

On Identifying At-Risk Servicemembers: The Life of Private Leonard “Gomer Pyle” Lawrence¹

Reviewed by Major David L. Brown*

Individual Marines and Sailors are the heart of our Corps. Their well-being is our collective responsibility, yet despite our best efforts, Marines and Sailors continue to take their own lives, including over [forty-five] individuals this year alone. These losses do not know grade, [military occupational specialty], or unit boundaries.²

I. Introduction

Who, really, is Leonard Lawrence? To many watching *Full Metal Jacket* for the first time, he is the overweight, grossly out-of-shape, “worthless piece of shit”³ Marine recruit less affectionately known as Private Gomer Pyle.⁴ Needless to say, Leonard Lawrence [hereinafter Private Pyle] receives extra attention and motivation from his Senior Drill Instructor, Gunnery Sergeant Hartman.⁵ The only thing Private Pyle proves he can do right over the course of eight weeks at recruit training, tragically, is that he can effectively employ his rifle.⁶ Unfortunately for Private Pyle, not one of his leaders ever engaged him and asked if he were thinking of hurting himself. When confronted with warning signs, this failure to ask leads to the foreseeable end⁷ when, after killing Gunnery Sergeant Hartman on graduation night, Private Pyle takes his loaded rifle, places the barrel into his mouth, and solves his “temporary problem” with “an irreversible reaction.”⁸

The warning signs of suicide exhibited by Private Pyle⁹ throughout *Full Metal Jacket* provide an excellent case study

for military leaders charged with the challenging task of identifying at-risk servicemembers who may intend to hurt themselves. This review will first look at the problem of suicide in the U.S. military. Next, the review will briefly describe the suicide prevention programs as established by the Marine Corps and the Army. Finally, the review will identify several of the warning signs exhibited by Private Pyle and will propose appropriate responses expected of concerned leaders. First, let us turn to the suicide problem in the military.

II. The Problem

While “suicides [in the military] are slightly down in 2014 . . . [there are] still roughly five active duty military members committing suicide each week, on average.”¹⁰ One death a day is too many; five is simply a failure of leadership. The Department of Defense (DoD) confirmed the untimely loss of 268 servicemembers by suicide in 2014.¹¹ The Army experienced the largest loss of personnel; 237 Soldiers committed suicide in 2014.¹² In early December 2014, the Marine Corps published its “suicides, attempts, and ideations” count for the fiscal year through December 1, 2014.¹³ Forty-four Marines had committed suicide and, even more concerning, 818 Marines were reported to have exhibited suicidal ideations.¹⁴

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¹ FULL METAL JACKET (Warner Brothers Entertainment Inc. 1987) [hereinafter FMJ].

² Marine Administrative Message, 648/14, 121558Z Dec 14, Commandant, Marine Corps, subject: Holiday Season Suicide Prevention “Call to Action.”

³ FMJ, *supra* note 1, at 15:26.

⁴ *Id.* at 6:12.

⁵ *Id.* at 1:36.

⁶ *Id.* at 36:02.

⁷ *Id.* at 45:08.

⁸ Drs. Adam Walsh and Jessica Jagger, *Marine and Family Programs Suicide Prevention Update December 2014* at 2, MANPOWER.USMC.MIL, available at https://www.manpower.usmc.mil/portal/page/portal/MRA_HOME2/MF/Behavioral%20Health/Suicide%20Prevention%20and%20Response/MF%20MFC-5%20Suicide%20Prevention%20and%20Response%20Contacts%20External%20Links%20and%20Reference/USMC%20Suicide%20Update%202014%20December%20Website%2020141201.pdf [hereinafter Suicide Prevention Update].

⁹ *Gomer Pyle: USMC* was a 1960s television show centered on the “innocence, naiveté, and low-key demeanor” of Gomer Pyle, “a sweet but not too smart Marine,” who “often got [] into trouble . . . at the hands of his

loud-mouthed superior.” *Gomer Pyle: USMC*, IMDB.COM, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0057752/> (last visited Dec. 14, 2014).

¹⁰ Molly O’Toole, *Military Suicides Decline, But Continued Failures Hold Lessons for Future Wars*, DEFENSEONE.COM (Nov. 23, 2014), <http://www.defenseone.com/politics/2014/11/military-suicides-decline-continued-failures-hold-lessons-future-wars/99746/>.

