

**MORE U.S.  
SOLDIERS  
HAVE KILLED  
THEMSELVES  
THAN HAVE  
DIED IN THE  
AFGHAN WAR.  
WHY CAN'T  
THE ARMY  
WIN THE WAR  
ON SUICIDE?**

BY MARK THOMPSON AND NANCY GIBBS



# LESLIE MCCADDON SENSED THAT THE ENEMY HAD RETURNED WHEN SHE OVERHEARD HER HUSBAND ON THE PHONE WITH THEIR 8-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER. "DO ME A FAVOR," HE TOLD THE LITTLE GIRL. "GIVE YOUR MOMMY A HUG AND TELL HER THAT I LOVE HER."

She knew for certain when she got his message a few minutes later. "This is the hardest e-mail I've ever written," Dr. Michael McCaddon wrote. "Please always tell my children how much I love them, and most importantly, never, ever let them find out how I died... I love you. Mike"

She grabbed a phone, sounded every alarm, but by the time his co-workers found his body hanging in the hospital call room, it was too late.

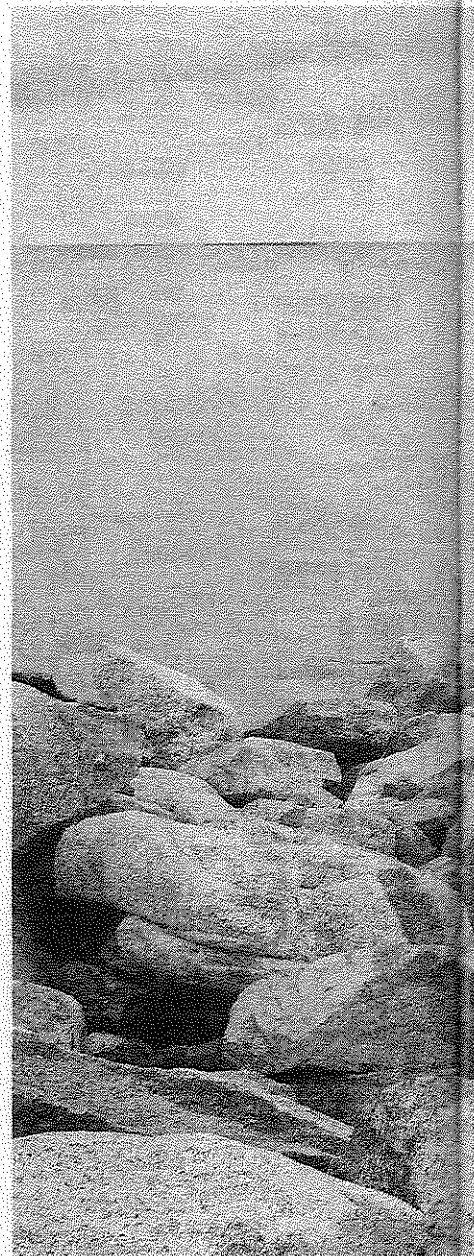
Leslie knew her husband, an Army doctor, had battled depression for years. For Rebecca Morrison, the news came more suddenly. The wife of an AH-64 Apache helicopter pilot, she was just beginning to reckon with her husband Ian's stress and strain. Rebecca urged Ian to see the flight surgeon, call the Pentagon's crisis hotline. He did—and waited on the line for more than 45 minutes. His final text to his wife: "STILL on hold." Rebecca found him that night in their bedroom. He had shot himself in the neck.

Both Army captains died on March 21, a continent apart. The next

day, and the next day, and the next, more soldiers would die by their own hand, one every day on average, about as many as are dying on the battlefield. These are active-duty personnel, still under the military's control and protection. Among all veterans, a suicide occurs every 80 minutes, round the clock.

Have suicides spiked because of the strain of fighting two wars? Morrison flew 70 missions in Iraq over nine months but never engaged the enemy directly. McCaddon was an ob-gyn resident at an Army hospital in Hawaii who had never been to Iraq or Afghanistan. Do the pride and protocols of a warrior culture keep service members from seeking therapy? In the three days before he died, Morrison went looking for help six times, all in vain. When Leslie McCaddon alerted commanders about her husband's anguish, it was dismissed as the result of a lovers' quarrel; she, not the Army, was the problem.

