

# **A critical response to DOD's "Preventing Suicide in the U.S. Military: Recommendations from the Suicide Prevention and Response Independent Review Committee"**

*by*  
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This report was written by so-called experts of the Suicide Prevention and Response Independent Review Committee (SPRIRC) established on May 17, 2022 by Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin. This, almost \$2.5 million dollar project was essentially a waste of time and money because of the failure to identify the root causes of suicide. The study lasted a maximum of 7 months resulting in 126 so-called recommendations, few of which were based on new findings, and current and historical data.

The report also failed to discuss the suicide rates according to occupational categories and as the rates compared to suicides in the "civilian world. Nor is there any discussion on suicide rates prior to or post Afghanistan in Jul 2021. This is very significant given that the suicide rates increased in 2021 as opposed to the decline in 2022. What are the reasons for the 2022 decline?

While the report mentioned veterans in several areas it failed to include veteran suicides in the study. This is evident on page 20 which presents a table (Table 1.11) indicating the percentage of suicides for active duty, National Guard and Reserve components compared to eleven (11) "patterns." The table and related discussion failed to indicate what percentage of National Guard and Reserve personnel were considered to be on "active duty" as opposed to "weekend warriors." This failure to differentiate the statistical data may have skewed the recommendations of the committee.

The discussion on Millennials echoes the same concerns that young service personnel have exhibited since the Vietnam Conflict. Leadership was and still is a major issue. While the report lists several recommendations involving leadership development, it fails to mention mentorship in these recommendations. Effective leadership cannot be learned via text, it must be guided and practiced prior to the leader taking charge. This is a wholesale failure across all services. Leadership academies are helpful but at the same time very limited in scope in both enlisted and officer ranks.

While leadership is discussed in training applications, it fails to discuss leadership in "call to duty" situations. The report fails to discuss the importance of having clear objectives and strategies as was demonstrated in Afghanistan and Iraq. A lack of these

two essential leadership components does not provide a solid grounding as to why the serviceman is in combat and thus reduces moral and other mental stresses.

Recommendation 5.2 suggests streamlining training by eliminating requirements that are not specific to maintaining competencies. This is an essential recommendation that must be implemented. There is too much outside pressure to include “social realignment issues” in the training process. Such programs are not conducive to the readiness and goal/purpose of our military.

Referencing the table on page 20 (Table 1.11) it should be noted that the percentage of suicides using a firearm was highest in the National Guard (76.1%), followed by Reserve components (74.3%), and last by Active Duty personnel (67.1%). While recommendations 5.12 through 5.24 call for various firearm control policies and methods, the report fails to recognize that highest firearm suicides were highest in the National Guard and Reserve units. This is important understand because members of these units do not have ready access to military firearms, live off-base or DOD property. Recommendations 5.12, 5.13, 5.16, 5.18, 5.21, and 5.23 are in direct conflict with the Second Amendment. Furthermore, the recommendations referencing “living on DOD property” is not clearly defined and policies surrounding this phrasing could be extended to include off DOD property simply based on the issuance of any military property that would reside (temporarily or permanently) on off DOD property.

In another DOD suicide prevention study for FY 2020-2030, there was no mention of restricting firearm possession. Similarly, previous studies going back to before 2010, do not mention restricting firearm use and/or possession. The lack of such discussion prior to the SPRIRC report can be construed as another attempt to restrict ownership of legally purchased and owned firearms within the US, Applying the restrictions outlined in the SPRIRC report is counter to the Second Amendment and the ability of a free people to protect themselves and their loved ones as demonstrated during the 2009 mass shooting at Fort Hood, TX where base gun policy prohibited possession of weapons on base.

Major flaw with the study is that it missed a very significant aspect of suicide. Recommendation 6.21 alludes to it with the recommendation to align DOD policy with the Veterans Administration’s suicide clinical practice guidelines.

When a person musters out of the military, DOD drops **ALL** responsibility for the soldier’s life and well being. Unless the soldier contacts the VA or some other health agency, there is no follow up of the service member. The VA, VFW, American Legion and other organizations are there to provide assistance, but if it is not ask for, it the

member is on his/her own. This is just another example of the military not carrying for its own.

There should have been a recommendation such that when a serviceman leaves the military that there is at least a 6 month follow-up on how the serviceman is transitioning to the civilian world. This must be a direct face-to-face interaction and not via any communication devices. As part of the recommendation, recruiting stations could have a person assigned to do the follow-ups or an active duty, trained individual assigned to each state's veteran's support office.

