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kcurthoys@militarytimes.com  
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tsouth@militarytimes.com

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atilghman@militarytimes.com  
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ssnow@militarytimes.com  
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slosey@militarytimes.com  
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galtman@militarytimes.com  
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# COMMANDOS TO COUNSELORS: A RESPONSE TO SPEC OPS FORCES' MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

There is a growing mental health crisis among members of the U.S. Special Operations Forces community that is not being adequately addressed.

On Feb. 2, 2019, CNN reported that suicides among those currently serving with U.S. Special Operations Command tripled last year. Although data specific to SOCOM veterans is not currently available, a recent study by the VA found that, between 2005 and 2015, veteran suicides increased 25.9 percent.

While the precise scope of the problem among SOF veterans remains unclear, anyone with access to forums like the closed social media groups that serve as an ad hoc support system for the community can see that the situation is getting worse. The most effective solution to this national crisis requires the direct involvement of SOF veterans trained to provide mental health services to their comrades.

After leaving active duty and transitioning back to civilian life, many SOF veterans struggle with serious mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress and depression. In the context of this difficult transition from the battlefield to the home front, a mindset that fosters success in the world of special operations can become a double-edged sword. Fighting through injuries and ignoring pain to complete the mission may be what is required in the short term, but insistence on our own invincibility over the long term can prove fatal.

The bitter irony is that the nature of SOF training and the culture of hardened stoicism that pervades the SOF ethos make it particularly difficult for SOF veterans to ask for help when they need it. We have made it a troubling habit to mistake suffering in silence for

the value of "quiet professionalism" that we seek to embody.

In 2015, recognizing the formidable barriers to seeking help within the SOF community, Gen. Joseph Votel (then commander of SOCOM) took the extraordinary step of speaking publicly about his own experience in counseling. Although Votel's candor on this issue was a significant move in the right direction, the crisis continues to grow and more must be done.

Effective responses to the epidemic of suicide and related mental health problems in the SOF community can take many forms, but they will all share one indispensable element. The key is the direct involvement of SOF veterans stepping up to show our comrades that they should not be ashamed of the problems they are struggling with. The simple truth is that, because of the unique bonds shared by members of this community, many SOF veterans may only be willing or able to talk about the challenges they are facing with other SOF veterans. Our comrades may be the only people that we feel we can relate to. For that reason, SOF veterans who are trained in suicide prevention and crisis intervention can have enormous positive impact on this problem. That kind of training does not require an advanced degree. It can be obtained relatively inexpensively and in a short period of time.

This is a fight and the creeds that we live by dictate that we never go into a fight unprepared. As with any mission, we need to train, organize, and prepare in order to succeed. Interventions are already being undertaken on an informal basis through social networks of SOF veterans. But the impact and outcomes relating to this work can be significantly

enhanced if members of the community obtain even a few hours of training from qualified professionals.

Creating a better-trained and organized response system within the SOF veteran community is a near-term goal that we can make significant progress on right away. Longer term, we should work toward the recruitment and training of SOF veterans to provide professional mental health services within the community on a sustained basis. This can be accomplished in a number of ways. In the public sector, we can press government at the federal, state, and local levels to recognize the need for differentiated mental health services tailored to the specific needs of SOF personnel and veterans. At the same time, private resources can be marshalled and directed towards research, training, and treatment.

Although there are many ways to approach this, there is a common goal that they all share. That is for every member of the SOF community to know that they are not alone in their fight against inner demons. For more information, please visit the Commandos to Counselors Facebook page.

If you or someone you know is in crisis, the number for VA's Veterans Crisis Line is 1-800-273-8255.

**Jon Hollis** is a litigation partner in the Washington, D.C., office of the international law firm Loeb & Loeb LLP. He is the founder of the firm's pro bono Veterans Assistance Project, which has provided free legal services to veterans in the VA benefits claims process for over 10 years. Prior to attending law school, he served with the Army's 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment and deployed multiple times to Iraq and Afghanistan.