Police Suicide: Self-Aid, Buddy-Aid and Personal Courage
by Jeffrey Denning

Richard Brewer, founder of OneWarriorWon.org, who told his story in the book *Warrior SOS: Interviews, Insights and Inspiration*, came home late in the evening after working a shift. His wife and kids were asleep when he walked into the house and sat down alone at the kitchen table. Mentally and emotionally exhausted, he eyeballed his duty pistol in the patrol bag that sat next to him on the floor, and then he grabbed it. Rich had made the decision to end the pain—years of hurt and trauma.

And then he saw it: an advertisement in the daily newspaper caught his attention. He had remembered the trip he had planned for his wife and children, quietly sleeping nearby. The thought was just enough to keep him from pulling the trigger. The trip wasn't as much as a glimmer of hope as it was a promise he had made and intended to keep.

Statistics and Stopping-the-Threat Training

We often hear of officers who die in the line of duty. National organizations, like the Officer Down Memorial Page or the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, as well as news media coverage, are quite prolific in their coverage of such tragedies. However, officers who take their own lives don't get the same public attention, and their names aren't memorialized either.

Twenty years ago, in 1994, there were twice as many officers who committed suicide than those who died in the line of duty. In 1999, Robert Douglas, the executive director of the National P.O.L.I.C.E. Suicide Foundation, said, "We are losing about 300 officers a year to suicide" and "If a jumbo jet with 300 people went down every year, do you think the FAA would ground the jumbo jets and find out what was going on? You bet they would."

Keeping track of the number of police suicides is no easy task, but Ron Clark of the Badge of Life, a police mental health organization, has done extensive research. Because of the difficulty in gathering accurate numbers of officers who commit suicide is so time consuming and challenging, only three years of data has been collected at this time. This study—the most extensive study ever done on the number of police suicides—was called the National Study of Police Suicides. The study included just three years: 2008, 2009, and 2012.

Below are the figures gathered from line of duty deaths along with a comparison to police suicides for the same years. The line of duty deaths listed below were extracted from the ODMP and/or the NLEOMF websites for this article.

2008 line of duty deaths: 153

2008 police suicides: 141

2009 line of duty deaths: 140
2009 police suicides: 143

2012 line of duty deaths: 120
2012 police suicides: 126

The data here is significant, even more so when compared to the data for line of duty deaths over the last ten years. Taking the last decade of law enforcement line of duty deaths into account there were, on average, about one-third of officer deaths by gunfire, one-third of deaths by motor vehicle accidents, and one-third that could be categorized as "other."

Again using average numbers over the last ten years, each year there are about 150 line of duty deaths with 50 of those deaths caused by gunfire and another 50 caused by motor vehicle accidents. Using these averages, combined with the numbers of police suicides listed above, that means there are also 150 police suicides each year—shockingly, the same number of officers who've died in the line of duty! In other words, *there are as many police officers that take their own lives each year as there are killed in the line of duty*.

In fact, during the same time span that Sergeants Cory Wride and Derek Johnson were killed in the line of duty, at least three other law enforcement officers in Utah took their own lives, one being a federal agent.

Law enforcement trainers often focus upon officer safety, specifically firearms training and tactical response. Too, over the last few decades, a lot more has been done to lessen the number of injuries and deaths involving police vehicle accidents (e.g. chase policy changes). Arguably, the intensified focus upon decreasing vehicle accidents has helped spare lives. As far as officer-involved shootings go, police trainers now tend to focus upon avoiding or responding to ambushes and more violent attacks, and rightfully so.

Tactical training and motor vehicle safety training is crucial and much needed. But, given the high number of police suicides, is the training lopsided? Training isn't the only thing that's needed to address this critical issue, of course. Greater awareness and administrative changes are also needed throughout most every department in the nation. The bottom line: Is there enough being done to address these highly disturbing statistics? We talk about mindset and survival, but do we address emotional survival enough?

Thankfully, books like *Emotional Survival for Law Enforcement*, by Kevin Gilmartin, have helped raise greater awareness of the need for mental catharsis and emotional balance within the realm of police work. Fortunately, ten years of military operations overseas have also given awareness to combat stress, too.

Veterans Suicides and Local Demographics

The suicide rate among military veterans has been staggering over the last several years. On average over 22 veterans are taking their lives each day. In 2012 there were more deaths by suicide among those in the military than there were in actual combat operations. Indeed, the years of operational stress had begun to take a significant toll among the forces and it continues with veterans today. Sadly, while veterans make up just 7 percent of the population in the United States, they account for an alarming 20 percent of all suicides.

In a forthcoming documentary film titled, *That Which I Love Destroys Me*, former Delta Force Operator, Tyler Grey is quoted as saying, "Take anyone in the world … no one can hold out forever. Take enough things to happen to a person at one time—enough negative things—and anyone, and everyone, can be broken."

