

A victory as Army mounts anti-suicide campaign

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DENVER — Army Spc. Joseph Sanders was despondent over the breakup of his marriage and feeling alone in the oppressive heat of an Iraqi summer when he turned his rifle on himself and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened. His buddy, Spc. Albert Godding, had disabled the rifle by removing the firing pin after Sanders told him he was thinking of killing himself.

It was a singular but welcome victory in the Army's battle against suicides, which last year claimed the lives of 163 soldiers on active duty and 82 Guard and Reserve soldiers not on active duty.

Congress ordered the Defense Department in 2008 to study ways to address the problem, and the Army started its own task force last year after an alarming spike in suicides in January and February.

The Army also launched a campaign to teach soldiers how to spot suicide warning signs and what to do about them. Godding credits that training for making him aware of the danger Sanders was in.

"I just reacted like a battle drill," Godding said. "Like muscle memory, you know?"

Godding, now stationed at Fort Carson, Colo., and Sanders, at Fort Polk, La., told their story in telephone interviews after Godding received the Meritorious Service Medal for saving Sanders' life.

The two soldiers were in Iraq together with a 10th Mountain Division artillery battery in 2008 when Sanders' wife said she wanted a divorce, Sanders said.

"It was mid-deployment. Things were getting pretty hectic at the time, the temperature was rising," Sanders said. "I would mainly call her to kind of vent. She was the only person I had to talk to. She just said goodbye."

Sanders told Godding. Godding also noticed Sanders withdrawing from his friends, and recalls Sanders telling him in detail about ways he could take his own life.

One night in August, while they were at a forward operating base in Baghdad to rest and resupply, Godding became concerned enough to remove the firing pin from Sanders' rifle. The next morning, Sanders tried to shoot himself, he said, but the rifle didn't fire.

First he felt shock, as if someone had dumped cold water on him. Then he went into "soldier mode," breaking down the weapon to see what had gone wrong, and discovered the firing pin was missing.

"It all hit me at once. 'Wow, what did I just try to do?'" Sanders said.

Then came relief mixed with anger because he was still in emotional pain and still had to finish a grueling deployment. "I was an emotional wreck. Tears in my eyes," he said.

Godding walked in, and Sanders recalls asking, "Where's my firing pin?"

Godding told a medic to take Sanders to a combat stress center at their post while Godding notified commanders.

"Feeling better took time," said Sanders. "I believe a lot had to do with that I had a mental health specialist to speak to right away."

Sanders has agreed to appear in an upcoming video for the Army's suicide-prevention campaign, said Col. Chris Philbrick, director of the Army Suicide Prevention Task Force.

Philbrick said he doesn't have statistics yet to show whether the campaign is working. The 245 suicides Army-wide in 2009 were nearly 20 percent more than the 197 in 2008. As of late May of this year, the Army had only three fewer suicides than in the same period in 2009, Philbrick said.

Bonnie Carroll, a member of the Defense Department's suicide task force, sees signs that the education effort is improving.

"What we're seeing is a cultural shift in the way military members are being trained today," said Carroll, the founder and chairwoman of the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, or TAPS, which works with the families of military personnel who died in the service.

She cited a recent training session for Marine recruits she witnessed.

"They even said it's not 'if,' it's 'when' you get into a tough place and have difficulty coping, you turn to your buddy" or someone else, Carroll said.

Mike Bowman, whose son Tim killed himself about eight months after returning from Iraq with the Illinois National Guard in 2005, has also noticed a change in the Army's approach.

"Somewhere along the line they went from hiding their heads in the sand to saying, 'We have a problem and we have to be out in the open about it,'" said Bowman, of Forreston, Ill.

Bowman said he fought a long and frustrating battle to get the Army to pay more attention to the mental health of Guardsmen like his son, and it's finally paying off, with better training and evaluation at the end of their deployments.

Kim Ruocco, whose Marine husband, John, took his own life in 2005 after returning from Iraq, said the programs in place today could have helped him.

Seeking help for your mental health was seen as a weakness at the time, Ruocco said, and people like her husband, a major and a pilot, feared losing the trust of their comrades in life-or-death situations.

"They have to trust each other with their lives," said Ruocco, who is now director of suicide education and support for TAPS. "He was afraid that he would let them down or if he made a mistake it would hurt someone."

Sanders said he worried about being stigmatized, but that didn't happen. He's been promoted to corporal and expects another promotion to sergeant.

"I never heard, 'You're weak' or anything like that. If anything, I've heard, 'You were stronger for coming forward.' I've never shaken so many hands in my life," he said.