

N.A.F.F.V.N.

<firefighterveteran.com>

In Memory of Senior Fire Fighter Rod Spycher, I.A.F.F. Local 255

Father, Husband, Fire Fighter Veteran, Rubber Boot Warrior, Co-Worker

“Amicus”

“Iactura Paucorum Serva Multos”

A Discussion paper delivered to the Baltimore Symposium on Suicide in
the

American Fire Service

Sponsored by Section 13 of the

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B.C.S.M. A.A.E.T.S.

“Festina Lente” from latin to English Hurry Slowly”

Motto of N.A.F.F.V.N.

Firefighter veterans under the direction and formation of North American Fire Fighter Veteran Network came into existence about March of 2002 after the writer was challenged by a Vietnam veteran to form a veterans group for firefighters in the aftermath of the 9/11 event. His comment was to form a veterans organization before the wave of suicides started post 9/11 so that there would be in place a Firefighter Veteran's organization that could make a difference and save lives due to stress related issues and suicides. He also said that the Vietnam Veterans waited for help for far too long before realizing that they had to “help themselves” a result of which far too many good men had taken their own lives needlessly or in the hopelessness/haplessness of isolation without the help or support of the units they had served in and been discharged from.

Shortly after the challenge to form was given, ten members active and retired and disabled met in conference in Calgary Alberta Canada to form the North American Fire Fighter Veteran Network.

North American Fire Fighter Veteran Network gives full credit to the spirit and honouring that Vietnam Veterans have shown with their dedication and knowledge regarding “stress woundings” inclusive of Post Traumatic Stress.

“Not All Wounds are Visible”. We take the Vietnam Veteran’s mentoring of our organization as a gift and cherish the wisdom that they offered then and to the present in our day to day and long term strategic goals.

Since that time the goal of N.A.F.F.V.N. organizationally under it’s original mandate has been to educate our front line “Rubber Boot Warriors” in regards to “operational stress injuries” to the mind, body and spirit through speaking and outreach dialogue to firefighters in active service, full time and volunteer as well as those who are retired and disabled.

The mandate also includes new rookies who need to be exposed to the educational material in current literature beyond that which they are required to read and be examined on.

Getting timely, accurate information so that the delivery of a stress inoculation program

in regards to the “occupational stress woundings” of the service that they would be exposed to as full time or volunteer firefighters has become

North American Fire Fighter Veteran Networks only mission.

The addition of a web site at firefighterveteran.com carries this message actively today and will continue to do so into the future under the headline program of F.I.R.S.T. S.T.E.P. H.O.P.E. care for the caregiver. This will be combined with the additional development of the "F.I.R.E.S. Within literature F.I.R.E.S. standing for "Firefighter Increased Risk Exposure to Suicide".

F.I.R.S.T. S.T.E.P. H.O.P.E. acronym stands for

-Firefighters Initial Response to Stressful Trauma,

-Sound Off, Tell a Friend, co-worker someone you trust, clergy or a culturally competent psychologist,

-Have

-Options

-Prior to

-Engaging in the Process or Exiting the Profession.

The Vietnam Veterans advised us that we should look at recovery from a position of "one veteran at a time" and not think about "saving" the hundreds of thousands or thousands or hundreds but to do so using the

“power of one”. “One veteran at a time”. To that we continue to hold fast to our defined vision and mission to the current presentation of this paper to the Baltimore Symposium.

N.A.F.F.V.N. uses the following acronyms to help open the dialogue between firefighterveterans and outside agencies which are trying to help us cope with the amplified stress levels current to operational readiness and dispatches from the front lines of America. We share these as a part of this symposium and have them recorded in the Section 13 Article Archives of the EveryoneGoesHome Fire Fighter Life Safety Initiatives.