We cannot ignore the fact that a lot of police officers have served—or currently now serve—in a reserve military capacity. This is mentioned not to shun military veterans from working in a law enforcement capacity or to place a stigma upon veterans. On the corollary, enduring the throes of battle offers tactical tools for police officers that operate daily in a paramilitary capacity. That unique experience simply cannot be gained elsewhere.

Moreover, the discipline and maturity veterans have to offer law enforcement circles is beyond compare. Simply said, no other education can compare to military service. When it comes time to selecting candidates for hire, military veterans are undoubtedly law enforcement's greatest candidate pool.

That said, as shown by the aforementioned statics of military veterans committing suicide, having a lot of veterans in law enforcement circles enhances the vulnerability of police suicides. Of course, not all police officers and not all veterans will ever consider taking their own lives. However, whether having served in the military or not, enough stress can break anyone, as mentioned above.

Conversely, working in a law enforcement capacity may not put an individual at a higher risk for committing suicide. Various studies have shown that both police are in a profession that is at higher risk for suicide and, on the other hand, police are simply in a national average for those who take their own lives, given similar demographics (e.g. age, alcohol use, divorce, etc.).

Interestingly, Utah is the second leading state in the nation for the highest number of suicides. There were 574 suicides committed in Utah in 2013, about a dozen more than 2012. In Salt Lake City alone there were 48 suicides and 461 attempted suicides that were reported in 2012. In 2013 there were 47 suicides and 451 attempted suicides reported. According to a local news report, there were 45,000 calls to Salt Lake's crisis hotlines last year.

Recognizing and Getting Help Soon

Sad experience has taught us that police officers are also susceptible to these sad statistics. Cited studies or not, there's no doubt that the law enforcement profession can take a great emotional toll on individuals and families. Unfortunately, most cops are skilled at concealing emotional challenges and personal difficulties. Cops rarely ask for help. No one wants to be seen as weak.

Rubbing some proverbial dirt on an emotional wound and trying to "suck it up" and "tough it out" can cause wounds to fester over time. While speaking with a retired Philadelphia SWAT officer a few years ago, he said that since retiring the two officer-involved shootings he got into began to really weigh heavily upon his mind. Retirement and rest can bring up old memories and have harmful emotional effects of past traumas once endured.

Psychologists have seen an increase of Vietnam veterans who came home from war and got into a lively profession, like law enforcement and/or firefighting, and then later retired. They didn't seem to have problems until they retired. The intensity of emotions faced in these professions can give a continual "fix," like the pill to the addict, for those who need or like adrenaline. But stop the rush and things can come crashing down. Masking problems for years isn't healthy.

Sometimes we may not even recognize that we need help. Often others see the change in us first. It's difficult to see our own emotional wounds reflected in the mirror, since any weakness at all is an image that tough, stereotypical "warriors" aren't supposed to reflect. With careful introspection, however, the warrior with 7 to 10 years on the job may soon begin to realize that a great emotional change has occurred.

Hardening happens to every person who deals with "stupid" people who have or may try to harm them. We go from not trusting others to feeling numb to becoming apathetic. Emotional survival brings dark humor, but isolation, withdrawal and a lack of sympathy for others (even ourselves), can ruin relationships and injure careers. This may be just one of reasons why the founder of the Badge of Life—the same man who conducted that the National Study of Police Suicides—suggests that every officer should go see a mental health counselor annually, whether they feel they need to or not.

An officer from the Dallas police department confided that after losing a friend on the force, and after being involved in multiple police encounters over a decade, including a critical incident, that he felt overwhelmed. The public scrutiny, the Internal Affairs investigations, and the daily grind of police work became mentally and emotionally fatiguing. He went from constantly being on alert and buying extra rounds and a back-up gun after a justified shooting where he felt he'd run out of ammo, to not wanting to shoot, fight or hurt anyone anymore. He lied to everyone and said he was fine, but he started hiding out in church parking lots, just to avoid any encounters with the public that could

forever be second-guessed and publically scrutinized.

He didn't trust the department psychologist, so he lied and said everything was okay following his critical incident. But he knew he wasn't doing well. The emotional toll also began to negatively affect him physically. Fortunately, he decided to go see a private counselor. He continued to work for at least five years following his justified shooting, but he was completely stressed out. He just needed a break. A different job assignment within the department, had it come sooner, might have helped. But instead, one of the most squared away officers in the department, got out of police work altogether.

As mentioned previously, training and awareness isn't the only thing that's needed to curb what could be called an epidemic of police suicide. Administrative acknowledgment and, perhaps more importantly, a compassionate understanding of such stresses, are badly needed. Officers need to feel comfortable enough to get help without feeling they'll lose their job or be ostracized from their peers. Of course, that is no easy task.

Recent comments on social media from a police officer in the Northeast part of the United States, following the suicide of a Trooper there, are worth sharing here. In this article, his full name and the department he works for is left out.

