

In Valor there is Hope: Reflections on the Wall

The National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial was dedicated in 1991 by President George H.W. Bush. It honors all of America's federal, state and local law enforcers. Inscribed on the Memorial's blue-gray marble walls are the names of more than 17,500 officers who have been killed in the line of duty, dating back to the first known death in 1792. The names of the fallen officers are displayed in random order on the Memorial Wall. At an annual candlelight vigil held each year during National Police Week (in May) new names of fallen officers are added to the Memorial. Each of the pathway entrances to the wall are lined with a grouping of an adult lion protecting its cubs. They symbolize the protective role of our law officers and convey the strength, courage and valor that are the hallmarks of those who serve in law enforcement.

It is of interest to look at the statistics of those courageous officers over the past ten years and how they died.

Law Enforcement Officers Killed In the Line of Duty/ Past Ten Years (1999-2008)

YEAR	FELONIOUS DEATHS	ACCIDENTAL DEATHS	TOTAL DEATHS
1999	53	90	143
2000	61	100	161
2001	152	88	240
2002	74	83	157
2003	65	82	147
2004	72	92	164
2005	65	96	161
2006	60	92	152
2007	73	109	182
2008	53	80	133
TOTAL	728	912	1640
Average	(73 per year)	(91 per year)	(164 per year)
<i>Updated March 2009</i>			

Source: National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, Washington, D.C.

At Issue: Forgotten Heroes

While homicides, accidents, and other types of death are accurately accounted for on the police memorial wall, there are some heroes whose names are not present- those approximately 140 officers in 2008 and in the past that have died by suicide. It is apparent that suicide is not considered a “line of duty death” in the view of those who prescribed requirements for the wall. In my view, as a researcher and retired police officer, I do not agree with this policy. It seems that the inscription on the memorial's east wall “*In Valor there is Hope*”, has forsaken those officers who were high in valor and indeed *lost hope* to such a degree that they took their own lives. They are no less a hero.

An example told by a police suicide survivor:

I watched my husband deteriorate the last three to four weeks of his life, and I couldn't stop it. He shot and killed himself the morning of March 8, 1995, in an undercover facility where we had lived in isolation and anonymity for the last year of his life. He was 45 years old. I wanted sodesperately to have someone come over and try to talk with him, to help us, but no one could visit the house or know where we lived or what we did; not even other agents or family. There was no where to turn. I felt helpless and hopeless. Pacing... wringing hands I can't do it ... I begged him - let's just walk out the door and leave ... Take nothing with us, just get in the car and go. We lived in a fishbowl, you see; it was the only way; but, he would not even consider it. Being an FBI Agent was who he was, how he defined himself.

He was like many of you – driven personality, unable to show his emotions, he had to appear unshakable, strong, and independent. He was my rock. With cops, there's always a wall, even with family members, even when we were both cops. In other words, he had to be no less than perfect. These are admirable qualities in a person and desirable qualities we want in our law enforcement. We want strong, motivated, and independent personnel who can take charge of any given situation. However, these qualities come with a price. We must change the perception in our law enforcement institutions that you “suck it up and go on.” We need to be there for our own. Certainly, no one else will be.

Does Police Work Cause Suicide?

As a former trooper and researcher, I have explored suicide among police officers for the past 23 years. It's generally a similar pattern that emerges- stress, trauma, isolation, work problems, suicide. The science bears this out, based on the significantly increased risk for suicide among police officers as compared to similar occupations such as firefighters and military personnel. According to Centers for Disease Control (CDC) data, the risk of an officer dying by suicide is three times greater than the risk of homicide. The Bureau of

Labor Statistics reports that police officers have a *seven-fold* higher risk of dying from suicide than the average worker.

There are of course many reasons why a person commits suicide. Among them, exposure to trauma and life stress ranks high. This was obvious among returning Vietnam veterans, of which, according to the Journal of the American Medical Association, some 20,000 veterans committed suicide. During the course of a career, an average police officer sees more traumatic events than any non-police person will see in their entire lifetime. This exposure is cumulative, that is, it adds up over time. There is a saturation point in everyone as to how much trauma and stress one can endure. The more the stress we experience, the quicker we reach that point. When we run out of the ability to positively cope with stress, we engage in maladaptive coping- this may include alcohol, drugs, relationship problems, or suicide.

Other factors can be considered in suicide. Among those are relationship problems at home and work, financial difficulties, and legal problems. One might first think that these are not related to police work, but on second look they are. Many facets of police work lead to problems at home, including shift work for example. Legal difficulties might certainly be related to IA investigations closely related to the job.

The point: if one is regularly exposed to what police officers experience – death, human misery, abused children, crime, and negative events- the pathway to saturation is much accelerated. Suicide is the ultimate form of maladaptive behavior.

So, why are these fallen heroes not on the wall?

To me and many others, it is regrettable that the names of officers who die by suicide are not on the memorial wall. Let us take a lesson from the movement to include Vietnam veterans who died by suicide on their memorial wall as a gesture to memorialize and honor those who served their country, and finally a place which may serve to help prevent suicides in the future.

The exclusion of officers from the memorial wall who died by suicide forsakes the sacrifice they gave to the job. As one police suicide survivor correctly stated: “*my husband should be remembered for how he lived, not how he died*”. Has the wall forgotten how they lived and the heroes that they are?

The term “line of duty death” needs revision to include those officers who literally gave their lives for the job. Apparently the *stigma* associated with suicide has heavily influenced the decision to exclude officers from the wall. Quite frankly, I would be proud to stand next to any brother or sister police officer on the wall. It does not matter how he or she died, it does matter how they lived and that they too were police officers. Let us once more reflect on the police memorial inscription “*In Valor there is Hope*”. The valor is present in every police officer; it is hope that is lost in the officer who dies

by suicide. Let us not forget our police family – honor ALL police officers who die “in the line of duty”, not only for their honor but also for the many survivors who grieve their loss. They too should be made proud.

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