H.O.T. meaning Hazardous Overload of Thoughts

W.E.T. meaning Wasted Emotional Thoughts

A.I.R. meaning Accept Individual Responsibility

H.E.A.T. meaning Heavy Emotional Afterthoughts

We are adding a new acronym for this conference and include it here in this paper:

“F.I.R.E.S. Within” meaning Fire Fighter Increased Risk Exposure to Suicide.

Firefighterveterans we have talked with in the older generation that has had the benefit of 25 to 35 years of wisdom learned from the front lines of the

fire service do not want the “new generation of firefighters coming up” behind them to be lost in the “emotional smoke of traumatic events that they will be exposed to”. The toxic hazardous material of “Blood, Sweat and Fears” repeated over thousands of runs that will be taken before they too will retire from active professional or volunteer duty is something that needs to happen with education exposure to material that is supportive and informative. Information that will keep them out of the emotional smoke of the many traumatic events that will form and shape their career and life outlooks on the front firelines and the home front as well.

Information that educates and insulates to the fullest level of emotional p.p.e. in the body mind soul of those who serve both young and old and older.

The epidemic of suicide is one of those “educational outreaches” that can make a difference to “long term outcomes” and survival on the fire ground deep inside each and every one who serves on Americas Front Fire Lines .

There is a psychological and moral injury to the profession when we fail to use the tools we have to prevent the tragedy of suicides amongst us from the lack of understanding from the F.I.R.E. S. that rage within us due to

occupational stress woundings (O.S.I.) we are unable to recover from.

The drama and the trauma of headless children, dying pregnant mothers, decapitated fathers and teenagers, the full run perspective of the lack of mercy that death holds on Americas Highways Cities and Towns.....we know what those events are and need to talk about them.

If we do not want to invent another wheel here then we also need to admit that we have the information and we KNOW WHAT WE NEED TO DO TO GET THE JOB DONE.

So, WHAT HAS GONE WRONG IN THE PROCESS?

NAFFVN uses the following greek words

Bie meaning "might" and Metis meaning "artifice, strategy, cunning tricks".

WE NEED TO THROW THE KITCHEN SINK AND THE KITCHEN TABLE ALONG WITH ANYTHING WE HAVE AT THE PROBLEM. IT IS NOT ROCKET SCIENCE HERE.

What we feel has gone wrong is the Leadership Particulars in the American Fire Service.

F.I.R.E.S. WITHIN leadership that protects the fire lines from the front with cohesion and training and dispensing with the EGOS that go with trying to compete with the other guy to become Lt., Captain or Chief.

The Command Climate is NOT a WEATHER REPORT of atmospheric and mood. It is the observed TRUSTWORTHINESS of how “POWER is EMPLOY’D”.

There are no atheists in the trenches when the war gets started.

THE FIRST CASUALTY OF WAR IS TRUTH. And to date we have been unable to grasp the incipient truth of suicide and that is why we are here at this symposium.

We have been battling the ancient “F.I.R.E.S. Within” as long as the first uncontrolled flareup set fire to the original cave and contents. Mr and Mrs Caveman Grugg had to stop being domestic and become firefighters in order to save the cave.

There are no “PRIVATE WRONGS” in the application of power in any fire service organization. When a fire department leader violates what is right in the use of power the injury affects everyone.

In speaking of prevention of psychological and moral injury

(F.I.R.E.S. Within) the “moral injury” has mainly to do with how power is used in the “high stakes of benefits, budgets and beliefs”.

An obvious example is the time between a physical or psychological injury

and the compensation delivery of funding for the 911 rescue workers.

Ten years.

The use or misuse of power in high stakes situations if it be one to one or a crew or a town or city, is immediate and devastating. New Orleans Fire Department and Katrina as a model.

The fire service attrition rate goes up and those who could fill the ranks in volunteering or full time professional service DECLINES. Cause and effect.

Action and reaction. The fire service in motion in emergency becomes Emotion in result and aftermath.

We are currently looking at the suicide rates in the industry in this symposium.

