U.S. Army Photo by Scott T. Sturkol, Public Affairs Office, Fort McCoy, Wis.)*

*Confirmed and Pending Suicide Deaths by Year and Component*

Year	Active	Reserve	National Guard	Total
2019	344	65	89	498
2020	384	77	119	580
2021	328	74	117	519
2022	331	64	97	492
2023	363	69	91	523
2024	304	168	105	577
2025	71	17	29	117

*Reported Suicide Attempts (DoDSER)*

Year	Scope	Attempts Reported	Notes
2021	All Components (DoDSER forms)	1329	1,329 attempts among 1,262 individuals
2022	Active Component (DoDSER forms)	1278	319 Army, 274 Marine Corps, 282 Navy, 403 Air Force
2023	Active Component (DoDSER forms)	1373	383 Army, 264 Marine Corps, 287 Navy, 436 Air Force; 3 Space Force

Think of it like a river: The current is fast, the water is deep, and just downstream, a massive waterfall thunders into oblivion. Our soldiers are floating toward it, struggling to stay above the surface. Leaders on the banks do what they can—they pull a few out, but most are carried over the edge. This is the Army’s current approach: valiant, but reactive. We are spending all of our energy pulling people from the water when we should be asking the harder question: How did they fall in at all?

As a young non-commissioned officer (NCO), I lived this reality every week. After a long weekend, my greatest fear was not seeing a soldier at formation. Knocking on a door, I would think, “Is this the time I find him? Has he reached the point of no return?” Every month we heard of another attempt or another death, and the question burned in me: “Is it going to be my soldier this week?”

That fear became my fuel, so I knew I had to act.

Together with another NCO, we built a program designed to shift prevention upstream. We targeted the leaders closest to the fight: sergeants (E-5s). These are the ones in the barracks, in the motor pool, in the foxhole. They know their soldiers’ struggles before anyone else. They hear it all. If they could be trained to spot risks early and act quickly, maybe we could keep soldiers from falling into the river at all.

In the second stanza of The Creed of the Noncommissioned Officer, we proudly proclaim: “My two basic responsibilities will always be uppermost in my mind: the accomplishment of the mission and the welfare of my soldiers.” Our program was built on that promise. We focused on four common risk factors: abuse, broken relationships, financial stress and declining resilience.

By drawing on Unit Risk Inventories, CCIRs and SSIRs, we saw exactly where soldiers were falling into the river. Every

formation—battalion, brigade, even entire installations—had its own unique current. Patterns emerged. We learned to anticipate the seasons when pressure spiked, when resilience thinned. With that insight, we could spot high-risk soldiers before they drifted too far, rally resources in real time and train with purpose. Guarding the river demands nothing less than sharp focus and relentless readiness.

Leaders may think they know where to send a soldier wrestling with financial, marital, or mental health issues. Too often, we simply point toward an office and hope for the best, losing precious hours and leaving the real solution half-found. How often do we know the name and face of the person who can step in now, not tomorrow? How often do we follow through with a warm handoff, a steady check-in? The Army has already paid for powerful resources, but too many remain hidden: unknown locations, vague hours, no clear contact. That ignorance costs lives. It is our duty to know better.

Through hard-won relationships with agencies across post, we built a training program to close that gap. These agencies were eager to teach and ready to share their expertise. We brought their knowledge to our NCOs, forging connections that turned strangers into allies. Leaders learned who to call, and those calls built trust—trust between units and families, trust that could hold fast when the storm came.

We didn’t try to turn NCOs into subject-matter experts. That isn’t their role. Instead, we empowered them to fulfill the role they already swore to uphold: protecting their soldiers. We trained them to recognize the early warning signs, to know the resources available and, most importantly, to build trust within their squads. When soldiers feel safe speaking up, they reach out before the crisis point. And the cost of this training? Nothing but time.

