



THIS WEEK'S FEATURE

The One Thing Really Missing

We Care for Our People — Right Up Until They Rock the Boat

Lt Col (Ret) Ryan Sweazey

Walk the Talk Foundation — President & Founder

This past week was World Suicide Prevention Day¹. The Department of Defense marked it with, maybe, a proclamation, maybe a 5K, maybe a poster in a break room — maybe nothing at all. What it did not do — what it has never done, in the hundreds of cases Walk the Talk has touched — is sit down and ask what it actually feels like to be the person on the other side of an investigation.

We have sat across from three-star inspectors general. We have listened to service chaplains describe their caseloads. We have read command-directed investigations cover to cover, watched officers deliver findings with the affect of a man reading a grocery list. What we have not found, in nearly any of it, is evidence that the person delivering the news has ever once tried to occupy the seat of the person receiving it.

"You did everything right."

That is what a three-star service inspector general told one of our clients, in person, after a lengthy reprisal investigation. Our client's actions had been textbook: documented, timely, corroborated by witnesses. The general did not dispute any of that. "You did everything right," he said. Then: "There's nothing I can do." Then: goodbye.

Sit with that construction for a moment, because it is not an accident of phrasing — it is the entire system, compressed into two sentences. The general could concede the facts, the investigation was flawed, it didn't comply with Service or DOD IG investigation standards, and yet it would stand as written. He can still walk away clean, because "substantiated" is a legal threshold the IG controls, not a description of what actually happened to our client. He could not make our client whole, because the process has no remedy built for a finding it refuses to acknowledge or issue. And he did not stay in the room, because staying would have required him to reckon with what "everything right, still nothing" does to a person — and reckoning was never on the agenda. Three failures, delivered in under a minute, by a man in a position to have prevented all of them, and with the authority to correct the errors if only he could acknowledge it outside the room.

"Most of those were people guilty of something already."

We raised a harder number with a different service inspector general: in the Pentagon's most recent accounting, roughly a quarter of active-duty service members who died by suicide had a known administrative or legal problem in the year before their death^{2,3} — not a fringe statistic, but one of the most consistent findings in a decade of DoD suicide surveillance, and alongside relationship strain, the strongest signal the data produces.

The general's response was not curiosity. It was a reflex to defend his service's numbers, followed by a theory, offered without hesitation: most of those troops, he said, "were people guilty of something already, like pedophiles."



Set aside, for a moment, how factually indefensible that is — the DoD's own data ties the risk to *undergoing* the process, not to guilt, and lumps together everything from a failed PT test to a court-martial. What that sentence actually reveals is the operating assumption underneath the entire IG apparatus: if you are in the system, you probably deserve to be — not a data point, but the reason nobody in that system is looking for a body until there already is one.

"He never called."

Col. Leslie Zyzda-Martin was removed from command of Volk Field in November 2021, read a prepared statement by the general who fired her, and escorted off the base she had led for less than a year. Four subsequent investigations would clear her of the underlying allegations⁴. None of that mattered on the day it happened.

"I was given a sheet of paper with the chaplain's name and number," she told us, describing the only support offered to her as she absorbed the end of her career. "He never called."

Her name ran in the wires within a day — "Commander fired," stripped of context, permanent, searchable⁵. The institution that could not find five minutes for a phone call found the transaction efficient enough to announce publicly before the ink on the paperwork was dry.

THE PATTERN, AND THE QUESTION NOBODY IN UNIFORM WANTS TO ANSWER

Every complainant we work with eventually gets sorted into one of a few institutional boxes: boat-rocker, troublemaker, malcontent, or — when the system wants to discredit without evidence — a suspect for something worse. Isolation follows. So does a particular flavor of gaslighting, in which the process itself becomes the proof: if it were really that bad, someone would have done something.

Nobody in that chain is required to imagine what it is like to sit where the complainant sits. Not the investigator drafting the ROI. Not the commander reading the findings aloud. Not the three-star closing the file. Empathy is not a checklist item anywhere in the IG regulation, the command investigation process, or the fitness reports of the officers who run either one. It is not trained, not measured, not rewarded — and in a system that runs entirely on the discretion of the people inside it, what isn't measured doesn't happen.

So: who is providing it? Right now, inside the institution, the honest answer is no one — not as an oversight, but as a design feature nobody has been asked to fix.

Happy World Suicide Prevention Day, U.S. military — a week late, and evidently, it shows.

Sources

1. World Health Organization / International Association for Suicide Prevention, "World Suicide Prevention Day," observed annually September 10.
2. U.S. Department of Defense, *2024 Department of Defense Annual Report on Suicide in the Military* — 24% of active-component decedents had a known administrative/legal problem within the year prior to death. <https://health.mil/Military-Health-Topics/Centers-of-Excellence/Psychological-Health-Center-of-Excellence/PHCoE-Clinician-Resources/Suicide-Risk>
3. Congressional Research Service, *Military Suicide Prevention* (IF10876) — corroborating CY2023 figures on administrative/legal problems among decedents.



4. Katelyn Ferral, "The Wisconsin National Guard cleared her 4 times. She still wants to know why she was fired," Wisconsin Watch, June 12, 2024. <https://wisconsinwatch.org/2024/06/wisconsin-national-guard-colonel-zyzda-martin-military/>
5. AP News. November 9, 2021. "Volk Field commander relieved of duties after investigation". <https://apnews.com/article/wisconsin-b546a8687a52522d8be3a312b2c57784>

Lt Col (Ret) Ryan Sweazey is the President and Founder of the Walk the Talk Foundation. All articles are posted on [LinkedIn](#) and online at walkthetalkfoundation.org. The Star Chamber podcast is available on [Apple](#), [Spotify](#), and [YouTube](#).

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