¹¹ Defense Suicide Prevention Office, *Department of Defense Quarterly Suicide Report Calendar Year 2014 4th Quarter* at 2, SUICIDEOUTREACH.ORG, available at <http://www.suicideoutreach.org/Docs/suicide-data/DoD-Quarterly-Suicide-Report-CY2014-Q4.pdf> (last visited June 23, 2015). The total number of suicides by component included: 122 deaths from the active component; forty-two from the reserve component; and seventy-three from the National Guard. *Id.*

¹² *Id.* The Air Force lost eighty-three Airmen—fifty-nine on active duty; ten from the reserve component; and fourteen from the National Guard. *Id.*

¹³ Suicide Prevention Update, *supra* note 6, at 4.

¹⁴ *Id.* It is unknown whether the 818 reported suicidal ideations were discovered by engaged leaders, by Marines with the courage to step up and seek help, or by their battle buddies.

Recognizing that more must be done to “[beat the] scourge”¹⁵ of suicide within the military, Senators Joe Donnelly and Roger Wicker recently introduced the Jacob Sexton Military Suicide Prevention Act as part of the 2015 annual defense policy bill.¹⁶ The act requires an annual “mental health check” (a screening to determine suicidal ideations) for all members, regardless of component.¹⁷ Further, the act calls on the DoD to report on best-practices from within the individual services, thus “allowing other branches to copy those [suicide prevention practices] that are succeeding.”¹⁸ Congress is doing its part to combat the problem of suicides within the ranks. Likewise, the Marine Corps and Army have implemented approaches to identify at-risk personnel within their services.

III. The Marine Corps’s Approach to Identifying At-Risk Marines

The Marine Corps’s approach to identifying and responding to at-risk Marines is found, primarily, in Marine Corps Order 1720.2, Marine Corps Suicide Prevention Program.¹⁹ MCO 1720.2 “emphasizes the importance of leadership for the early identification and intervention for stressors that detract from personnel and unit readiness,”²⁰ which, if executed smartly, will “preserve mission effectiveness and war-fighting capability.”²¹ Identified separately, the Marine Corps lists the following risk factors—“warning signs for suicide”—on its dedicated Suicide Prevention and Combat Operational Stress website:

- Talking about dying
- Preparing to die
- Looking for ways to die
- Recent loss or humiliation
- Change in personality or emotions
- Change in behavior
- Change in sleep patterns
- Low self-esteem
- No hope for the future²²

¹⁵ Patricia Kime, *Defense Bill Mandates Yearly Mental Health Checkups for Troops*, MILITARYTIMES.COM (Dec. 11, 2014, 4:01 PM), <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/capitol-hill/2014/12/11/defense-bill-tricare-troops-health/20147081/>.

¹⁶ Jacqueline Klimas, *Service Members to Get Annual Suicide Screenings*, WASHINGTONTIMES.COM (Dec. 10, 2014), <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/dec/10/service-members-get-annual-suicide-screenings/>.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ U.S. MARINE CORPS, ORDER, 1720.2, MARINE CORPS SUICIDE PREVENTION PROGRAM (10 Apr. 2012) [hereinafter MCO 1720.2].

²⁰ *Id.* at 2.

²¹ *Id.*

²² Community Counseling and Prevention Services, *Risk Factors*, MANPOWER.USMC.MIL, <https://www.manpower.usmc.mil/portal/page/>

A key component of the Marine Corps’s annual suicide training program, “Never Leave a Marine Behind,” is its introduction of and reliance on the acronym “[Recognize. Ask. Care. Escort.]”²³ This concept, known as R.A.C.E., is a tool developed for Marines to utilize when encountering a fellow Marine exhibiting suicidal ideations. All commanding officers are specifically tasked with “sustain[ing] an integrated program of awareness education, early identification and referral of at-risk personnel, treatment, and follow-up services.”²⁴ Similarly, the Army has published specific guidance to leaders and Soldiers when confronted with at-risk personnel.

