

After Suicide Attempt, Combat Veteran Finds His Voice

author: Rob Kane date: April 9, 2013

TOPICS: *iraq veteran • PTSD • suicide attempt • veteran suicide*



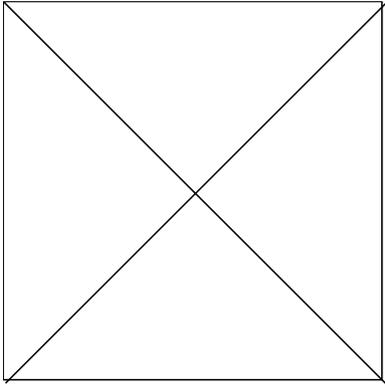
Austin-American Statesman – Just before dawn, Andrew O’Brien flipped his laptop open, turned on his webcam and prepared to tell the world the most personal story of his life.

On the first try, the lump in his throat caught his voice and tears welled in his eyes. He tried again, he said, but the words kept jumbling together. His mind raced back to the night his world collapsed, to the horrible mistake he almost made.

On his fourth try, O’Brien looked into the tiny keyhole of the webcam: “So here’s the story,” he said, his voice steady now. “I snapped one day and decided to take every pill I could get my hands on.”

Four minutes and 23 seconds later, the 24-year-old finished the video. But he hesitated before uploading it to YouTube. There was a reason no other soldier he knew of had ever gone public with their suicide attempt. It’s a taboo subject in general and especially among young soldiers, who too often view talk of feelings as a sign of weakness.

For O'Brien too, a suffocating silence — the unexpressed feelings, the untold stories — had marked his return from war to his Army post in Hawaii. He came home with nightmares that had started after the night in Iraq when he disobeyed an order, looked under a tarp covering a bomb-blasted armored vehicle and saw something his mind couldn't erase.



He kept his struggles hidden from his fellow soldiers, and even from his big brother Lee, an Army infantryman he had followed into war. O'Brien rode his pain alone, into the abyss, but unlike nearly 1,500 other active-duty service members in the past five years, he survived his suicide attempt.

As he sat at his computer that February morning in Austin, he hoped his story would reach other suffering soldiers or the countless families trying to re-establish connections with veterans who have come home from war. "It felt like I was opening up a wound, but opening that wound would close somebody else's," he said later.

A certainty stirred inside him, something reminiscent of what he'd felt after gulping down the pills and deciding he wanted to live. He took a deep breath. And he pressed send.

Lead gunner

O'Brien, 24, grew up a shy, quiet boy in large family of seven brothers and sisters in a suburb of Dallas. After his father left the family, his brother Lee became a father figure. "He always sat back and watched," Lee O'Brien remembered. "He was always the observer."

Both boys, separated by about two years, got in their fair share of trouble as youngsters, and Andrew said his brother Lee joined the Army to “man up” and walk a straighter line. Andrew knew he wanted to follow his brother’s footsteps after he visited him at Fort Bragg and saw the tight bond among the soldiers. “My brother explained to me, when you deploy you become like this very tight- knit family,” Andrew O’Brien said.

Andrew O’Brien was 19 when he joined the Army in 2007 at the height of the surge of U.S. troops in Iraq.

At Forward Operating Base Summerall, a bleak outpost north of Baghdad, he was a truck driver in the convoys that crisscrossed Iraq, moving troops and supplies while trying to avoid roadside bombs. Soon he was made a lead gunner, standing atop the armored vehicle, clutching a .50-caliber machine gun and scanning the road for danger, particularly for the improvised explosive devices that regularly ripped through convoys.

“All you’re thinking about is you’ve got to watch the sides of the road,” he said. “There is a lot of pressure. You feel like you are responsible. If you pass something, even if it doesn’t explode, it could explode on the people behind you.”

Three months before the unit was scheduled to return home, Andrew O’Brien and his unit learned that another convoy had been attacked with an IED that dropped from a tree’s branches and onto a Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected vehicle, or MRAP — whose reinforced hulls are designed to deflect explosions from below. The blast killed the lead gunner, who was a 19-year-old with a young son, and two members of the crew.

After the crippled MRAP was towed to the base and covered with a tarp, Andrew O’Brien’s sergeant ordered the men to steer clear of it.

Andrew O’Brien, though, felt compelled to look. He worried he was getting complacent, potentially putting his men in danger. Seeing the results of the IED up close, he figured, would snap him into the proper alertness.

That night, he sneaked out to the truck and pulled back the tarp. The bodies were mostly gone, but the truck hadn’t been cleaned of the grisly evidence of the blast.

“It was the biggest mistake I ever made,” he said. “I can’t get that image out of my mind. It’s burned in there.”

