

# SHOULDER TO SHOULDER

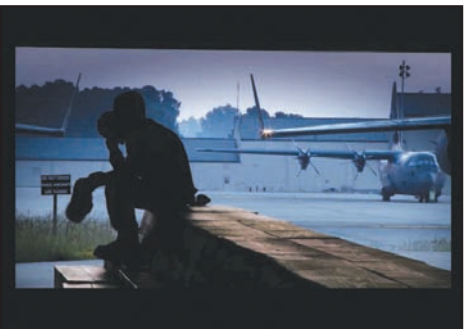


# I WILL NEVER QUIT ON LIFE

Screen shots from the 2010 "Shoulder to Shoulder: I Will Never Quit on Life" video, courtesy U.S. Army Suicide Prevention Task Force

By Cindy Ramirez

*"I grabbed the rifle off the wall, put my rifle up to my chin, put it on semi; I pulled the trigger. ... I tried to kill myself."*



Those are the words of Spc. Joseph Sanders, speaking bravely into a video camera as he tells of his suicide attempt after his marriage ended following deployment.

"The only thing I thought was my world was over. ... Something took over, and I couldn't control it."

Sanders tells of going into Soldier mode, immediately dismantling his rifle to find out why it didn't fire. The firing pin was missing.

Fearing that his battle buddy might hurt himself, Spc. Albert Godding had removed it.

"I'm not that guy that intervenes. I'm not that guy that does stuff like this," says Godding as he speaks into the camera.

"But for some reason, I was; for some reason, I did," Godding says. "I didn't believe it myself, but I'm glad I did it."

Sanders later asked Godding if he had removed the pin. Godding admitted doing so, telling Sanders he had noticed a change in his behavior and was concerned for his safety.

"I believe that he acted appropriately," Sanders says. "I mean, he took charge of the situation. He manned up and he did what he needed to do."

He saved Sanders' life.

## TRUE STORIES

This true story opens the video, “Shoulder to Shoulder: I Will Never Quit on Life,” the Army’s latest suicide awareness initiative aimed at helping reduce the number of Soldiers who take their own lives.

Soldiers, leaders and families talk candidly about their roles in preventing a suicide, their suicidal thoughts or suicide attempts, and how they’re overcoming times of hardship and heartache with the support of their Army peers, leaders and family.



“Through the awareness video, we are trying to get Soldiers to understand first and foremost that it’s okay to reach out for help,” said Walter Morales, a retired sergeant major and member of the Army Vice Chief of Staff’s Suicide Prevention Task Force. “But we also want the Army family to recognize that when somebody is in need of help, they should reach out and give it.”

Released in July, the video is an update to last year’s. Like its predecessor, the video is now available at Army Knowledge Online and the Army’s suicide prevention website. It includes a training manual and materials for NCOs and other leaders to spread the message to all Soldiers and their families across the Army. An accompanying video features stories by and for Army civilians.

“I thought the success stories were great,” said Fort Bliss, Texas, Chaplain (Col.) Thomas Wheatley, who previewed the video. “There are a lot of success stories that never get heard. You hear about suicides, but you don’t hear about the [stories] where a buddy was successful in talking somebody out of it.”

Morales said the 17-minute video should be used as part of in-processing training, pre- and post-deployments, professional development training and anywhere leaders deem necessary to help create awareness.

Family readiness groups and other community organizations are also encouraged to use the video, he said.

“I’m urging my fellow NCOs to look at the video and heed the messages in order to help our fellow Soldiers,” Morales said.

“He took charge of the situation, he manned up and he did what he needed to do.”

“They’re good stories from real Soldiers, real family members, real civilians, who overcame their obstacles because they were resilient and had somebody brave enough who had the courage to speak up and help.”

Sanders’ story is not uncommon.

But unlike Sanders, many other Soldiers die by their own hand, leaving behind distraught families, friends and colleagues.

## ONE TOO MANY

The Army this summer reported a decrease of about 30 percent in suicides among active-duty Soldiers so far this calendar year. However, an increase in suicides among reservists has also been reported.

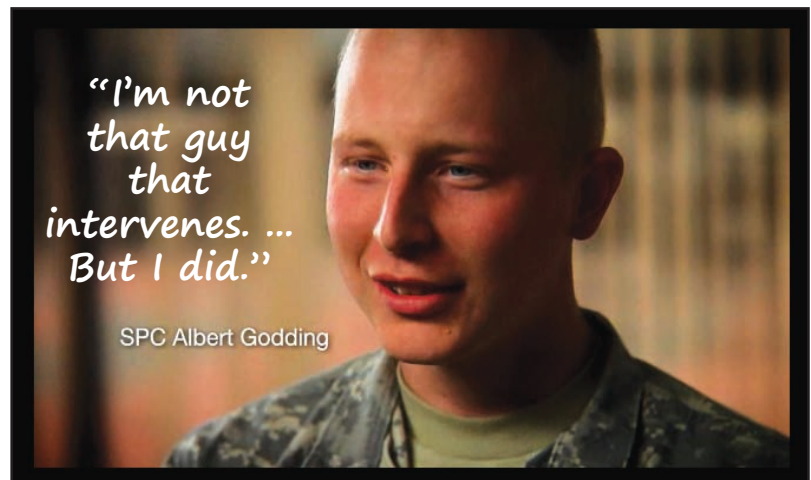
During the first half of 2010, 80 suicides among active-duty Soldiers have been reported, compared to 88 at the same time in 2009. Among reserve component Soldiers, the numbers are 65 and 42, respectively.

