

LEHNERT: All the men in his platoon came home alive

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an anti-tank mine detonated under his Humvee.

Platoon Sergeant Lehnert, who worked back home as a Pendleton police officer, worried about “my guys,” not only about their physical safety, but their mental health. Echoing in his mind was the request from the mom of two of his soldiers to “bring my boys home safe.”

“I was wrapped pretty tight,” said Lehnert, who is now a corporal with the Pendleton Police Department. “I felt a huge responsibility to keep all those soldiers safe.”

Stress also came from the home-front as soldiers dealt with financial burdens and relationship issues. Lehnert often counseled and consoled young soldiers who knocked on his door late at night. When one soldier got the news from home that his father had died, Lehnert sat on the floor and held the soldier while he cried.

When Lehnert communicated via Skype with his wife and three daughters (one born after he deployed), he concentrated on looking happy and strong. The “I Love Daddy” poster they’d sent was taped on the wall where they could see it during the live video sessions.

Outside the base perimeter, Lehnert said soldiers focused on the mission and let everything else fade to the background as they dealt with bombs and snipers. If a soldier needed a psychia-



A soldier in the Oregon National Guard’s 3rd Battalion, 116th Armored Cavalry stands in the crater caused by a roadside bomb near Kirkuk, Iraq.

trist, counselor or chaplain, Lehnert sent them to the Combat Stress Unit.

In the end, all his men came home alive, but some, maybe all, struggled to deal with what they had seen in Iraq. One soldier took his own life.

Lehnert faced down his own demons after finally admitting they were there. He said the transition took time, mild anxiety medication and counseling.

“Soldiers come from being hypervigilant to a place where they’re supposed to be loving, kind and caring,” Lehnert said. “They’ve programmed themselves to

be numb, to not feel.”

These days, as a law enforcement officer, he sometimes deals with veterans in crisis. Instead of backing them into a corner, Lehnert often takes a more personal approach, instantly creating a bond by mentioning his own military status and then helping them recall their better self.

“The key is to remind them they served their country. They have a reason to hold their head high and take pride in the discipline and integrity they were taught while in the service,” Lehnert said. “You bring them back to that focus.”

Lehnert encourages veterans to tackle their mental health issues instead of pushing them aside. Pride, he said, is the biggest barrier.

“You don’t want anyone to think you are weak,” he said. “But I don’t believe anyone can go into a combat role and come home without PTSD or some other emotional impact. It’s just how you choose to manage it when you get home and if you’re willing to put your pride aside and say, ‘I need help.’”

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PTSD: Convincing veterans to get help is the main challenge

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What has changed is the understanding of the phenomenon.

During WWII, Gen. George Patton famously rebuked soldiers with battle fatigue for cluttering up hospitals and “not having the guts to fight.” These days, numerous programs and crisis helplines exist to help veterans deal with depression, PTSD and other aftereffects of life in a combat zone. Research shows that if veterans seek help, they can conquer their demons or at least learn to manage them.

Convincing veterans to get help is the main challenge, said Jeff Dulin, Chief of Behavioral Health at Jonathan Wainwright VA Medical Center.

“A lot of veterans sit at home and feel like they shouldn’t be having their symptoms, that they’re stronger than that,” Dulin said. “A lot of them don’t seek care.”

When they dare to seek help, he said, “the vast majority get better.”

Veterans have an assortment of ways to reach out, from making an appointment with a VA counselor to calling a crisis line.

Deborah Zwetchkenbaum, assistant director of the Lines for Life crisis line program, fields calls to the organization’s military helpline. The helpline had about 25,000 calls in 2015, up from 13,900 in 2014. Some of the

callers are having suicidal thoughts, but some of the veterans struggling with PTSD, depression, substance abuse or other aftereffects of war simply need to talk.

“They’ve had life-changing experiences and feel like they can’t talk to anyone else,” Zwetchkenbaum said. “They say the civilian world just doesn’t understand. They think if they talk about their experience, it’ll freak people out.”

Zwetchkenbaum has developed huge respect for veterans.

“These are really strong, resilient people, but they’re dealing with an awful lot,” she said.

Though the helpline gets calls from people who are feeling suicidal, she can count on one hand the number of callers who followed through in her eight years at Lines for Life. If they call, she said, they have ambivalence — some part of them wants to live. The counselors get them talking.

“We call it getting into the muck,” she said. “We hear all the things that cause them pain and help them discern the part of them that wants to live. We acknowledge and validate what they’re going through and face it together. Some of the weight of what they’ve been carrying starts to lift.”

