

TESTIMONY OF JACOB WOOD

UNITED STATES SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

VA MENTAL HEALTH CARE

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McShan, Jenson, Stewart, Ross, Rios, Markel, Rocha....Clay Hunt.

In 2008, my unit redeployed home to the US after a long and bloody tour in Helmand Valley, Afghanistan. In 7 months, we lost 20 Marines, suffered nearly two dozen amputations, and took over 150 casualties. The names I just read, however, weren't among those grim statistics. No, the names I just read are the names of the men we've lost in the last four years; names of the men we've lost to suicide while pursuing peace.

That last name, Clay Hunt, belonged to my dear friend and sniper partner. Clay was a good man, a great Marine, and an incredible humanitarian. Clay helped me start an organization called Team Rubicon—a nonprofit which uses the skills and experiences of returning combat veterans for continued service following natural disasters.

My cofounder and I launched Team Rubicon after the Haiti earthquake in 2010. We arrived only a few days after the devastating quake struck, and provided medical triage in the hardest hit areas of Port au Prince; essentially using the principles of Counter-Insurgency warfare to mitigate risk, move quickly, gain the trust of an unstable populace, and render critical medical aid.

It was after Clay's suicide, however, that we realized a critical truth: Team Rubicon is more than a high-speed disaster response organization. Rather, it is a veteran service organization that is using disasters as an opportunity for veterans to regain what they've lost since leaving the military. Ladies and gentlemen, many will come and testify here today that jobs, or education, or access to healthcare is what will keep our nation's warriors from killing themselves here at home. But, simple Marine Sergeant, I'm going to argue that it is much simpler.

You see, returning from a decade long war that has suffered from ambiguous political leadership, an unclear mission, and a disengaged and disinterested public takes a heavy mental and emotional toll on our servicemen and women.

Picture for a moment an 18 year old boy in Omaha, Nebraska. That 18 year old boy graduates high school and joins the Army. The Army sends him to boot camp and gives him a rifle. Later he deploys to Iraq and is promoted to the rank of sergeant. This young man spends twelve months in Iraq, and every day he leads his men outside the wire on a mission to pacify the countryside and protect his comrades from insurgent attacks. He has purpose.

Every night, back inside the wire, he checks on his men, ensuring they have what they need. They laugh together, and they cry together. He has a community.

Twelve months later his unit returns home. The young boy, now a man, walks through the airport in his uniform and is slapped on the back and thanked by all those around. He has an identity.

A few short months later, that man leaves the Army and returns home to Omaha, Nebraska. He gets a job and reconnects with old high school friends. Soon, however, he discovers a serious void—things just aren't the same. No job can replace the purpose he once felt. Distant high school friends simply cannot understand or replace the community he has left behind. And no mechanics' overalls or pinstripe suit will ever give him the identity he once felt while proudly wearing the uniform of his beloved nation.

He is not whole. And now, left to his own devices, he questions his war because everyone around him questions it. He now finds himself trying to justify the lives lost, the lives taken, and the moral code war inevitably compromises. For some this is the most difficult part because the mission may no longer feel noble, the threat no longer imminent.

We at Team Rubicon believe that the foundation to a healthy transition lays in those three simple concepts: Purpose, Community, and Identity. By providing veterans with a new and noble mission—helping those afflicted by disasters—veterans not only help their neighbors, they help themselves.

Through disaster response our veterans find a new method of employing the skills they learned for war. Combat medics treat young children; combat engineers build refugee camps; and squad leaders bring order to ravaged communities. They raise their right hand and let their neighbors know that when disasters strike they will, once again, lace up their boots and answer the call. They look around themselves and discover a new band of brothers; men and women with a similar ethos and desire for community. Lastly, they wear our t-shirt with pride; a pride of belonging to something bigger than themselves. If done right, we can make them feel whole again.

Earlier I mentioned community, and community cannot be undervalued. Today, service members come together from communities all across the country and form tight-knit units. But when they leave the military, they go back to their home towns, losing that connection - that brotherhood - they had when they were in the service.

To help build a 21st century veteran community, I have also cofounded a technology company called POS REP, or Position Report. POS REP was also inspired by Clay Hunt, when, at his funeral, I discovered that Clay had lived within 10 miles of three Marines we'd served with in Iraq—Clay, in fact, had not been alone. Frustrated with the VA and DOD's inability to connect veterans with one another after they leave the service, we set out to solve the problem using the most ubiquitous tool on the planet—our smartphones.

Using the GPS capability of smartphones, we have created an application exclusively for military veterans. It connects veterans not only to the vets they already know, but more importantly it helps them discover and communicate with the unseen network of veterans around them, unlocking a peer

support network that we all know is critical to stemming the tide of veteran suicide. It also serves as a unifying platform for veteran service organizations, helping numerous nonprofits reach veterans in order to provide critical transition services. POS REP is an innovative attempt to solve an age-old problem.

In later versions, we hope to help veterans connect with VA services based on their proximity to those resources. The app can serve as a hyper-local, veteran version of “Foursquare,” however, to do so requires cooperation with the federal and state government, which has proven to be tremendously cumbersome for a young, underfunded startup, such as POS REP.

In closing, it is my humble opinion that at the root of this issue lays three core tenants: purpose, community and identity. Team Rubicon is working to provide all three of those through a new, exciting mission in disaster response, and POS REP is looking to create offline communities through innovative online discovery tools. In order for us to adequately address what has become a national epidemic—one in which 22 veterans a day are *successfully* killing themselves-- we must have the public and private sectors come together to propose *and execute* bold, innovative solutions. At this stage inaction is not an option.

Thank you for your time, and I'd be happy to answer your questions.