IV. The Army’s Approach to Identifying At-risk Soldiers

The Army’s approach to identifying and responding to at-risk soldiers is found, primarily, in Department of the Army Pamphlet 600-24, Health Promotion, Risk Reduction, and Suicide Prevention.²⁵ As outlined in Department of the Army Pamphlet (DA Pam) 600-24, “[t]he Army Suicide Prevention Program . . . has an Army-wide commitment to provide resources for suicide intervention skills, prevention, and follow-up in an effort to reduce the occurrence of suicidal behavior across the Army enterprise.”²⁶ The Army identifies twelve “warning signs of suicide,” including:

1. Noticeable changes in eating/sleeping habits and personal hygiene.
2. Talking/hinting about suicide, expressing a strong wish to die, or a desire to kill someone else.
3. Obsession with death (for example: in music, poetry, artwork).
4. Change in mood (for example: depression, irritability, rage, anger).
5. Isolation and withdrawal from social situations. Increased alcohol and/or drug use or abuse.
6. Giving away possessions or disregard for what happens to possessions/suddenly making a will.
7. Feeling sad, depressed, hopeless, anxious, psychic pain or inner tension.
8. Finalizing personal affairs.
9. Themes of death in letters and notes.

portal/M_RA_HOME/MF/Behavioral%20Health/BH_Community%20Counseling%20and%20Prevention/Resources (last visited Dec. 14, 2014).

²³ U.S. MARINE CORPS, R.A.C.E. SUICIDE PREVENTION BIFOLD, MARINES.MIL, *available at* <http://www.marines.mil/News/Publications/ELECTRONICLIBRARY/ElectronicLibraryDisplay/tabid/13082/Article/127261/race-suicide-prevention-bifold.aspx> (last visited Dec. 14, 2014).

²⁴ MCO 1720.2, *supra* note 20, at 7.

²⁵ U.S. DEP’T OF ARMY, PAM. 600-24, HEALTH PROMOTION, RISK REDUCTION, AND SUICIDE PREVENTION (7 Sept. 2010) [hereinafter DA PAM. 600-24].

²⁶ *Id.* at 1.

10. Problems with girlfriend/boyfriend or spouse.
11. Soldier experiencing financial problems or in trouble for misconduct (Article 15, UCMJ, and so on).
12. Sudden or impulsive purchase of a firearm or obtaining other means of killing oneself such as poisons, medications.²⁷

The Army applies the “[Ask, Care, Escort]²⁸ . . . model for peer intervention” when a Soldier encounters a fellow Soldier presenting any one or more of the above warning signs.²⁹ Commanders at all levels are directed to “remain sensitive and responsive to the needs of Soldiers . . . [and] [b]uild a command climate that encourages and enables Soldiers and civilians to seek help.”³⁰ Let us now apply the key components of the Marine Corps and Army suicide prevention programs to several of the warning signs exhibited by Private Pyle.

V. The Warning Signs of Suicide As Exhibited by Private Pyle

Private Joker: Leonard, if Hartman comes in here and catches us, we'll both be in a world of shit.

*Private Pyle: I am . . . in a world . . . of shit.*³¹

A. A Poor Performer

Private Pyle is, without question, a poor performer. He is the farthest thing from a model Marine recruit. He failed miserably at physical training, drill, and basic combat skills training. As Gunnery Sergeant Hartman stated, he looked like about “150 pounds of chewed bubblegum.”³² Regardless of the attention and motivation given Private Pyle, both by Gunnery Sergeant Hartman and his fellow recruits,³³ he never improved. We are never let in as to why Private Pyle performed so poorly at recruit training.

That said, is poor performance alone a warning sign for suicide? Both MCO 1720.2. and DA Pam 600-24 are silent on this specific factor. They do, however, speak to a leader’s obligation to recognize at-risk servicemembers. Should n engaged leader care less about Private Pyle’s poor performance and more as to what is causing him to perform so poorly? The critical question here: is his poor performance the result of a risk factor which is interfering with his duties? Warning signs may not be readily present. Leaders must engage with and listen to their servicemembers in order to flush out any underlying factors which are causing one to perform poorly.

B. “I need help.”³⁴

During a nightly health and comfort inspection Private Pyle is caught possessing a “jelly donut” in his unsecured foot locker.³⁵ The platoon is ordered to pay for Private Pyle’s misgiving; incentive training³⁶ commences immediately. While the remainder of the platoon cranks out countless push-ups, Private Pyle stands in the middle of the squad bay eating his jelly donut. He is visibly ashamed and humiliated.³⁷ The next morning, while struggling to get dressed, he speaks with his recruit squad leader, Private Joker:

Private Pyle: Joker, everybody hates me now. Even you.