But no matter the number or the reason, officials repeatedly say, one Soldier suicide is one too many.

“We continue to look at different ways to reduce suicides and suicidal behavior among our Soldiers,” Morales said, adding that the primary causes of suicide include relationship and financial issues and alcohol abuse.

Trouble adapting to life following deployments has

also been found to be a factor, although statistics show about 30 percent of Army suicides occur among those who have never deployed, Morales said.



Providing access to mental health professionals is another challenge in improving behavioral and mental health and preventing suicides, officials said.

Vice Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. Peter Chiarelli recently told members of the Senate Armed Services Committee that the Army is experiencing a shortage of mental health professionals — mirroring a national shortage.

In fact, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has identified more than 3,200 communities nationwide that have



shortages of mental health professionals and reports it would take more than 5,300 practitioners to meet the need. Telehealth resources — a virtual net of professionals who provide services via telephone, online and through videoconferencing — have been a popular option among Soldiers, Chiarelli said.

Maj. Brad West, a Fort Bliss chaplain, said that's a reality with which the Army has to cope.

"There's not enough behavioral health professionals to go around," he said. "That's why it's all the more important for buddy care and chaplain care to be at the top of priorities when it comes to preventing suicides. ... There will never be enough [professional care] to meet the demand, but you will always have a buddy and a chaplain nearby."

Morales agrees, saying that although the Army is working to improve Soldier care, these obstacles are why he stresses the importance of awareness and the need for peer and family involvement.

## LENDING A SHOULDER

"Shoulder to Shoulder" is but one of the numerous initiatives the Army is using to get its messages out: You're not alone; it's okay to ask for help; and it's your duty to provide help.

On the prevention side, programs like Comprehensive Soldier Fitness and its related resilience courses focus on teaching Soldiers how to be emotionally strong and bounce back from adversity to keep from reaching the point of desperation.

Awareness initiatives such as the Real Warriors Campaign promote resilience and aim to combat the stigma associated with seeking mental health care and treatment. Real Warriors features stories of service members who have sought

treatment and are maintaining successful military or civilian careers.

Suicide intervention programs such as the Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training and the Ask, Care, Escort training have been widely embedded in the Army to teach Soldiers how to intervene when a person is considering taking his or her life.

The video will augment these programs, said retired Staff Sgt. Debra Wiggins, a consulting trainer with the ASIST program at Fort Bliss.

"I'm already thinking of ways to incorporate this video into my training," Wiggins said. "When the story [of Sanders and Godding] came out, I printed it out and now I use it when I

teach ASIST. But to actually hear them talk about it, it's very touching and very impacting."

## WE ALL BLEED

"Shoulder to Shoulder" aims to reinforce the message that when faced with adversity, Soldiers should not be afraid to seek help, and leaders, peers and families have an obligation to intervene.

Perhaps most importantly, the video makes it clear that these issues should not impact a Soldier's record, and they should not fear retribution or negative stigmas.

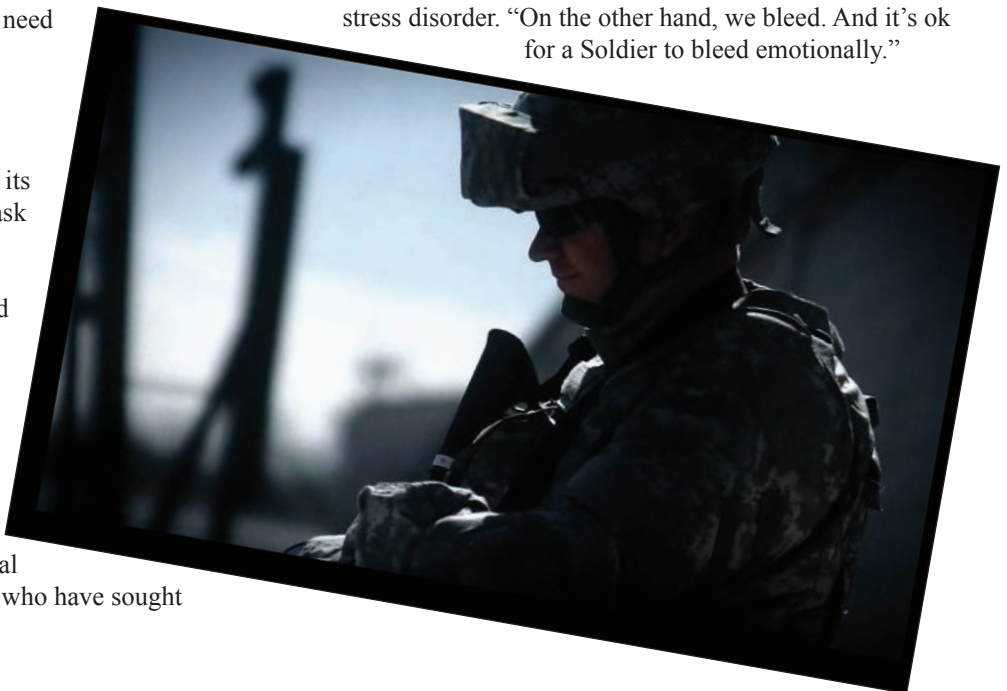
"These Soldiers, they're not broken," Command Sgt. Maj. Michelle Fourier says in the video. "Sometimes they just need a little bit of help."