N.A.F.F.V.N. believes that "Suicide" is a form of "psychological and motivational desertion" in it's extreme but none the less it is exactly that.

If the stakes have been and are "life and death" and the betrayal bad enough the individual will motivate by leaving the service before fully completing a reasonable length of career commitment as a full time or volunteer firefighter.

SUICIDE ATTRITES THOSE FIREFIGHTERVETERANS WHOSE CAPACITY FOR SOCIAL TRUST IN THE SYSTEM HAS BEEN DESTROY'D.

They are lost in the Emotional Smoke of events they have been exposed to.

We have "NO BUSINESS OF BEING IN THE BUSINESS" of helping others in the community at large unless we recognize that WE TOO ARE A COMMUNITY and WE TOO need to help ourselves and recognize the attrition that goes with the hazardous toxic waste of ptsd injury and suicides in the service.

The "Social Trust" of our fire service leadership has been sadly slow in recognizing the need. Front line firefighterveterans recognize this.

The simple truth is in the numbers of suicides we are experiencing today.

In discussing Suicides we must be inclusive of Post

Traumatic Stress as a Key component in understanding why a firefighter will consider committing suicide while serving in an organization that is so deidcated to the preservation of life up to and inclusive of the violence

against his/her own personal commitment to the preservation of their own life. The levelness of life and positive life affirmation as a whole meaningful activity has left the individual hero far behind.

The act of suicide becomes a hero's last statement of fact in his or her career. This act we call suicide becomes "an active statement against the psychological wounding that goes deep into the basement of the individual firefighter/veteran.

Beyond P.T.S.D., suicide for firefighters is not a passive statement of the damnation against what we have been doing. It is, to our firefighter/veteran way of thinking, an "in your face, kick to the administrative butt of those who would say they lead us." It is a way of showing a "bureaucratic absence of presence" in the understanding of p.t.s.d. and suicide, the silent deadly killers amongst us to the physical self and the emotional soul of the exposed individual. As deadly and silent as Carbon Monoxide.

The "F.I.R.E.S. Within" suicide prevention program of N.A.F.F.V.N. can be delivered with abundant courage and intelligent educational literature that is found on the fire ground where these events are taking place.

See F.D. Houston for a model program of suicide prevention using every tool possible to do the outreach. (information attached)

F.I.R.E.S. Within is a suicide prevention program in the public health concepts that give us straightforward ways to think about prevention. Primary prevention gets rid of the thing that is injuring: secondary prevention creates equipment, practices, or arrangements that reduce the frequency and severity of the injury: tertiary prevention is “Early Recognition and Treatment of the Injury Before” it becomes disabling or permanent or complications (p.t.s.d. or suicide) sets in. Primary prevention of psychological and moral injury in the American Fire Service is a permanent end to the “empty fire bucket” that p.t.s.d. and suicide woundings leave us with. If we keep dispatching the same rigs to the incident we will continue to suffer the same outcomes. The F.I.R.E.S. Within each of us are incipient and building to a “backdraft of emotions”. The rite mixture of fuel and air will cause our stress levels to explode in any one of us due to our traumatic exposure and for some, the traumatic woundings that never go away. Changing rigs is not good enough, we need to change the way we dispatch the response. We go big or go home with the level of the response and surround and drown the problem. That part of the fireground equation for successful management of the problem has not changed as far as the tactics are concerned.

Secondary prevention is any fire service policy, equipment, culture and practice that reduces the frequency and severity of the injury.

Tertiary prevention is early, expert, and far - forward recognition and treatment of injury as they happen. (Again see the Houston Integrated CISM and CISM D model along with psychological support services and chaplancy and peer support, educational outreach at ALL LEVELS, rookie, crew, Lt., Capt. through all command levels up to the chief.

In the "F.I.R.E.S. Within" model of N.A.F.F.V.N., the preventive psychiatry at the secondary level is and must be in the hands of line leaders, trainers, and policy makers not in the hands of support personnel like doctors, psychologists, or chaplains.