The results were immediate. They were powerful. NCOs stepped up in ways that saved lives. One intervened not just in his own formation, but even across battalion lines, connecting a struggling soldier with mental health support before he attempted suicide. He received no award, no recognition; it was just a life saved because someone cared enough to act. For the NCOs, the program gave them purpose. It gave them a chance to live out the Army value of Selfless Service in the most profound way possible: protecting their soldiers.

As we expanded, we brought senior leaders into the fold. First Sergeants and Commanders learned to spot burnout and fatigue—not just in their soldiers, but in themselves. Working with Risk Management, we used Unit Risk Inventories to identify patterns of behavior and tailor training to seasonal and unit-specific needs. Prevention became focused, not generic. Leaders gained tools to meet their soldiers where they actually were, not where a PowerPoint said they should be.

But leadership in a formation is not defined by stripes alone. It is also found in young soldiers trusted by their peers—those who make a difference outside the spotlight, without

rank or recognition. They are the ones who step in when the official chain of command isn’t immediately present, carrying the thankless burden of lifting up their brothers and sisters in moments of struggle. Recognizing this, we began training Specialists nominated by their peers to act as advocates—bridges between soldiers in crisis and the resources they desperately needed.

## THE WAY FORWARD

This program succeeded because it is simple, adaptable and cost-free. It doesn't require a new contract, millions in funding or a massive bureaucracy. It works in any unit, in any setting, with the resources we already have, and it doesn't stop with the Army. Civilian agencies—mental health providers, financial counselors, family support services—must also be part of the solution. Soldiers don't live in a vacuum. They live in families, communities and cities. By linking NCOs and peer advocates to civilian partners, we can build a stronger safety net than the Army could ever provide alone.

The Army has spent decades—and billions of dollars—trying to pull soldiers out of the river. We've proven there's another way. We can stop them from falling in. We've seen it save dozens of

lives. The question is no longer whether it works. The question is whether we will scale it.

Picture yourself back on that riverbank. The faces in the water aren't strangers. They're your brothers, your sisters, your family. They are being swept away. You have a choice: pull out a few, or stop them from falling in at all.

This is not a question of how: We already know what works. It is not a question of when: The time is now. And it is not a question of who: It is us.

If we call ourselves guardians of freedom, then the fight starts here: upstream, with prevention, with leadership, and with courage.

Our soldiers deserve nothing less.

*SSG Benjamin Betts is currently the Brigade ASFNCO for 2-2SBCT. He also currently serves as the Brigade JFO Program Manager, Future Operations NCO, and Mission Support Site NCOIC. He has also fulfilled roles as Battalion and Squadron Fire Support Sergeant, and several Forward Observer Positions. Prior to reclassing to be a Joint Fire Support Specialist, SSG Betts served as a Financial Management Technician. SSG Betts has graduated from Joint Fires Observer Course, Joint Fire Power Course, Target Mensuration Only, Weaponing, and Collateral Damage Estimation. While serving as a Squadron Fire Support Sergeant at Fort Wainwright, Alaska in 1-11 Air Borne, started a program focused on suicide prevention and young leader development with a fellow NCO. SSG Betts (then SGT Betts) and SFC Lawrence were directed to expand their suicide prevention program from the Squadron level to the Brigade level. He then served in that position for six months up until his PCS to JBLM.*

## References

Annual Report on Suicide in the Military Including the Department of Defense Suicide Event Report (DoDSEER). (n.d.). [https://www.dspo.mil/portals/113/2024/documents/annual\\_report/arsm\\_cy23\\_final\\_508c.pdf](https://www.dspo.mil/portals/113/2024/documents/annual_report/arsm_cy23_final_508c.pdf)

(n.d.). Department of Defense (DoD) Quarterly Suicide Report (QSR) 4th Quarter, CY 2024 [Review of Department of Defense (DoD) Quarterly Suicide Report (QSR) 4th Quarter, CY 2024]. Defense Suicide

Prevention Office. Retrieved February 10, 2026, from <https://www.dspo.mil/portals/113/documents/qsr/dod-qsr.pdf>

Department of Defense Suicide Event Report. (2025). Military Health System.

Military Suicide Prevention and Response. (2025). Congress.gov. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF10876>