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The War Comes Home: Rifleman couldn't take any more

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SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

He felt old, "really, really old," the 22-year-old told his parents that last weekend as they strolled Southcenter, chatting about this and that.

Ken Dennis was fresh out of the Marines, finally out of Iraq, flailing financially and filing for divorce from a wife who ran off with a fellow Marine.

The combat rifleman wasn't sleeping much: nightmares. He had tried counseling but only briefly, then he had given up on it.

"At the mall Ken said, 'I just don't want to see 23 after all of this' -- and then he changed subjects in a second," said his father, Joe Dennis, a journalist in Ephrata who plays and replays that strange fly-by conversation in his mind.

His son didn't see 23. On March 21, exactly one year after the first Marine combat deaths in Iraq, the wiry 6-foot-1 soldier who had been a classroom cut-up, a devotee of heavy philosophical tomes and a proud patriot tattooed with the Marine Corps insignia hanged himself from a showerhead in the bathroom of his Renton apartment.

His best friend, Abram Hoffmeister, found him in the bathtub, a belt around his neck, blood vessels in his face exploded.

"It was pretty obvious he was dead," said Hoffmeister, best buddies with Ken since kindergarten in Ephrata.

He had recently set his friend up with an auditing job at the Renton insurance company where he worked. He said Ken was putting in long hours, striving to excel and, finally, was starting to talk about the future, not the past.

"He'd been depressed until he got the job, but then he seemed excited -- happy," said Hoffmeister. "It's not like he was talking suicide or anything."

The young rifleman's suicide didn't make official military lists of "non-hostile," "self-inflicted" deaths in Operation Iraqi Freedom, lists that show 26 overseas Army soldiers and Marines killed themselves as of July 24 this year.

Only two Marines were counted in that toll. Yet the Marine Corps historically has suicide rates higher than any other military branch.

P-I SERIES

This is the first of an occasional series on soldiers returning from Iraq and the challenges that await them at home. We would like to hear from soldiers and their families on the home front or war front. Call 206-448-8030 or e-mail us at WarAtHome@seattlepi.com.



Family photo

Ken Dennis reads a letter from his wife, Rachel. Their breakup was especially nasty, family and friends said.

"The Marine Corps experiences a different life, with fewer creature comforts, more deployments, more field time and more time away from home. That puts added stress on people," said Bryan Driver, a spokesman at Marine Corps headquarters.

Numbers show a rate of 13.2 suicides out of 100,000 Marines for 2003. But military statistics tell only a small part of the story. .

For starters, the numbers don't count attempted suicides.

"Ken told me that, over four years, there were probably six or seven suicides or attempted suicides among people he knew," said Joe Dennis.

Military statistics also don't follow soldiers home, out of uniform, out of the service, and into the stateside messiness of civilian life -- a tricky territory planted with its own potential landmines: broken relationships, money troubles, legal hassles and mental stresses.

"The guys coming home -- their world can start to unravel, it all feels unreal. They feel tired, and old ... some of the Vietnam vets I've interviewed said they felt 10 to 20 years older when they came back," said Michael Phillips, an Issaquah psychologist who counsels war veterans.

Specialty counselors say comments from civilian outsiders can be unnerving -- including the most common and, according to some returning soldiers, "dumbest" of questions: "So -- did you kill anybody?"

When kids popped it out during a high school presentation Ken Dennis gave in Ephrata, the hard-core Marine was shaken.

"We were in combat -- it happened," he answered carefully.

In fact, the rifleman had killed his first man at age 20.

He was struggling with guilt, said his father, opinion page editor at the Grant County Journal. "At one point he told me, 'You know, Dad, it's really hard -- very, very hard -- to see a man's face and kill him.' "

The young corporal -- who had served in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia and Djibouti and had been part of the first Marine presence in Iraq last year -- had always been headstrong. The kid who holed up in his room to read Winston Churchill's five-volume set on World War II dropped out of high school and checked into an alternative school in 10th grade.

Drawn to the idea of being one of "The Few, The Proud," he entered the Marines at 18, and completed the second half of boot camp with pneumonia, running the final endurance tests with a broken foot, laced up tight in his boot.

"He was one tough kid," said his father.

He was 100 percent behind the U.S. effort overseas. "He wasn't just there because of duty. He felt it was something we need to do for the security of our country," said his father.

Nevertheless, scenes from Iraq haunted him.

The combat veteran described being at a checkpoint when a van tried to gun it, after soldiers commanded the driver to "Stop" in English. Marines opened fire, and discovered they had killed an entire family: mother, father, two children.

"That kind of disgusted him," said Hoffmeister.

Ken complained to friends the enemy in Iraq was "hidden" -- that soldiers didn't wear uniforms.