A 2013 VA report estimates the number of suicides each day at 18 to 22, though some experts believe that estimate is low. Veteran suicide touches every demo-

graphic. Oregon Senator Brian Boquist, R-Dallas, lost his son, a combat veteran, to suicide last month.

The counselors often connect veterans with services, including VA programs.

“When they are connected with the VA, they do better,” Zwetchkenbaum said. “Nationally, about 50 percent of veterans who are eligible are enrolled with the VA. In Oregon, that number is 63 percent.”

Media reports of veterans waiting more than 90 days for care might have discouraged some from seeking help, but Dulin said wait times for the VA in Walla Walla are averaging seven days or less.

“It’s important for veterans to know we really want to help them,” Dulin said.

He said the therapy used depends on the veteran’s symptoms and circumstances. The evidence-based arsenal includes prolonged exposure therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, cognitive processing therapy and others.

“We choose the type of treatment that fits,” he said.

PTSD can encompass more than explosions, snipers and watching a fellow soldier die in your arms. Twenty-three percent of veterans are sexually abused while in the military and this is another cause of PTSD.

“It’s another important aspect of PTSD,” Dulin said.

“People don’t talk about that very much, but we are set up to treat that.”

Some trauma comes from grisly tasks such as collecting the parts of bodies blown apart in explosions. Those charged with retrieving the body parts relive the experience in nightmares and agonize to counselors they worry they weren’t able to find every piece. It’s a twist on “No Man Left Behind,” he said.

“Some veterans have had no active combat, but have PTSD from this type of situation,” Dulin said.

He stopped short of saying a veteran could be cured of PTSD.

“We are shaped by our past,” he said, “but people can live happy and productive lives.”

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HOMELESS: Sheriff’s office said people had been given ample warning of the cleanup

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face it,” she said.

Page said sheriff’s deputies came Wednesday to tell everyone they leave the area by Friday at 11 a.m.

She said no matter how the camp’s residents ended up homeless, it was still humiliating to have to walk out Friday morning with everything she owned on display. She also said it was embarrassing to hear people refer to her as one of the “river people” and shoo her out of local businesses.

She acknowledged that the commercial-sized dumpster brought in by the county was already overflowing with garbage by 11:30, but said some of the items that had been cleaned out, such as rusty appliances, were clearly dumped there by other people — people with homes.

A statement from the Umatilla County Sheriff’s office, released Friday afternoon, said people illegally camped by the river had been encouraged numerous times to leave the property voluntarily and had been given ample warning of Friday’s cleanup.

The county has been receiving complaints about unsanitary conditions created by the camp, and several citizens said they no longer feel safe recreating on the river.

“Clearly, the public wants the encampment removed,” the statement said.

The statement went on to note that studies have shown a “strong relationship between homelessness and criminality” that manifested in higher crime rates in the surrounding areas.

“Case in point: All of the persons our deputies contacted yesterday at the Umatilla encampment had criminal histories, some extensive ... additionally, the environment can be polluted and negatively impacted by litter, infectious waste and other hazardous materials, human waste and the potential for fires.”

The statement said the number of people at the camp was growing, and two other camps have been reported in the county.

For those reasons, the Umatilla County decided to trespass people from the riverbank and bring in a work crew to clean out

“We can’t just draw a line in the sand again and kick them down the road.”

— Mayor David Trott

what was left behind.

Kimberlee Castellanos was gathering up her belongings Friday morning but said she did not know where she was going to take them or even how she was going to transport them. She said the way the group was being thrown out was “inhumane.”

“This is crazy,” she said, gesturing around to the four sheriff’s deputies and other officials supervising the cleanup process. “This is like a police raid for a drug dealer or a murderer.”

She described herself as “newly homeless” and said while there were groups that delivered food and other donations, it was shocking how rude others in the community had treated them.

“People act like we’re aliens, or a disease,” she said.

After banning camping in city limits, pushing the homeless camps outside of town, the Umatilla City Council on Tuesday discussed the idea of working with the county to establish a designated transient camping spot with dumpsters, toilets and fire pits to help forestall some of the sanitation issues.

Mayor David Trott said he wanted to sit down with county and state agencies to come up with a plan, since the tactic of cleaning out camps had only served to shuffle the problem around.

“We can’t just draw a line in the sand again and kick them down the road,” he said.

Page said if the county and city did come up with a designated camping area for homeless residents that included toilets, she and Martinez would be more than happy to stay there. They just need a place to sleep every night, she said, where they wouldn’t be considered a nuisance.

“I’m sorry I’m in this position,” she said.

Contact Jade McDowell at jmcdowell@eastoregonian.com or 541-564-4536.

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