

Post-traumatic stress disorder: gateway to suicide

[Psychology](#), [Psychotherapy](#)



Dangling lifelessly in the locker room of a YMCA in central Iowa, Norman Bowker's life tragically ended. Tim O'Brien tells the story of Norman Bowker in the chapter "Speaking of Courage" of his book *The Things They Carried* (137-154). Once Bowker came back from the war, he spent his days alone circling a lake in his father's Chevy. After a while, he would head down to the A&W to order a burger and fries hoping to find a friend, or just someone to talk to. Bowker had flashbacks of the war, recalling how he let Kiowa go, swearing that he was still alive.

Midnight sweats haunted Bowker as well, making it impossible to attain a good night's rest. All of this contributed to the terrible event that took place in the locker room of the YMCA. Although this happened to a fictional Vietnam veteran, returning soldiers from today's wars are suffering from similar stories. Soldiers coming back from the Iraq/Afghanistan war often have a serious mental illness caused by the stress of serving in the armed forces. The illness is called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and can lead to serious consequences.

In a recent study by the Army, 21.4 percent of lower-ranking enlisted male soldiers showed symptoms of PTSD (Entous). Throughout O'Brien's book, the soldiers had ways to cope with the stress; however, like Norman Bowker, not all could fully live with the ghosts of the war. Suicide caused by PTSD is a terrible end and is all too prevalent throughout veterans. In most cases of suicide from PTSD, the soldier feels like there is no reason to live. An article by Andrew Buncombe and Oliver Duff published in *The Independent* tells a story about an incident that led to suicide.

Thirty-five-year-old army reservist Douglas Barber had been back from Iraq for two years, but he was still having memories of the terrible experiences. He was a member of the 1485th Transportation Company of the Ohio National Guard and was called up for active duty in February of 2003. Barber spent seven months in Iraq, driving trucks while he witnessed his friends being killed around him. After going for medical help and counseling, Barber seemed to be doing better. However, this was not the case. Barber had been in contact with Craig Evans, a student at Bournemouth University, helping with a report on PTSD.

Evans says, " Doug said he wasn't the same person when he got back [from Iraq]—he was paranoid, had lost his social skills, his marriage was over, he couldn't walk down the street without worrying something was going to blow up. " On January 16, 2006, Barber sent an email to Evans stating, " I have nothing to live for any more—I am going to be checking out of this world. " Evans immediately notified police and friends, as well as writing back telling Barber not to do anything stupid. It was too little, too late. Within an hour, Barber called the cops and had a brief standoff only to shoot himself in the head with a shotgun.

He was pronounced dead at the scene. Barber's story is one of many sad suicide stories that truly illustrate what some soldiers are like once they return from the war. Another idea to consider is the number of soldiers that come back with mental problems such as depression. According to Adam Entous's article on Reuters, one in five returning veterans are depressed. As stated before, a survey by the Army found that 21.4 percent of lower-

ranking enlisted male soldiers had mental problems such as anxiety, depression, or acute stress.

This number is significantly higher than the results found in a 2005 survey, where only 10.4 percent were diagnosed with these problems, but it is slightly lower than the 2007 finding of 23.4 percent. There are definitely signs of improvement for soldiers that are currently in Iraq. Only 13.3 percent of soldiers reported these problems, which is down from 18.8 percent in 2007. It is hard to compare Vietnam veterans, who were not studied until 10 to 20 years after the war, to returning soldiers from Iraq/Afghanistan.

Marilyn Elias from USA Today sheds some light on the comparison of the veterans. About 30 percent of Vietnam veterans reported having PTSD symptoms during their lives while 13 percent of troops a few months out of Iraqi combat zones report PTSD. Elias goes on to say: "Today's returning soldiers may recover more easily than Vietnam veterans because the latter were more vilified at home, says psychiatrist Matthew Friedman, executive director of the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder." The acceptance of returning soldiers is a point that many people do not consider.

Current returning soldiers have the luxury of having people with the knowledge to understand the predicament better than those in Vietnam. To summarize, a high number of soldiers returning home have PTSD symptoms; however, that number is decreasing over time. To illustrate the previous point, Armen Keteyian has a very eye-opening article about veterans who felt their only way out was through suicide. Keteyian divulged the shocking

statistic that there were 2200 suicides last year, this does not include the soldiers not on active duty.

He dug deeper to find that in 2005 there were at least 6256 suicides among those who served in the armed forces. That is 120 per week in that year alone. Keteyian also found that veterans are twice as likely to commit suicide as opposed to non-vets. The highest suicide rates for veterans are the vets aged 20 to 24 and are estimated to be three times higher than civilians at that age. Keteyian interviewed Kim and Mike Bowman to find the story on their son. Tim Bowman was an Army reservist who patrolled Airport Road, one of the most dangerous places in Baghdad.

Kim explains, " His eyes when he came back were just dead. The light wasn't there anymore. " On Thanksgiving Day, just eight months after getting back, Tim at the age of 23 shot himself. Keteyian also asked Kevin Lucey a few questions about his son. Jeff Lucey, a twenty-three-year-old Marine Reservist, hanged himself with a garden hose in the cellar of his parent's house. Kevin goes on to say, " There's a crisis going on and people are just turning the other way. " Something clearly needs to be done to help veterans more than we are now.

To further support the preceding remarks, the article " Iraq, Vietnam, and the Dilemmas of United States Soldiers" has some insight on morales of soldiers. In a study done by the Stars and Stripes newspaper in 2003, it found 34 percent of soldiers rated their morale as low or very low and 35 percent were not clear on why they were deployed to Iraq/Afghanistan (" Iraq, Vietnam... "). When this study was run again in 2006, 72 percent of the

soldiers said American troops should exit Iraq within the next year while only 23 percent thought they should stay as long as needed.

These numbers are very similar to the statistics for soldiers who fought in Vietnam. With opinions like this among the soldiers, morales will be low and that can lead to stress and PTSD. At the end of January 2005, more than 600 US soldiers had been evacuated from Iraq for psychiatric reasons. One of them had attempted suicide after he sought out psychiatric assistance, and was sent back to his unit after only five minutes. Some projections say at least 20 percent of soldiers will have problems with PTSD and will require treatment.

Another morale crusher is that soldiers often times fight alongside private-security contractors who can earn upwards of \$200, 000 per year while the soldiers will only make \$25, 000 per year. Low morale can lead to serious mental conditions and eventually PTSD, so finding a way to boost soldier's spirits needs to be a priority for the US. Thus to conclude, PTSD is a mental illness that was prevalent during the Vietnam War and is still a problem in the Iraq/Afghanistan war.

Norman Bowker's story is just one of many stories that end with suicide when something could have possibly been done. Maybe if proper counseling was available at the time, a solution could have been found to prevent the horrible story of his suicide. Overall, current war veterans have very similar circumstances to those that were in the Vietnam War—no one wanted to be there, especially for such an extended length of time. Either way, action needs to be taken now to help these soldiers. Even one suicide is too many.