That's a message John Fortunato, chief of the Fort Bliss Restoration and

Resilience Center, reiterates in the video.

"When major life changes happen, yeah, we're all about being tough," says Fortunato, a clinical psychologist who runs the renowned treatment facility for Soldiers with post-traumatic stress disorder. "On the other hand, we bleed. And it's okay for a Soldier to bleed emotionally."

*"We bleed.  
And it's ok for a  
Soldier to bleed  
emotionally."*



## FAMILY MATTERS

In another impacting story, the video touches on the importance of family through Maj. Jeff Hall and his wife, Sheri.

“I started feeling a little off of my game,” says the major about his stress after a deployment. “I’ve always kinda held a high standard for myself; I couldn’t keep that standard. ... I was not who I was; I couldn’t recognize myself anymore.”

“He needed more than love.”

Sheri feared the worst. “I lay on the floor of my bedroom while my wife pleaded with me not to take my life,” the major says.

Like many suicidal people, the major in the video may have felt those he

loved would not miss him, said Chaplain (Maj.) Don Van Alstyne of Fort Bliss.

“That is one of the rationales why Soldiers want to end their life,” he said. “I think the bottom line of what was said there is, ‘My family would be better off without me.’ That was mixed with emotions. If you want to capture a statement about why a Soldier considers taking his life, it’s that they think, ‘My family will be better off without me.’ And that couldn’t be more wrong.”

Wiggins said incorporating family into the video was a must because “it’s also the people you go home to who notice that something is not right with their spouse.”

Sheri Hall knew this was a problem she and her husband couldn’t handle alone.

“He needed more than love. And he needed care that I obviously couldn’t give,” she says, telling how the major was referred to Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Washington, D.C., and received help.

“I think that gave him hope,” Sheri says. “It gave me hope.”

“Shoulder to Shoulder” also stresses the key role chaplains play, emphasizing they are there to listen, and not always to talk about religion. The Fort Bliss chaplains who viewed the video said they appreciated that message, as well as a first-hand account of a chaplain who talks about his own struggles with thoughts of suicide.



“In the Army, we’re not just co-workers; we’re family.”

View the video at [www.armyg1.army.mil/hr/suicide](http://www.armyg1.army.mil/hr/suicide) at Army YouTube or [www.facebook.com/USArmy](http://www.facebook.com/USArmy)

## FOLLOW YOUR INTUITION

Van Alstyne said among the many messages the video delivers is that Soldiers should go with their gut as Godding did.

“One thing that struck me is it gives encouragement to Soldiers to use their intuition,” he said, “to trust your intuition in terms of caring for someone when you feel they may need it. Take that risk and get involved.”

A gut feeling also came over Maj. Catherine Black, who in the video credits her supervisors for allowing and encouraging her to go to the aid of a friend and comrade, who she believed was suicidal.

“I just knew I had to be there,” she says. “I don’t know that she would have been able to reach out to another person.”

Black touches on the topic of another kind of family — the Army family. She said the support of her leaders had a “powerful impact on her as a person and as a commander,” re-enforcing the message “in the Army, we’re not just co-workers, we’re family.”

That’s a message Sanders and Godding now take to heart.

“He saved his own life.”

A sense of relief resonating from his voice, Sanders says he felt more at ease once he opened up to friends and mental health professionals.

“As soon as I started talking, I immediately felt better,” he says, a smile forming on his face.

For Sanders to agree to get help and not quit on life was as important as taking the firing pin out of the rifle, says Godding, adding that by doing so, “he saved his own life.”

Contact Cindy Ramirez at [cindy.ramirez1@us.army.mil](mailto:cindy.ramirez1@us.army.mil)