The goal is for prevention of the devastating injuries due to P.T.S.D. woundings and choosing the final solution of suicide from the F.I.R.E.S. Within that brings to the firefighter/veteran no other solution or way out of the emotional smoke of the event (s) that are devastating his or her life.

There must be change and H.O.P.E. as a F.I.R.S.T. S.T.E.P. in order to begin the process of recovery for the psychologically wounded firefighter/veteran.

It will take cohesion, leadership and training as part of the three legged

stool we sit on to bring this to the here and now.

Cohesion means keep our people on the fireline together. They train and eat and sleep as a team, they are dispatched into danger together and return to quarters together from the fireline, they spend time together on and off the job. Stability is a necessary condition for cohesion to develop. If P.T.S.D. or a "Trauma Event" causes an upset in the cohesion of a team then let them work on working it out together. Let them reach for all of the tools in the tool box and not be the fools in the fool box looking for something that is not there for them to use.

Let's give them the tools to get the job done.

A second leg on the stool is expert, ethical, and properly supported leadership inclusive of telling the truth so that policies, practices, culture and command climate reward truth not punish it. It should be "safe to tell the truth" about how you are feeling and how the trauma in your trauma trunk of memories is affecting you. Lack of safety in telling the truth in order for the system to "look good" in regards to reporting of intrusiveness of traumatic recall. (including reporting a departmental suicide from front line stress).

Not reporting suicides at the department level to the national reporting

system is a sure way to “poison the fire service” and strangle its strategic impact on the outcome of fire and rescue efforts. We cannot change what we do not know needs changing, we can only react to what we see or preserve we can see. Seeing beyond the emotional smoke of suicide is instinctive and intuitive as well as being scientifically factual towards the gathering of information to base our reactions to it. There is however ample proof that suicide is happening and in increasing numbers in the fire service. The statistical equations and additions may not be of importance here. If suicide happens to one of us in the fire service then a little of ourselves dies with that firefighter/veteran just as surely as we die a little from our L.O.D.'s. We can do better than that with our knowledge and passion directed towards a very solvable problem.

Firefighting personnel are not machines or equipment. They are the human skin and bones that put machines and equipment to work for positive outcomes. Realistic exposure to training and training literature has been the spine in the modern fire service that keeps the firefighter/veteran upright and operational.

When the load is too heavy from poor training the front line suffers and that need not be so especially in regards to Post Traumatic Stress Woundings and Increased Risk Exposure to Suicide as a result of untreated P.T.S.D. wounded firefighters.

Cohesion, leadership and training are what creates and maintains trust amongst us.

The endstate of cohesion, leadership and training is “Trust” and “Truth”.

If we here at this conference can at the end of the day, look eachother in the eye and say “I am part of your future, and you are a part of mine, then we will have embraced the opportunity for change and for a positive outcome to the devastation that Suicide in the American Fire Service is having on the front lines of our firefighter community.

Through the Blood, Sweat and Fears,

There is no easy or simple way of doing this except to simply begin.

More information is available on line from the section 13 Firefighter Life Safety Initiative “Mental Health and Wellness in the Fire Service” of the National Fallen Firefighter Foundation and with the web site: firefighterveteran.com dedicated to the front line firefighterveterans who serve so brilliantly every minute of every hour of every day, week, month and year into the eternal flame of the future, understanding that there is a great moral imperative that is needed to shed light on the hidden danger of Post Traumatic Stress and Suicide in the modern fire service.

Credit:

This paper references the work by Jonathan Shay, M.D., Ph.D., D.V.A. Outpatient Clinic and Tufts Dept. of Psychiatry, Boston, MA from his working paper titled:

“Achilles and Odysseus Today”

“What Homer Can Tell Us About Military Leadership” in his delivery to the Rouman Classical Lecture at the University of New Hampshire