### **Suicide Methods**

The SPRIRC report discusses only two of sixteen common suicide methods. According to Wikipedia the sixteen methods include:

Suffocation	Vehicle collision
Hanging	Air
Poisoning	Disease
Firearm	Electrocution
Jumping	Fire
Cutting and stabbing	Hypothermia
Drowning	Indirect
Starvation and dehydration	Ritual

According to CDC-WISQARS data, the primary suicide methods are:

- Firearm (52%)
- Suffocation and hanging (23%)
- Poisoning/overdose (18%)
- Jumps (2%)
- Cuts (2%)
- Other 4%.. (CDC – WISQARS)

### **Leadership**

Since the 1950s, the military leadership, and resulting policies, has undergone significant change. One key factor has been the suppression of practicing spiritual faith. Every surviving POW will attest that a significant aspect of their survival under horrendous conditions is due to their faith in God.

The mandatory requirements regarding anthrax and COVID vaccines, in light of poor testing and resulting health issues, has undermined the confidence of military personnel in their leaders. Policies on critical race theory, LGBTQ+, and other woke agendas has distracted the soldier and military units from their prime mission and undermines the readiness of the military and security of our nation.

The SPRIRC report has two very important and significant flaws.

First and foremost is that a great many of the recommendations made have been made in the past, many of them going back to the 60s and 70s. The failure of implementing the recommendations falls upon the leadership of each service branch and within the DOD.

The second flaw initiates the previous flaw. Leadership in all services and DOD should be bound by the British Army's 7 Ps adage of: [Proper Planning and Preparation Prevents Piss Poor Performance](#). A review of the Afghanistan War after-action reports along with other reviews and books such as *The American War in Afghanistan: A History*, by Carter Malkasian, and *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War*, by Craig Whitlock, describes how poorly upper echelon leadership plays a significant role in the moral and psych of servicemen in all branches.

Furthermore the reports indicate a lack of a common goal to win the war, a lack of strategic decisions supporting the goal, and infantile approaches by each new theater commander. The lessons taught in the military academies, the national and service war colleges, and Command and General Staff Schools (CGSS) were forsaken for personal ego and a lack of direction from the beginning (the Commander in Chief[s]). In other words, putting it mildly, Afghanistan and Iraq were major **FUBAR**, which lead to the military becoming a **SNAFU**, and resulting today in the DOD being **SUSFU**.

Given the many DOD and service specific reports on suicide prevention, and the lack of implementing various recommendations, the DOD and service branches have wasted tax-payer dollars on useless studies. Although many reports have alluded to various causes for suicides in the military it remains evident that the root problems for preventing suicides have not been identified.

The majority of the problems are grounded in upper echelon leaders. Their failure to implement recommendations, address basic issues facing service personnel, and the implementation of non-military social agendas and other policies have only attributed to suicides within the military.

In order to mask their incompetence to address the suicide issue, DOD and military leadership have created a number of distracters over the years. The SPRIRC report introduces its own distracters involving gun control, and shower and curtain rods.

## Conclusion

Suicide is highly complex physiological and psychological issue that is impacted by external environmental and social elements. A majority of so-called experts on prevention panels rarely look at the physiological and psychological aspects of suicide, but rather concentrate on trying to identify external elements that cause individuals to commit suicide. An example would be a teenager who commits suicide because of bullying. The bully is censored or punished but usually only after the victim's self-esteem and confidence has been destroyed. To prevent the suicide, the experts need to address the psychological backgrounds of both individuals.

The one major flaw with the DOD and service branches is that the left hand does not know, understand, or flat out refuses to acknowledge what the right hand does. Every decision made in one area affects the entire military.

To reduce many of the issues common to all branches it is recommended that the common activities in all branches be consolidated and coordinated in order to reduce duplication of effort throughout the DOD. For example, recruiting is a significant issue for all branches. One major issue is that many prospective recruits are not physically fit. If recruiting stations had a certified physical fitness instructor, who was also trained in suicide prevention, this would not only be a cost savings but also help reduce potential suicide events. Additionally there are many common core elements of every branch's boot camps and OCS training. Consider the approach the Navy utilizes where a sailor goes to boot camp and then to an occupational school. A similar approach would be a common core boot camp that covers the essentials of all branches and then the enlistee is assigned a service specific school, followed by the occupational school. Similarly services schools which essentially cover the same curriculum should be consolidated. One example would be the basic schools for enlisted construction classification. The Navy and Army both have engineer construction programs. Such an approach would better integrate the services and create a stronger "brotherhood" among servicemen between all branches.

The SPRIRC report can be found online at:

<https://media.defense.gov/2023/Feb/24/2003167430/-1/-1/0/SPRIRC-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>

**About the Author**

Phil Rasmussen has spent his entire life associated with the military in one form or another. He grew up as an Air Force dependent, joined the Navy (12 years) and retired from the Army for a total of 30 years. He is also retired from the NC Community College System. He holds post-graduate degrees in education and security studies, and completed advanced studies in criminal justice, leadership, engineering, and world history. Throughout his life he had traveled extensively and has lived in the Middle East and Europe.