This is the ultimate asymmetrical war, and the Pentagon is losing. "This issue—suicides—is perhaps the most frustrat-



ing challenge that I've come across since becoming Secretary of Defense," Leon Panetta said June 22. The U.S. military seldom meets an enemy it cannot target, cannot crush, cannot put a fence around or drive a tank across. But it has not been able to defeat or contain the epidemic of suicides among its troops, even as the wars wind down and the evidence mounts that the problem has become dire. While veterans account for about 10% of all U.S. adults, they account for 20% of U.S. suicides. Well trained, highly disciplined, bonded to their comrades, soldiers used to be less likely than civilians to kill themselves—but not anymore.

More U.S. military personnel have died by suicide since the war in Afghanistan began than have died fighting there. The rate jumped 80% from 2004 to 2008, and

**TO GET HELP**

**National suicide-prevention hotline**  
1-800-273-8255

**Army suicide-prevention website**  
[www.armyp1.army.mil/hr/suicide](http://www.armyp1.army.mil/hr/suicide)

**Real Warriors suicide-prevention website**  
[www.realwarriors.net/family-support/preventsuicide.php](http://www.realwarriors.net/family-support/preventsuicide.php)

**Department of Veterans Affairs suicide-prevention website**  
[www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide\\_prevention](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention)

**For families who have lost a loved one in uniform to suicide**  
[www.taps.org/survivors/survivor.aspx?id=6320](http://www.taps.org/survivors/survivor.aspx?id=6320)

*Leslie McCaddon  
and her children clamber over the  
rocks near her parents' home in  
Rockport, Mass., where she now lives*



while it leveled off in 2010 and 2011, it has soared 18% this year. Suicide has passed road accidents as the leading noncombat cause of death among U.S. troops. While it's hard to come by historical data on military suicides—the Army has been keeping suicide statistics only since the early 1980s—there's no denying that the current numbers constitute a crisis.

THE SPECIFIC TRIGGERS FOR SUICIDE ARE unique to each service member. The stresses layered on by war—the frequent deployments, the often brutal choices, the loss of comrades, the family separation—play a role. So do battle injuries, especially traumatic brain injury and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). And the constant presence of pain

and death can lessen one's fear of them.

But combat trauma alone can't account for the trend. Nearly a third of the suicides from 2005 to 2010 were among troops who had never deployed; 43% had deployed only once. Only 8.5% had deployed three or four times. Enlisted service members are more likely to kill themselves than officers, and 18-to-24-year-olds more likely than older troops. Two-thirds do it by gunshot; 1 in 5 hangs himself. And it's almost always *him*: nearly 95% of cases are male. A majority are married.

No program, outreach or initiative has worked against the surge in Army suicides, and no one knows *why* nothing works. The Pentagon allocates about \$2 billion—nearly 4% of its \$53 billion annual medical bill—to mental health. That simply isn't

enough money, says Peter Chiarelli, who recently retired as the Army's second in command. And those who seek help are often treated too briefly.

Army officials declined to discuss specific cases. But Kim Ruocco directs suicide-prevention programs at the nonprofit Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, or TAPS. She knows what Leslie McCaddon and Rebecca Morrison have endured; her husband, Marine Major John Ruocco, an AH-1 Cobra helicopter-gunship pilot, hanged himself in 2005. These were highly valued, well-educated officers with families, with futures, with few visible wounds or scars; whatever one imagines might be driving the military suicide rate, it defies easy explanation. "I was with them within hours of the deaths," Ruocco says of the





Devoted dad Mike McCaddon shaved his head when his son was diagnosed with leukemia in 2005, above; below, a 2007 family photo and his daughter's 2009 snapshot of him



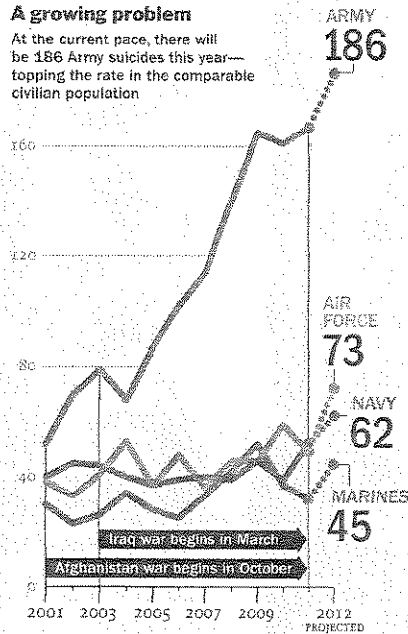
Since 2001, 4,486 U.S. troops have died in Iraq...