Tony S. writes,

"Rest in peace sister. May God welcome you home. This happens way too often. We lost a platoon member last year. She had asked for help for years and never received it. Instead of help, she received ridicule and rumors. She was never properly honored nor is there anything that even mentions that she was part of our department. [Here] there is no real help for those suffering. The last 'debriefing' I attended was conducted at a bar during happy hour and constantly interrupted by patrons. The perception is that if you need help, the administration will strip you of your weapon, ship you off to the hospital, drug you into submission and you spend the remainder of your career in the rubber gun squad. [Here] we are expendable because there are as one chief put it, 'a thousand other people out there who want that job.' We don't matter or count here. That needs to change."

While no response was gathered from this officer's administration, his perception of how things work within his department is real. His pain is real.

Self-Aid, Buddy-Aid and Courage

A former SWAT operator and Navy SEAL, told me about a horrific battle he was in a few years ago. He said they were attacked and his buddy, literally standing shoulder to shoulder with him, went down. My friend told me, "He was bleeding badly. I threw him a tourniquet. Then, I returned fire... If I hadn't, I wouldn't be here today... My buddy

didn't make it. He bled out. He didn't get the tourniquet on in time."

Most officers would rush to the aid of the fallen and wounded, including those who are emotionally wounded. In the example given above, the former operator threw his buddy a tourniquet. He would have done more if he could.

When it comes to rapid response, we need to not only be our brothers' keepers, we need to get help ourselves when we are in trouble. Sometimes our buddies just can't save us. We need to save ourselves. We need to recognize we're emotionally hemorrhaging, and we must get the tourniquet on ASAP. In other words, as difficult as it may be, we need the courage to help ourselves.

Thankfully, there's a peer support group in Salt Lake City. Unfortunately, other officers within Utah are bereft of that. Regardless, there are programs and people that will help. Yet still, the most critical tool for the law enforcement officer's emotional toolbox is courage. It's takes an extra amount of courage to step forth and get help.

Karl von Clausewitz, the father of modern warfare, "Courage, above all things, is the first quality of a warrior." When it comes to suicide or taking one's own life, officers need courage to not pull the trigger; courage to not drink oneself into further despair; courage to avoid rage and violence at home; courage to believe that it isn't cut-and-dry career sabotage to get help, but that even if it is, that no career is worth more than one's own life.

It may be easy, by comparison, to run into a gunfight. Getting emotional help is entirely another story. This is the crux of the whole matter. Officers who take their own lives are stuck between getting much-needed help and feeling like their career, their relationships and their lives are completely over.

Feelings of guilt, isolation or even incompetence can overwhelm those who suffer in silence. Many who suffer feel like they shouldn't feel the way they do. Ironically, they may feel guilty for feeling guilty. Comparison to warrior archetypes, or what we may conceive or expect a warrior to be, isn't healthy either.

Additionally, we must not underestimate the toll of experiencing primary, secondary or even tertiary traumas. Even interviewing victims of heinous crimes can be overwhelming (e.g. child abuse crimes). From nightmares to sleepless nights and from powerful feelings of anger or rage to the gloom of depression and constant fatigue, sometimes the warrior's bane is terribly stressful.

After experiencing a tragedy, it's normal to question or even second-guess everything we've done. We may regret ever doing what we've done, particularly if we get slammed in the media, on social media or with Internal Affairs. Unfortunately, it can create a huge burden for future confrontation in that we may hesitate the next time a situation occurs that may reflect the first tragedy we've experienced and suffered through—or something other good officers have suffered through. For example, we may ask ourselves "Would it

be better to get bit by a dog now instead of shooting it?"

Whatever the case may be, we must not feel like we haven't endured enough to be suffering. Such inner conflict can be overwhelming. Those who suffer internally may feel justified to feel badly only if they had experienced something truly horrific in their minds. We can compare ourselves to the point of compounding guilt (e.g. "If I had the same experiences as [so and so] then I'd feel justified for feeling the way I do.")

Vicktor Frankl was held captive in a Nazi prison camp. He chose a gas chamber analogy regarding the size of personal suffering. In his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, he wrote, "A man's suffering is similar to the behavior of gas. If a certain quantity of gas is pumped into an empty chamber, it will fill the chamber completely and evenly, no matter how big the chamber. Thus, suffering completely fills the human soul and conscious mind no matter whether the suffering is great or little. Therefore, the 'size' of human suffering is absolutely relative."

In short, believe that whatever you're experiencing that is negative is a huge problem that needs airing out. You and I cannot stay long inside a toxic gas chamber very long without feeling its devastating affects.

In conclusion, for those who end their lives or even attempt suicide, feelings much deeper than failure and toxic pains much more poignant than despair must be saturating their entire lives. As rescuers, we can be understanding, nonjudgmental and compassionate. We can at least throw our buddies an emotional tourniquet. Utilizing these attributes, as well as lending a listening ear, can help do just that. But again, in the end, it's up the every person individually to get the help themselves. Don't wait until things are catastrophic. Don't put a Band-Aid over an amputation. Get help today and try to have hope enough to recognize that after the storm passes, sunshine always appears.