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Editorial

When Warriors Hurt Themselves

Published: September 1, 2010

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October 15

"Dwell time" is military shorthand for the precious home-front visits back to family life that soldiers enjoy between the multiple deployments of modern warfare. The need for enough dwell time — and for a fairer, less stressful distribution of repeat deployments — is a keystone finding in a study of the alarming rise in suicides afflicting the military as it soldiers on in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Other factors stand out, including the continuing stigmatization of troubled warriors who dare to step forward for help. And, most surprising, perhaps, the lack of a top-level Pentagon office and prevention policy for the hundreds of antisuicide programs now pursued separately by the services.

The ambitious, yearlong study by military and civilian experts was ordered by Congress in facing the fact that the suicide tally has been increasing despite intensified prevention programs. From 2005 to 2009, more than 1,100 members of the military killed themselves, with the highest tolls among Army soldiers and Marines carrying the burden on the battlefronts.

No service has yet tracked the myriad factors involved in suicide. One of the more ambitious recommendations of the Task Force on the Prevention of Suicide is to set up an investigatory process to standardize the gathering and analysis of the facts of each case, much like an aviation crash is studied.

The services have hardly ignored the problem. But soldiers testified "they almost died from boredom listening to yet another suicide prevention briefing." The challenge is to make prevention more credible and urgent — for officers and even more for soldiers wrestling with depression in a monolithic organization.

Suicides are doubly tragic casualties of war. They are increasing at a record rate — higher than civilian suicide. The task force has laid out a mandate for Congress and the Pentagon to target suicide as a most vital wartime mission.

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A version of this editorial appeared in print on September 2, 2010, on page A34 of the New York edition.

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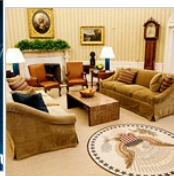
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