"He always had that bit of a shadow in the back of his mind. 'Did I shoot a fedayeen or did I shoot a civilian?' " said his father, who was later reassured by fellow Marine unit members that his son wasn't a "cowboy," and had taken out only armed combatants.

The rifleman's concern was no anomaly. A New England Journal of Medicine study released in June showed that 28 percent of Marines in Operation Iraqi Freedom said they were responsible for the death of a civilian -- twice the number of Army soldiers who answered yes to that question.

Hoffmeister believes his buddy, honorably discharged from the Marines in mid-January, could have dealt with combat fallout, if it hadn't been tangled up in the collapse of his marriage to the young woman named Rachel he met during leave in Australia -- a woman whose name he would have tattooed over his heart.

Marriage breakups among combat soldiers are common. A Brigham Young University study published in December 2002 -- the same month Ken married his wartime bride -- reported that combat veterans' first marriages were 62 percent more likely to end in separation or divorce than other men's.

And Ken's breakup was particularly nasty, according to his family and friends. He adored his wife, supported her financially, gave her the keys to his car. But after things soured back home, she ran off with a Marine from his squad, a former friend who had served in Iraq with Ken, friends and family said.

The stung young veteran began to hit the bars hard in Renton. Reluctant to talk about Iraq experiences when sober, he couldn't stop talking about them -- and the wife who had "done him wrong" -- after one too many tequilas.

Hoffmeister grew weary of listening, he admits. "After a while, I got agitated hearing about his ex-wife, so I discouraged him from talking about it. I think that was the worst. He needed to talk that out with a counselor."

Ken's family said he apparently did meet briefly with a counselor in the Marines, and was undoubtedly aware of mental health services offered through the service, but opted not to take advantage of them.

"He was a very, very stubborn person," said his father. "That's why he was able to accomplish so much -- but it was also a liability.

"It put him in a situation where he was unwilling, at some emotional level, to reach out and accept help."

In the world of look behind that follows any suicide, Ken's family and friends are left to dissect the what-ifs.

Ken's mother, Shirley Dennis, says her son's jump from military to civilian life was too quick. "There should have had more one-on-one talks with other vets. There should have been more realizing that you just can't kick loose these young boys after what they've experienced and seen."

Little things nag at the mind. Were there missed signals?

Ken's father notes that his son's divorce would have been final June 24, the date of the 23rd birthday he would never see.

His buddy Hoffmeister remembers Ken diving into books on existentialism toward the end. He was also deep into the letters and journals of another suicide victim, '90s punk guru Kurt Cobain. "It was weird," said Hoffmeister.

He wonders, too, if the movie they watched the night before the suicide, with an actress who looked like Ken's wife, was a trigger. A half-hour into the movie, "The Truth About Charlie," Ken abruptly got up and left.

That night, or early the next morning, the rifleman put the belt around his neck and opted out of the world he had left as a young gung-ho Marine -- and re-entered four years later as someone old, "really, really old."

Along with a suicide note, he left a poem he had written for his missing wife.

"All I want is for the hurt to fade

"But everything just stays the same

"I found out the hardest way

"That love and happiness are not the same."

SUICIDE RATES

Although the Army saw a spike in suicides in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2003 -- up to 17.3 suicides per 100,000 soldiers -- rates have fallen since and the overall rate for the Army in 2003 was lower.

Overall suicide rates for military branches were 12.1 per 100,000 in 2003.

The Marine Corps historically has the highest number of suicides, with a projected rate for 2004 of 13.5 per 100,000.

Military suicide rates for young, white males -- the predominant military population -- run below that of civilian populations. In 2003, that civilian demographic had 19 suicides per 100,000.

Warning signs to watch for in returning vets:

- Sadness, a change in personality, talk about death.
- Giving away possessions; making final dispositions of affairs.

- Hoarding medications.
- Talking about "having a plan" or "method" of suicide.

The Army has a 24-hour confidential, toll-free hot line with trained professionals set up to help curb suicides and offer crisis intervention to soldiers. Army One Source: 1-800-464-8017.

Branches of the service offer their own suicide prevention programs, with medical help, chaplains, mental-health care providers and other support personnel:

- Air Force Suicide-Prevention Program: <https://www.afms.mil/afspp>
- Army Suicide-Prevention Program: www.medtrng.com/suicideprevention
- Marine Corps Suicide-Prevention Program: www.usmc-mccs.org/perssvc/prevent/suicide.asp
- Navy Suicide-Prevention Program: www.persnet.navy.mil/PERS601/
- For civilians, National Hope Line Network offers a 24-hour suicide hot line: 1-800-784-2433.

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