Afterward, he grew paranoid; he would call out every piece of debris on the road, forcing the convoy to stop repeatedly so the items — often just trash — could be inspected.

“When we went through villages it felt like I was having a heart attack, making everyone show you their hands,” he said. “And it is your hand on the gun, just waiting.”

The dreams came soon after, but instead of strangers in the MRAP, he saw the bodies of his men.

He didn’t tell anyone in his unit what he had done, and if they noticed a change in his behavior, no one said anything. By summer’s end, the unit made its last convoy run — riding in anxious silence until they pulled back into the base and the soldiers tumbled from the trucks with joyous shouts. “You could finally breathe again,” Andrew O’Brien said. “It kind of felt like our war was over.”

‘Pretend it never happened’

After the unit returned to Schofield Barracks outside Honolulu in the fall of 2009, Andrew O’Brien’s life quickly turned into a binge of drinking and partying. At first, the drinking was a celebration and release; he was with his battle buddies, and they had survived. About a month after coming home, though, the nightmares returned, and the drinking began to serve another purpose: helping him forget.

Andrew O’Brien and his buddies would drink until they passed out and slipped into a dreamless slumber. They never talked about the darker side of Iraq. “That’s what was so weird,” he said. “You go out there and you go through it all together, but you came back and just want to pretend it never happened.”

One by one, his friends transferred to other units or left the Army altogether. Andrew O’Brien felt a sadness watching them leave, his support system crumbling piece by piece.

He also began to have flashbacks as he trained the next batch of soldiers for convoy work. The sound of the truck engine or the smell of gasoline could send his mind hurtling back to Iraq. Eventually, at the urging of a girlfriend, he decided to visit a civilian counselor on the base.

He'd done the required mental health screening when he first returned to Hawaii, but he called the process a joke. Soldiers were herded into a large room and asked in plain view of other waiting soldiers if they needed mental health help. "Of course you're not going to say that in front of all these people," he said.

The visits with the counselor ended abruptly, however, after Andrew O'Brien said she questioned his version of what he experienced in Iraq. To O'Brien, the counselor had judged him, had called him a liar. "I stood up and told her if someone gets hurt because of this it's your fault," he said. "I never went to that counselor again."

Around this time, his first sergeant called him out in front of his unit because of his mental health visits, humiliating him in front of other soldiers. The two incidents convinced him that seeking out professional help was a losing bet. Instead, he would make it through on his own.

"I decided I would keep trying to push it down and ignore it, and hopefully it would just go away," he said. "I put a smile on my face every day and walked around like everything was fine. I'm good at that, and a lot of soldiers are good at that: sucking it up and pretending everything is perfect."

Four bottles of pills

Shortly before Thanksgiving 2010, Andrew O'Brien took a camping trip with some friends, including one of his last remaining combat buddies, along the glorious Hawaiian beaches. That night they drank heavily and got into an argument — O'Brien can't remember about what, but it ended with a fistfight on the sand. The next morning, the sullen pair set off for home, the car silent until the argument erupted again.

"I was exhausted from drinking, I felt horrible," O'Brien said. "I guess that day I realized I had become different than I was before."

His friend dropped him off, and Andrew O'Brien walked into the house he shared with his sergeant. O'Brien started pacing back and forth in the empty house.

"My mind was just flooding like a dam had broke," he said. Memories of Iraq, of the truck, of how he missed the guys he served with, of his troubled childhood. "Your mind just goes 100 miles an hour. You think 'I'm never going to be normal again.'"

He walked into the kitchen and saw four bottles of pills: Ambien, antidepressants, over-the-counter painkillers. He had contemplated suicide before, mostly in the desperate moments when he would wake up from a nightmare. If he'd had a gun, he's sure he would have shot himself one of those nights.

But on this day, the fight with his friend had broken something inside him. He chugged the pills down with beer, hoping the alcohol would speed up the process. At first he was filled with rage, punching holes in the walls and fracturing his hand. He grabbed a knife and put it on the table, contemplating cutting himself in hopes of ending it faster.

Sitting on the couch, he said he felt what he believes was his soul leaving his body.

"I'm not a very religious person, but that's what it felt like," he said. "You could feel something leaving your body, and that's when reality kicks in. This is it."

And that's when he realized he wasn't ready.

"It's too late," he thought to himself. *"They won't be able to save me."*

He has no memory of picking up the phone and making the 911 call.

A brother's love

As an infantryman, Lee O'Brien served a 15-month deployment to Afghanistan, where he took part in a number of battles and firefights. He had suffered his own nightmares and was being medically discharged from the Army because of post-traumatic stress when he got the call about his brother's suicide attempt.

