

A Symbol to Remove the Stigma

A VFW Auxiliary member in New York created a flag that honors and remembers veterans and troops lost to suicide

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Kevin Hertell comes from a proud military family. His uncle — an Army Gulf War veteran — and grandfather — an Army, Army Air Corps and Air Force World War II and Korean War veteran — inspired Hertell to join the Air Force.

Hertell also had a cousin in the military. Robert Dean was an Air Force veteran who died by suicide in 2016. After his cousin's death, Hertell began researching the topic of suicide among veterans and troops, which he calls an epidemic.

“At that time, I decided our country needs a symbol to remove the stigma of suicide and mental health,” Hertell said. “A symbol to continually raise awareness and to remember and honor those who died by suicide.”

And so, the idea for the Suicide Awareness and Remembrance flag, or SAR flag, was born. Hertell, who served from 1999 to 2003 as an F-16 crew chief, spent the next year designing the symbol on the flag. He took inspiration from the POW/MIA and Gold Star flags.

Hertell said that having a recognizable symbol and flag will help elevate the issues of veterans' suicide to the public consciousness.

“By normalizing an otherwise taboo subject of mental health among veterans, we will allow them to seek out the care they need without fear of judgment,” Hertell said.

AN ‘ATTAINABLE GOAL’

Hertell said the flag is already being flown in 24 states. His goal for the SAR flag is to make sure it is raised over the U.S. Capitol and White House one day.

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“I think it’s a very attainable goal,” said Hertell, the president and executive director of The Veterans SAR Flag Corporation — a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. “We are using the POW/MIA flag as a blueprint. We want to get to a point where the SAR flag is officially recognized by Congress, much like the POW/MIA flag is. I truly believe the SAR flag can be anywhere that the POW/MIA flag is.”

Another one of Hertell’s endeavors is working to have the federal government recognize Sept. 22 as Veterans Suicide Awareness and Remembrance Day. He said he has already started working with the states of New York and New Jersey to make the day recognized in each state.

“There is no reason why we can’t honor those lost by suicide and forever remember them,” Hertell said. “We can do that by changing the stigma when it comes to getting help with mental health. This will allow more veterans to get treated. Mental health ailments are treatable, and suicide is preventable. It’s up to us to do something about it.”

‘AS LONG AS WE EXIST’

On Sept. 26, VFW Post 1384 in Long Beach, New York, held its inaugural VFW Block Party, which includes activities for community members. But before the fun began, the Post held a flag-raising ceremony for the SAR flag.

The ceremony took place after Hertell contacted the Post about the SAR flag. Joe Braskey, the junior-vice commander of the Post on Long Island, said he took an immediate interest in the SAR flag’s

mission. Braskey — a Navy veteran, who served aboard the USS Saipan (LHA-2), USS Seattle (AOE-3) and USS Dwight D. Eisenhower (CVN-69) — said the more he researched Hertell’s nonprofit organization, the more the message resonated with him.

“It became even clearer to me that talking about suicide and mental health issues is the calling of many Post-9/11 veterans,” Braskey said. “I believe the SAR flag’s goals are all encompassing like no other. I can’t think of a better way for our Post to advocate for veterans. As long as we exist, the SAR flag will be flown above the Post.”

Braskey said that seeing the SAR flag outside of the Post makes him think about the thousands of veteran lives lost to suicide and the family members who were affected. He added that he hopes the flag will help save lives.

“I think about the POW/MIA flag, and what it did for the Vietnam generation,” Braskey said. “It raised our nation’s consciousness of those who are still missing in action. I think that’s what we are helping to accomplish with the SAR flag.”

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