

MY FRIEND, A STORY ABOUT WARRIOR SUICIDE

By Stephen R. Swirczynski

I am writing this article to talk about my friend New Milford and longtime Bergen County resident, and retired Teaneck Firefighter, Technical Sergeant James P. Connors of the United States Air Force Reserve. This man has truly become a humanitarian and an empathetic shepherd caring for his fellow war veterans and first responders. After retiring from the Teaneck Fire Department and completing seven deployments all over the Middle East combining Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Afghanistan, James found himself getting involved in *Save a Warrior* and combating veteran suicide or what the people of S.A.W. call "Warrior Suicide." A New York City policeman named John Vitale got James interested in S.A.W. When he decided he was going to get involved in this situation that was breaking his heart. James himself, has dealt with bouts of sadness and survivors guilt in the past from the effects of war, but now he has found a whole new road less traveled in this fight against the alarming rate of losing 20 veterans a day related to Post Traumatic Stress.

James has said many times there is nothing sadder than to hear when a man or woman returns home from war and then—during peacetime—takes their own life. Those are our brothers and sisters and our mothers and fathers. So what is S.A.W.? What is this program that keeps this man traveling to California every month? And traveling to Lexington, Kentucky in the summers over the past 3½ years, on his own dime and free time?

S.A.W. is a one-week-long, in residence, war detox, or what is coming to be known in certain circles as a model reverse boot camp. It's a 501(c) (3) tax-exempt organization and is a resiliency program specifically designed for supporting our Warriors to heal from the sometimes devastating effects of war. S.A.W. is open to veterans, active duty military, reservists, National Guardsman along with first responders who, on a regular basis, have to deal with trauma. S.A.W. is the last house on the block. Most who come to this program have already taken suicide attempts to end their lives and make the pain go away.

James has spent 3½ years' worth of volunteering almost 1,700 hours, helping 444 Warriors take their lives back. He has had an effect on 200 families and states it makes him more humble every time he is given the honor to come back and work with S.A.W. James helps others find and maintain a community of healing. The veterans learn meditation twice a day for 20 minutes, the Warriors work with Horses, and have equine-supported learning, along with a ropes course, and team building exercises that give our men and women the tools to take back their lives, put the trauma in the past, where it belongs. James helps them to learn and write a new story to tell for their lives as Servant Leaders. S.A.W. provides the toolbox to deal with life's everyday issues. Is one week going to fix all of your problems? Of course not; you will still have bills and family matters to contend with; however... TSgt James Connors shows and supports our Warriors as they learn to deal with life's issues on a completely different level. It is a healing community of LOVE.

What is unfortunate is the numbers that James throws at me all the time. The most recent VA Study shows that 20 veterans a day take their own lives; but going by these numbers, that's a veteran nearly every hour of every day; that's nearly 7,500 veterans a year. 500,000 have sought treatment for Post-Traumatic Stress. Post-Traumatic Stress has killed more of our Warriors than the tragedies of 9/11 and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan combined.

James was with Jake Clark the founder of "Save a Warrior" and his mentor when he stated so soberly at the WebMD awards two years ago "It's a holocaust in slow motion." A *New York Times* reporter wrote about this epidemic. What that *New York Times* reporter failed to mention is that there are now over 58,000 names on the Vietnam Wall in Washington D.C.; however, what he did not tell you is that there are 150,000 names that are not on that wall of Vietnam veterans that committed suicide after returning home. Instead, those names get carved on the

hearts of the loved ones left behind wondering "why?" Why did this happen?

In this world there are amazing selfless people and I have learned there is no greater advocate for peace than a man who has been to war. James is truly paying it forward. He continues to put the needs of others and the relief of so many veterans and first responders before his own. He is giving our veterans and first responders love and spiritual initiation. That's what our Warrior's need, and want. They need love, they need understanding and patience. Karl Marlantes, author of the book *What it is Like to Go to War* writes, "Our entire nation builds the rifle piece by piece and it's the veteran that goes to war and pulls the trigger for all of us."

In ending this story about my friend, sometimes in life the most important crosses beside his own that we will bear are the crosses in our lives that belong to someone else. Thus, how well we bear our personal crosses, whether of our own making or an accident by birth, is much less of a story than how well we carry the crosses of family, friends other Warriors and most importantly the crosses of strangers. What I have found is that it is very rarely in life we have an opportunity to select the crosses that we are compelled to carry. TSgt Connors has become a humble bystander and shepherd among great men and women who are giving aid in the fight and support effort to help men and women returning home from our current conflicts in war or in support of protecting our communities along with lives and property.

I would like to quote what James says to me sometimes "If I could tell someone who is suffering and in pain or isolating themselves from the world, I would say hang on, we are here, and it helps me to help you. There is no more need to travel alone for if you just look around you will see we are all on the same train."

James, thanks for being a good friend and becoming an inspiration in our community. Those wishing more info on S.A.W., please check out saveawarrior.org [saveawarrior/facebook](https://www.facebook.com/saveawarrior). You can contact James at jimmy@saveawarrior.org if you or someone you know needs help. ■

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When applying for the plates, please follow the instructions.

1. Complete your portion of the application making sure to answer all questions. THE ORGANIZATIONAL LIAISON LINE WILL BE SIGNED AT DEPARTMENT HEAD-QUARTERS.
2. Make a check or money order payable to: **THE AMERICAN LEGION, DEPT. OF NEW JERSEY** in the amount of \$35.00.
3. Make a copy of your **current membership card** and **your vehicle registration**. (Please note that registration renewal is a separate transaction. If your registration has lapsed, the Motor Vehicle Commission will not issue Legion Plates.)
4. Submit your **completed application, check or money order, a copy of your current membership card, and registration to:**
John D. Baker, Department Adjutant, The American Legion, Dept. of New Jersey, Building 5, 2nd Floor, 171 Jersey Street, Trenton, NJ 08611.
 Please contact Department Headquarters for the application and any questions you may have at 609-695-5418. ■