



Defense Suicide Prevention Office Video Transcript

Spotlight on Suicide Prevention: U.S. Navy Reserve – Naval Construction Battalion 18

Chief Stephany Sherman:

Thank you for joining us for Spotlight on Suicide Prevention, a new series of videos by the Department of Defense to highlight the suicide prevention achievements of our local program. Today we're joined by our friends from the U.S. Navy Reserve Naval Construction Battalion 18. They're an example of what suicide prevention looks like at the local levels of our military communities. Their efforts to raise awareness and prevent suicide is inspiring and innovative. Let's learn about our guests and their work to keep our Service members safe from suicide.

Naval Construction Battalion 18, NCB 18 is a 580 Service member commissioned Reserve unit that recently deployed two waves of roughly 140 Seabees to the CENTCOM area of operation. The command arranged Warrior Toughness and Resiliency Training before and after deployment and developed relationships with the available mental health providers at Naval Base Ventura County. The command utilized a virtual Troops to Triad, T2T meeting format to maintain connections and growth opportunities with members who did not deploy. Command leadership with a strong focus on personal growth and leadership development met quarterly with members who live in 40 of the 50 states and drill at 77 different Navy Reserve centers.

The T2T meetings focused on resiliency, well-being, operations, and training information. Khaki leadership concentrated on personal growth and leadership development through training on warrior ethos, courage, warrior toughness, ethics, and protective measures for moral injury. The multiple strategies and touchpoints allowed leadership to address the unique needs of members returning in waves from deployment. Thank you for joining us today. Can you take a moment to please introduce yourselves and your titles?

CDR Leia Guccione:

Thank you for having us. I'm Commander Leia Guccione, commanding officer of Naval Construction Battalion 18.

CMDCM Chad Bartman:

Good morning. I'm Command Master Chief Chad Bartman, the command master chief for Naval Construction Battalion 18.

Chaplain Andi Ingram:

I'm Chaplain Andi Ingram, and I am the battalion chaplain for Naval Construction Battalion 18.

Chief Stephany Sherman:



Let's learn more about your efforts and accomplishments. Can you please share details about your program, what your team accomplished, and what worked best to encourage participation and engagement?

CDR Leia Guccione:

Absolutely. Beginning in the fall of 2022, we began a process of supporting two separate global force management deployments. All right. We had two waves of sailors, so we ended up sending just shy of 270 Seabees to the CENTCOM AO to support board deployed joint missions in that theater of operations. And as a Reserve battalion who has personnel across 77 different Naval Reserve centers, bringing our folks together for deployment we knew was going to be an unprecedented event for the unit, and that it would require a different level and a different posture of engagement for us in all of our programs. So, both in what our command chaplain was doing in her chaplaincy efforts for our drug and alcohol prevention awareness programs, as well as our suicide prevention program. And just an overall difference in our intrusive leadership posture with our team.

And so preparing for these mobilizations was really sort of the triggering event that inspired us to take a hard look and give some real creative thought to what we were doing to ensure that we were sending resilient warfighters down range and to think about what the command could best do to support them. And so, Chaps, I want to invite you to say a little bit about how we formulated that plan and then actually ended up sort of supporting our team as they both prepared to go down range and then went down range and then how we helped bring them home.

Chaplain Andi Ingram:

Sure. Yeah, absolutely. So one of the key things we started with is we actually sent a number of people to the Advanced Warrior Toughness Training, which kind of opened up the beginning conversations that a lot of our sailors had never even heard of what Warrior Toughness was. So, we kind of began there as the start for how we were going to begin to lay a foundation of why it mattered to focus not just on one aspect of a person, but to understand them as a whole person and understand their needs from both their physical needs, their mental needs, and their spiritual needs, understanding them totally. And so our entire program was really centered around this idea of isolation, right, that we understand that it's easy for our members to be isolated when they feel out of touch with themselves, or maybe with others, or something's going on with their family back home or whatever it may be.

And so our program really honed in on how do we focus on decreasing isolation. So we did that through lots of trainings and different events and ways in which we sort of indirectly helped them understand the importance of mitigating the suicide risk. And we also did it directly. So it was both and a mixture of a lot of different trainings, a lot of different just events that we put together. So some of the trainings that we honed in on as a group that we trained our sailors on were, of course, we worked on some Warrior Toughness, we did Sacred Pause, we worked on what it meant to be courageous and how that ties into being vulnerable in character building, leadership building, preventative measures of moral injury.