Private Joker: Nobody hates you Leonard. You just keep making mistakes and getting everybody in trouble.

Private Pyle: I can’t do anything right. I need help.

Private Joker: I’m trying to help you Leonard. I’m really trying.³⁸

The “help” Private Pyle seeks is different from the help Private Joker has to offer. Private Pyle is exhibiting classic risk factors for suicide here. He demonstrates low self-esteem, expresses a sincere feeling of hopelessness, and presents a noticeable change in his ability to accomplish the simplest of tasks—dressing himself properly. The risk factors present demanded a hard question from Private

²⁷ *Id.* at 14.

²⁸ The Air Force also follows the Ask, Care, Escort model for suicide prevention. *Suicide Prevention: Caring for America’s Airmen*, U.S. AIR FORCE, www.af.mil/SuicidePrevention.aspx.

²⁹ *Id.* at 15.

³⁰ *Id.* at 3.

³¹ FMJ, *supra* note 1, at 42:04 to 42:25.

³² *Id.* at 14:50.

³³ *Id.* at 28:08 to 30:12. The recruits administered a “blanket party” to Private Pyle in an effort to motivate him. *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.* at 27:20.

³⁵ *Id.* at 24:52.

³⁶ See Lance Corporal Brain Kester, *Dis Instill Discipline, Motivation With Incentive Training*, MARINES.MIL (Feb. 27, 2004), <http://www.tecom.marines.mil/News/NewsArticleDisplay/tabid/5055/Article/527602/disinstill-discipline-motivation-with-incentive-training.aspx>. The article’s author defines incentive training as a “very effective [tool], utilized by all drill instructors to instill discipline and motivation, and correct minor disciplinary infractions.” *Id.*

³⁷ FMJ, *supra* note 1, at 26:20.

³⁸ *Id.* at 26:50 to 27:32.

Joker—“Are you thinking of hurting yourself, Leonard?” Instead, Private Joker concludes the scene stating simply, “Tuck your shirt in.”³⁹

questions ever asked of another human being: are you thinking of hurting yourself? Have the courage to save a life. Engaged, compassionate leaders are the solution to temporary problems, not irreversible reactions.

C. “Leonard talks to his rifle.”⁴⁰

*Private Pyle: It's been swabbed and brushed. Everything is clean. Beautiful. So that it slides perfectly. Nice. Everything clean. Oiled. So that your action is beautiful. Smooth shining.*⁴¹

The scene is eerie and disturbing. While cleaning and reassembling his rifle, Private Pyle speaks tenderly, yet disturbingly, to his “Charlene.”⁴² His words are precise and collected. His demeanor is confident. His words cause Private Joker, sitting adjacent to him, to pause and gaze concernedly at his fellow recruit. No words are exchanged between the two; no questions asked. Private Joker later surmises, based on what he observed, that Private Pyle is a clear “section eight.”⁴³

Firearms, both government-issued and personally owned, are everywhere in the military. A servicemember’s access to a firearm could not be any easier. Low self-esteem and total hopelessness, coupled with a firearm, could be a deadly combination. It is fair to conclude that Private Pyle’s conversation with “Charlene” foreshadowed the actions he would eventually take. Any leader overhearing a similar conversation with a Marine or Soldier and their firearm should become concerned. An engaged leader, however, would act on that concern—that clear “warning sign”—and ask that servicemember if he intends to hurt himself.

VI. Conclusion

So who, really, is Leonard Lawrence? Well, the answer may be quite simple: he could be that servicemember standing directly in front of you as you lift your eyes from this review. He may be a poor performer or a problem-child, like Private Pyle; she may be a water-walker or he may be someone your fellow Marine or Soldier tells you about—someone you do not even know personally. Regardless, one or more of the warning signs of suicide exhibited by Private Pyle may be present in that Marine or Soldier. Have the courage to ask that servicemember one of the hardest

³⁹ *Id.* at 27:35.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 35:00.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 33:56 to 34:36.

⁴² *Id.* at 36:56. Private Pyle affectionately named his rifle “Charlene.”

⁴³ *Id.* at 35:18. A “section eight” was a type of military discharge “based on military assessment of psychological unfitness.” Terrance L. Trezvant, *Section 8*, UD.COM (Nov. 8, 2004), <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Section%208>.