1,950

## Self-Inflicted Crisis Military suicides are at record levels, but the causes are unclear

### A growing problem

At the current pace, there will be 186 Army suicides this year—topping the rate in the comparable civilian population



\*Through June 10. Note: Statistics apply to all Defense personnel for 2010. Source: U.S. Department of Defense; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Who commits suicide in the military?

95% ARE MALE

85% of the military is male

95% ARE ENLISTED

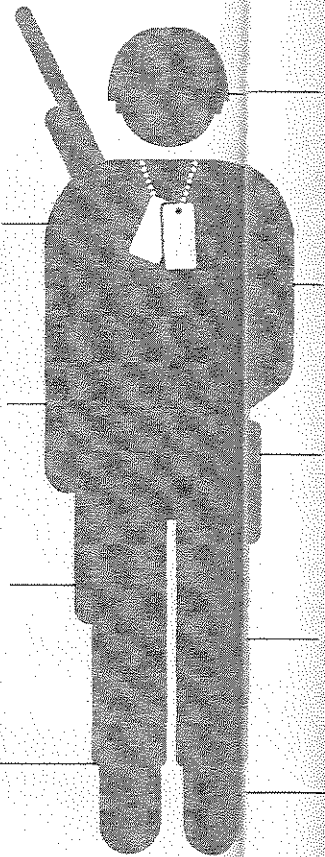
83% of the military is enlisted

80% ARE WHITE

70% of the military is white

47% ARE UNDER 25

36% of the military is under 25



two new Army widows. "I experienced it through their eyes." Their stories, she says, are true. And they are telling them now, they say, because someone has to start asking the right questions.

### The Bomb Grunt

MICHAEL MCCADDON WAS AN ARMY BRAT born into a uniquely edgy corner of the service: his father served in an ordnance-disposal unit, and after his parents divorced, his mother married another bomb-squad member. McCaddon entered the family business, enlisting at 17. "When I joined the Army I was 5'10" and weighed 129 lbs," he blogged years later. "I had a great body... for a girl." But basic training made him stronger and tougher; he pushed to get the top scores on physical-fitness tests; he took up sky-diving, snorkeling, hiking. If you plan

to specialize in a field in which a single mistake can cost you and your comrades their lives, it helps to have high standards. "Ever since I was new to the Army, I made it my personal goal to do as well as I can," he recalled. "I thought of it as kind of a representation of my being, my honor, who I was."

The Army trained him to take apart bombs. He and his team were among the first on the scene of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, combing the ruins for any other devices, and he traveled occasionally to help the Secret Service protect then First Lady Hillary Clinton. He met Leslie in 1994 during a break in her college psychology studies. They started dating, sometimes across continents—he did two tours in Bosnia. During a Stateside break in January 2001, he married Leslie in Rancho Santa Fe, Calif. They had three

children in four years, and McCaddon, by then an active-duty officer, moved with his family to Vilseck, Germany, where he helped run an Army dental office.

He was still ambitious—two of Leslie's pregnancies had been difficult, so he decided to apply to the military's medical school and specialize in obstetrics. But then, while he was back in Washington for his interview, came a living nightmare: his oldest son, who was 3, was diagnosed with leukemia. Just before entering med school, McCaddon prepared for his son's chemotherapy by shaving his head in solidarity so the little boy wouldn't feel so strange. McCaddon may not have been a warrior, but he was a fighter. "I became known as a hard-charger," he wrote. "I was given difficult tasks, and moved through the ranks quickly." He pushed people who didn't give 100%; he pushed himself.

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1,950 have died in Afghanistan...