And we also used something called Troops to Triad, which helped keep our Seabees really connected to what was not only going on in the battalion but helped them engage in a fun way to feel like they were part of something bigger. To again, draw them from isolation, from feeling like, I just have this one job I



do. I don't know that it really matters, but understanding the bigger picture I think helped them become part of something bigger.

CDR Leia Guccione:

Thanks, Chaps. One of the things that we really thought about in the foundations of our program is how do we have strong individuals, all right, when we think about war fighter resilience and what helps our warfighters be tough? So how do we strengthen them as individuals? How do we ensure that they feel supported, all right, and connected to the battalion? And then how do we connect them so that they don't feel isolated? And so Master Chief, one of the things that we know that was effective and that we really invested in was how we used our existing chain of command, command and control structures, and the tried-and-true things like the chief's mess to make sure that we were staying tuned into our troops. And so I was wondering if you could say more about how we actually really engage our leaders to be part of what we did in this process.

CMDCM Chad Bartman:

Yeah. During the deployment, it gets difficult where you have a portion of the chief messes remaining back at home, taking care of the individuals at home port, and you have a good portion of your chief's mess is actually located overseas. So, one of the things we tried to do within the mess, and this would move its way outside to the junior sailors, is to keep the connection between both home port and deployed messes together. It allowed us to, if there was issues going on overseas, our home port chiefs would know about it and be able to assist if needed be. We worked quite a bit within the mess to keep that going.

We also worked a fair amount with our junior sailors and keeping in contact with them, especially. Basically, we would use the Troops to Triad format for meetings with our deployed sailors that are at remote locations throughout the CENTCOM AOR. There would be as few as four people at a location in the middle of nowhere, and we would have these meetings with them to keep that connection and to let them understand, hey, we're here. We know you're there and we care about what's going on with you.

Chief Stephany Sherman:

What inspired you to build your program this way and why do you feel it has had positive impact in preventing suicide?

CDR Leia Guccione:

Absolutely. I think when considering how we needed to build and leverage our program, there were a couple of important things that we took into consideration. So one, as a Reserve unit, we are distributed. All right? We have over 500 Seabees in the battalion, and as I mentioned previously, they are serving out of over 70 different Naval Reserve centers. We literally have Reservists who are part of this unit in almost every single state and territory in the Nation. We're also an expeditionary force. All right? So we conduct distributed operations as part of our core mission capability that we deliver to the fleet. And so really, we, I think, leaned into what does it mean to build connection for our sailors, given



the distributed nature of our battalion as a Reserve battalion, but also the distributed nature of expeditionary operations. And so this drove us to be one creative about the tools we used to build connection.

We really leaned heavily on virtual technology capabilities like Microsoft Teams, using web-enabled survey tools and other things to communicate and collect feedback real time from our sailors. All right? So we thought creatively about given the distributed nature of what we were dealing with, what did that mean in terms of building connection? I think the other thing is we looked hard, and it wasn't just about suicide prevention, but what does it mean to be a resilient war fighter? All right and really normalize mental health and self-care as something that is expected of all war fighters who are remaining ready for the fight. And so we talk a lot of time to think about what does that mean for the individuals, but then what do we also as leaders and in particular the Khaki, all right, our officers and chiefs need to do to be supporting that, role modeling that, and reinforcing what that really means for folks. Chaps, what would you add?

Chaplain Andi Ingram:

Yeah, I think we were inspired by a few things. One, like I said, I think getting in and getting involved in what it meant to understand what the military is pushing, which is the Warrior Toughness aspect. And then from our own personal lives. I mean, my own personal life, this stuff is important to me. And so the thought of losing a sailor to the challenges of life just feels a bit overwhelming. Right? So, to be able to hone in on really looking at who they are as whole people and looking at them from their capacity, not just to go out and fight a war, but their capacity as a whole person to be better characters and be better people, not only for themselves and for their fellow sailors, but also for their families and for the jobs that they go back to because our Reservists all go home after this.

And so the opportunity to really understand that loneliness is an epidemic in our society and that the military is not immune to that epidemic and how we drew people out of isolation. We use a quote, which I'm not going to remember the quote name exactly right now, but it was the concept that solitude is a good thing. Taking time to reflect, do some inner reflection is really important, but isolation is detrimental, and it can lead to death. And this is what we didn't want to do. And so we worked hard at being, as Skipper mentioned, creative, thinking outside the box, coming up with ways that weren't necessarily what we'd done before to try to envision something new that decreased the isolation.

