

**Subject: Opinion: Suicides in VA parking lots**

**Date:** February 16, 2019

I was in Vietnam for only 5 months more than 4 decades ago.  
But my time there left me haunted with a deep pain I still carry to this day.

When I read about the 19 veterans taking their lives in the parking lot of VAs my heart breaks.

I know what good the VA can do.

I too have wanted to take my life, but it was the VA that saved me and continues to help me carry on.

In 1969, I was just 19 years old. I was faced with the choice, enlist or get drafted. I knew if I was drafted it was likely I would end up in the Army or Marines, and after years of watching the war on the evening news those didn't look like good options to me. My Dad was in the Navy in World War II and he said I should enlist with the Navy so that is what I did.

The Navy trained me as a helicopter mechanic and I guess they decided I was maybe a little bit better mechanic than some of the other guys so I ended up being an inspector who decided whether the helicopters on the USS Sacramento were safe to fly.

I was sent to sea on the USS Sacramento. We carried hundreds of 1,000 lbs. and 500 lbs. bombs from the ship to aircraft carriers stationed off the coast of Da Nang.

It was obvious the work we were doing was going to kill hundreds and thousands of people. When you are putting your hands on 500 lbs. bombs, you know what you are doing, it is all part of the killing process.

I had a piece of chalk, and I started writing on the bombs. I wrote messages like, "We need to stop killing people" and "Please let this be the last bomb." I know people saw it, but nobody ever talked to me about those messages.

After I got out of the service, I tried to get on with my life.  
I got married and divorced and married again and divorced again.

Things were never right.

I was angry, I just felt like I didn't belong, I felt like I hated myself, and was often plotting ways to commit suicide.

It was another vet who recognized what was wrong with me, and he badgered me and badgered me to go to the VA in 2012.

When I got to VA I met a psychologist, who was no-nonsense.  
I went when I learned from her that I had PTSD.

I knew if I was going to survive and not getting rid of myself, I needed someone like her in my corner.

The VA treated me like I deserved to be listened to, like what I said was real. And veterans today need that- they need to be seen and heard.

I don't know what happened to those 19 veterans who didn't get the help they needed when they needed it. I know a minute or a second can stand between life and death when it all seems too much to handle. I know because I have stood in that space between.

I know that those 323 veterans who the Washington Post said were saved from killing themselves on the grounds of the VA are just some of the untold thousands who are still alive today because of the VA.

I worry that the lives the VA saved will be lost in the story of the lives lost.

The pain of war never goes away, it ebbs and flows of its own accord.

That is why the VA must be made stronger, so that it will not ebb and flow, but stand solid as a place for every veteran to find comfort and solace and a way to carry on. That is what I will fight for as I mourn the loss of these 19 veterans who brought their wars home and died under their weight.

David Cooley, USN 1969 - 1972, DAV, UVLC, VFP  
[dacooley@usinternet.com](mailto:dacooley@usinternet.com)  
Cel. 612-244-7649  
24725 Smithtown Road  
Excelsior, MN 55331