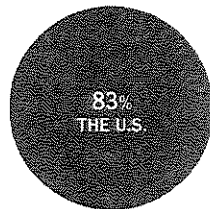
... and 2,676 have died by suicide\*

\* = 100 troops

41%

HAD RECEIVED  
OUTPATIENT  
BEHAVIORAL-  
HEALTH SERVICES

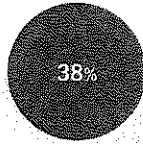
Location  
of suicide



34%

COMMUNICATED  
THE INTENT TO  
DIE TO SOMEONE

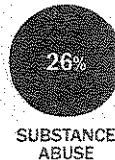
Deployment  
and  
combat



30%

HAD A FAILED  
INTIMATE  
RELATIONSHIP IN  
THE PRIOR MONTH

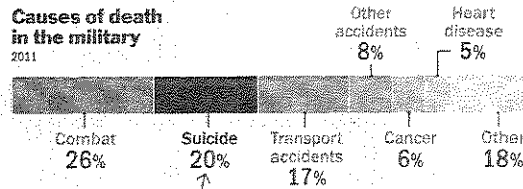
Behavioral  
health



20%

WERE PRESCRIBED  
ANTIDEPRESSANTS

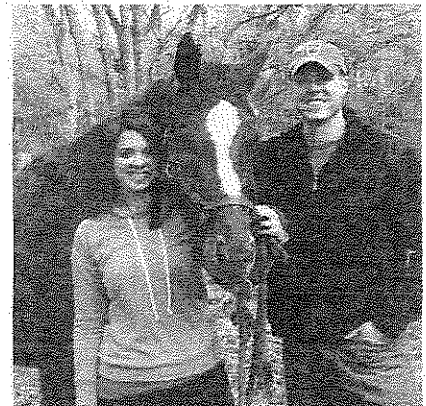
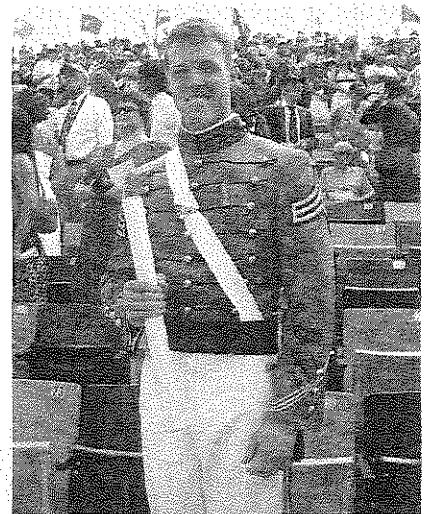
Causes of death  
in the military  
2011



14%

HAD PREVIOUSLY  
INJURED THEMSELVES

Compared with 7% of deaths among civilian men ages 17 to 60



Long gray line Ian Morrison graduated from the U.S. Military Academy in 2007; top, above, with Rebecca and their horse Ike in January

### The Apache Pilot

IAN MORRISON WAS BORN AT CAMP LEJEUNE in North Carolina, son of a Marine. An honor student at Thomas McKean High School in Wilmington, Del., he sang in the chorus, ran cross-country and was a co-captain of the swimming team before heading to West Point. He had a wicked sense of humor and a sweet soul; he met Rebecca on a Christian singles website in 2006 and spent three months charming her over the phone. One night he gave her his credit-card information. "Buy me a ticket, because I'm going to come see you," he told her before flying to Houston. "The minute I picked him up," she recalls, "we later said we both knew it was the real deal." He proposed at West Point when she flew in for his graduation.

Morrison spent the next two years at Fort Rucker in Alabama, learning to fly

the two-seat, 165-m.p.h. Apache helicopter, the Army's most lethal aircraft. He and his roommate, fellow West Pointer Sean McBride, divided their time among training, Walmart, church, *Seinfeld* and video games, fueled by macaroni and cheese with chopped-up hot dogs. Morrison and Rebecca were married two days after Christmas 2008 near Dallas. The Army assigned him to an aviation unit at Fort Hood, so they bought a three-bedroom house on an acre of land just outside the town of Copperas Cove, Texas. They supported six African children through World Vision and were planning to have some kids of their own. "We had named our kids," Rebecca says.

Morrison was surprised when the Army ordered him to Iraq on short notice late in 2010. Like all young Army officers, he saluted and began packing.

### Triggers and Traps

ONE THEORY OF SUICIDE HOLDS THAT people who feel useful, who feel as if they belong and serve a larger cause, are less likely to kill themselves. That would explain why active-duty troops historically had lower suicide rates than civilians. But now experts who study the patterns wonder whether prolonged service during wartime may weaken that protective function. Service members who have bonded with their units, sharing important duties, can have trouble once they are at a post back home, away from the routines and rituals that arise in a close-knit company. The isolation often increases once troops leave active duty or National Guardsmen and reservists return to their parallel lives. The military frequently cites relationship issues as a predecessor to suicides; that irritates