And one event that we did that I feel like kind of helps understand this is it's very typical after a deployment to do an award ceremony. And we decided that we needed to do the award ceremony very differently because we had sailors that were deployed in different locations. They didn't really know what one group was doing or the other. And we really needed to figure out how could we bring them back as a unit, help them understand that they had each other, and that they had gone out there and they had done this together even though they never saw each other for six months. And what we did is we actually had this award ceremony where not everyone got an award. Yes, some people did, but everyone came up to the front and everyone had an opportunity to be proud of the hard work that they had put in, understanding that they were part of a team. And we really believe that that small act, that small event, actually increased people's trust in each other, people's sense of belonging and people's understanding of identity within the unit. And that helped then decrease isolation.

Chief Stephany Sherman:



It sounds like your team really did put a lot of time and effort into creating that unit cohesion and ensuring everybody felt a part of the team. Do you think your program has implications outside your installation across other services or units for suicide prevention efforts or suicide prevention efforts in the civilian community?

CDR Leia Guccione:

I absolutely think that the efforts, the initiative, the things that we tested are having an impact in our sailors beyond the immediate role they serve as a member of our battalion, and also with units beyond Naval Construction Battalion 18. One of the things that we did in particular when preparing for the return, realizing that our sailors who were in theater when the tensions rose between Hamas and Israel, all right, that these folks were going to need an even greater and more expansive and comprehensive level of support than our first wave of Seabees did. And we did a lot to ensure that we were ready to support our first group, but our folks who were in theater when the hostilities broke out and some of them actually saw actual indirect fire and aggression at the installations where they were serving, we knew that we were going to need to do something even more significant and supportive for those folks.

We worked with the psychological health team at 1st Naval Construction Group, and actually not only had them help us build the curriculum of training, of counseling, of team building and individual supportive and family engagement activities for our second wave of sailors, but we also were able to have the psychological health team at 1st Naval Construction Group get connected with the professionals at the Mobilization and Deployment Support Command in Virginia where our sailors would actually be doing their demobilization out-processing as well as their final sort of psychological and physical screenings before returning to civilian status. And so that, I think, was the first time MDSC had ever had an echelon four command try to partner with them to have an integrated handoff of support of what the care plan was and what we were trying to do.

And so I know through some of the things like that that we did that we've definitely created some important connections and foundations in the whole fabric of support that we're trying to offer our sailors. I think if you ask Chaps and Chaps, I want to pass to you. I think some of what we did goes even further than that. Chaps?

Chaplain Andi Ingram:

Sure, absolutely. Like Skipper said, what we were able to do with the embedded mental health was amazing. It was super helpful for our team, for our members, and again, played a role in their understanding of kind of decreasing the stigma, right, and understanding that we're all in this together and we're going to do this together. So, I think that was really important. But also just thinking about the impact of our RCBs on the community. RCBs have great impact in their local communities because they all have their own jobs and they're part of a civilian life every day.

And so I go back and look at, there's a lot of stories. We could tell lots of stories, but one in particular, a sailor who also got involved in the Warrior Toughness program and learned a lot from it, went on deployment, spent a lot of time learning more about himself and how to deal with his own stressors and then helped others. The impact that what he has learned and gained as far as knowledge and his own care for himself goes on and is important to the people that he serves in his communities as a police officer and also his fellow officer. So, I am proud of that, to think that not only him, but many others of



the impact of the work that we've been able to do has impacted directly civilians and the civilian community to a lot of our sailors.

Chief Stephany Sherman:

Thank you for sharing with us all the ways you're working to make our military safe from suicide. I'm confident I can say this on behalf of our audience, we've all learned so much about ways we can lead the fight to help eliminate suicide across the military. Our guests were honored at the 2024 Department of Defense Suicide Prevention Recognition Ceremony in September for their campaigns to prevent suicide, which took place at the Pentagon Hall of Heroes. We hope you enjoyed listening to what you have heard. Please help us spread the word by sharing the link to this interview with others. If you found it on social media, share it on your timeline for your friends to discover. To access more videos and resources in DSPO's video library, visit us online at www.DSPO.mil. If you are a Service member in crisis, remember you are never alone. Dial 988 and press one for the Veterans and Military Crisis Line. You can also access the crisis line by texting 838255 or chat online at veteranscrisisline.net.