“I had no clue,” said Lee O’Brien, who was stationed at Fort Bliss in El Paso. “We had talked here and there, but he didn’t talk about his wartime experiences like I did. For me, talking about it, what I had been through, (helped) me. But he bottled it up.”

Andrew O’Brien said he never confided in his brother because he didn’t feel his trauma was in the same league as what Lee had experienced during his time in the infantry.

That morning, when Andrew O’Brien was handed a phone in his hospital bed, the O’Brien brothers shared their experiences for the first time.

“That’s when we bonded over it,” Andrew O’Brien said. “You could feel the love. That helped a lot in pushing me back to being not suicidal. You don’t realize how many people there are who love you. I woke up that morning and realized how many there were.”

They talked at least once a week after that.

“He knew from that point on that he could call me if anything was going on,” Lee O’Brien said. “It made it easier that I had already walked that line.”

A few weeks later, Andrew O’Brien went to the chaplain of his unit and asked to talk to the soldiers. “I felt that firsthand experience would help, but they wouldn’t let me. That’s when I stopped trying to help: I guessed it wasn’t that big a deal. There must not be that many soldiers dying of suicide.”

In fact, suicides were spiking within the military’s ranks. A few months earlier, the Army had released a landmark report acknowledging the record suicide numbers and placing some of the blame on Army leaders who weren’t taking mental health issues among their soldiers seriously enough.

Since then, the Army has instituted a number of suicide prevention programs and beefed up others already in place, to little effect. Military officials say they cannot pinpoint a single reason for the rise: deployments, financial woes, relationship problems and more have been cited as contributing factors.

Suicide rates continued to climb, and last year about one service member a day died of suicide. Even more, like Andrew O'Brien, tried to kill themselves. In 2011, there were three times as many suicide attempts as suicide deaths.

Searching

Andrew O'Brien left the Army in February 2011 and moved in with his brother, who by then was living in Dallas. For the first time, he was around someone he could talk to about Iraq.

"It's hard to talk to someone who has never been through it," he said. "They can feel sorry for you and they can feel sympathy, but you don't want sympathy. You're just wanting to know you're normal for feeling that way. My brother was my counselor."

The O'Brien brothers were actually practicing a form of what experts call peer-to-peer counseling, which has been hailed by military leaders as particularly effective in battling mental health issues. The Texas Senate recently approved an additional \$4 million for veterans mental health, much of which will be used to help train veterans and their family members in more formal peer programs.

After those talks with his brother, Andrew O'Brien said his dreams of the truck came less frequently. He had learned to wake himself up when they began.

After the suicide attempt, Lee O'Brien wanted his brother close: "I think it really helped him out having someone who he could trust no matter what. And it meant a lot to me to have him."

At the same time, Andrew O'Brien felt adrift. He tried a semester at DeVry Institute studying computer science, but decided school wasn't for him. He tried his hand at a number of jobs and briefly started an errand-running business, but nothing seemed right. After about four months, he left his brother's place and over the next few months moved eight times, living briefly with old Army buddies and on the couches of friends in Texas and Chicago.

He eventually landed in Austin, a place he had visited and loved, in the spring of 2012, renting a room in South Austin from a woman who had advertised on Craigslist.

“I felt like I was searching for so long for a place I was comfortable in,” he said.

He got a clerical job with a medical supply company. Then, in January, he saw a headline that would shape his future: The VA reported that 22 veterans per day were killing themselves.

“I was just shocked, amazed,” he said. “The first thing I thought was ‘Wow, I wasn’t alone.’ All these other people felt exactly the same way. The only difference is I woke up the next morning.”

Now that the issue had landed in the national consciousness, he figured people might want to listen to his story. “This is my time,” he thought. “I can stop someone from doing what I did.”

Going public

He sat down and wrote a 32-page guide for families with returning veterans with practical tips on how to deal with loved ones who had gone to war. He sent it to Amazon to have it self-published.

He set up a website and Twitter account, then made the YouTube video. That’s when the seriousness of what he was doing hit him. As a teenager he wasn’t capable of making friends with anyone he didn’t grow up with, he said, and “I couldn’t sit and have a conversation with anyone I didn’t know, so I never thought I’d be able to do this.

“I was thinking, once I click this button, there’s no turning around. If I click this and put this up on YouTube, people are going to see it, and my life is going to be out there. This is the most private thing someone could have in their life, and I am just blasting it across to anyone that will listen to me. I thought about it and said, ‘You know what, I’m going to do it.’”

His story began to spread. On Twitter, he was contacted by a Louisiana veterans group called NOLA Patriots. There had recently been a rash of suicides among the veteran community there, and organizers wanted O’Brien to speak at a suicide awareness rally in early March.

His roommate, Tana Campbell, had become engrossed in the project and agreed to drive him to New Orleans and invest in the campaign. The pair drove to New Orleans with soaring spirits, making an excited YouTube video on the way, arriving at their hotel at about 3 a.m.

“As soon as I lay down, my mind starts racing: what am I going to say, how am I going to order it? Should I write something down?” he said. But he didn’t want to read off notes. He wanted to speak from the heart.

The next morning, he walked to the podium in the shadow of a highway overpass and took the microphone. He began haltingly, but as the words tumbled out of his mouth he found a rhythm. As his confidence grew, so too did a down-to-earth charisma and natural storytelling ability that had gone untapped for so long.

“It’s hard to talk about, but it needs to be talked about,” he told the crowd. “We’ve been in this war for so long now it’s just becoming normal, and it’s not all right.”

Looking into the crowd, he spotted the mother of the veteran who had recently killed himself and began to tear up. Someone from the crowd brought him a tissue: “Sorry about that, it’s my first speech, and it’s still pretty sensitive to me.”

Driving home that day, Andrew realized this was his calling.

“Before it was all just a dream, me chasing a dream,” he said. “After the speech, it made me confident this could go somewhere. Because I’m going to push this to the limit and go as far as I can with it.”

What we have been looking for

On a picture-perfect late winter day above Lake Travis last month, about 20 people sat in chairs on the veranda of a lavish lake home as Andrew O’Brien stepped forward in white dress shirt and told his story and then invited questions.

He had set up this meeting himself at the rental home, whose owners had heard of his project and donated the space. He publicized it online, inviting veterans and their

families. The assembled mothers asked how they could help their sons and daughters during a panic attack, how to get them out of the house if they retreat from the world.

“Your job is not to understand, it’s to support them through it,” he told the parents. “We don’t want you to think we are weak. You have to make them feel as normal as possible.”

Afterward, the mothers crowded around Andrew, telling him their stories.

“If I had had him earlier it would have made a huge difference,” said Mary Chin of Pflugerville, whose son did four tours in Iraq. “They come back from war a totally different person. You have to re-establish a relationship with them, but you’re kind of lost. This is the resource we have been looking for as parents. I feel like I’ve found a new friend, a resource I didn’t know existed.”

Andrew O’Brien believes this is just the beginning. He hopes to speak to groups of returning veterans and give them the hope he now feels.

“That night, when I felt whatever it was leaving me, it was pushed back in, and I feel like this is what I was supposed to do,” he said. “This is the time that people will listen.”

Resources:

To learn more about Andrew O’Brien’s suicide prevention project visit

<http://www.wyshproject.org/>.

O’Brien will speak at the Marchesa Hall and Theatre, 6406 N. Interstate 35, No. 3100, at 7 p.m. Wednesday.

Veterans Crisis Line: 1-800-273-8255 and press 1.

BREAKING THE SILENCE

One of Andrew O'Brien's goals is to speak to service members before they leave the military, in hopes that those who are struggling as he did can relate to his story.

A growing number of veteran advocates are pushing for just that kind of interaction between recently returned veterans and troops who are about to enter the civilian world. The hope is that the discussion will save lives.

"For those who do come back and are silent ... there is a greater risk of suicide," said Jarod Myers, an Iraq veteran and the regional veterans outreach coordinator for Bluebonnet Trails Community Services, which provides mental health services. "But if service members are able to engage in that process early on, we are more likely to avoid that horrible situation."

Myers said military installations such as Fort Hood and Camp Mabry have been increasingly receptive to having veterans like himself meet with active-duty soldiers.

In his 2010 book "What It's Like to Go To War," author and veterans advocate Karl Marlantes writes that such discussions among veterans and active-duty troops should be mandatory before discharge. "It gets the talk started, breaks the damaging code of silence that stops the integration process," Marlantes wrote. "This process could go on in civilian life, because now it's legitimized and the young veterans know how to do it. Some veterans will always be afraid to bring back their nightmare. They need to know early on that the nightmare can be faced."

Much of the military's suicide prevention effort has been aimed at reducing the stigma surrounding mental health treatment that O'Brien experienced at Schofield Barracks. While it's hard to measure, and military suicides remain on the rise, officials say the message is beginning to penetrate.

"The paradigm in the military is changing from 'I'm too tough, I can handle it by myself,' to help-seeking behavior," said Lt. Col. Alba Villanueva, director of joint family support services for the Texas Army National Guard, which has experienced more than 20 suicides since 2008, the second-most in the nation. "Commanders are looking at it that way, that it's not a weakness, but a natural condition if you experienced trauma."

Source: [Austin-American Statesman](#), April 7, 2013, by [Jeremy Schwartz](#)