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***If Veterans don't help Veterans, who will?***

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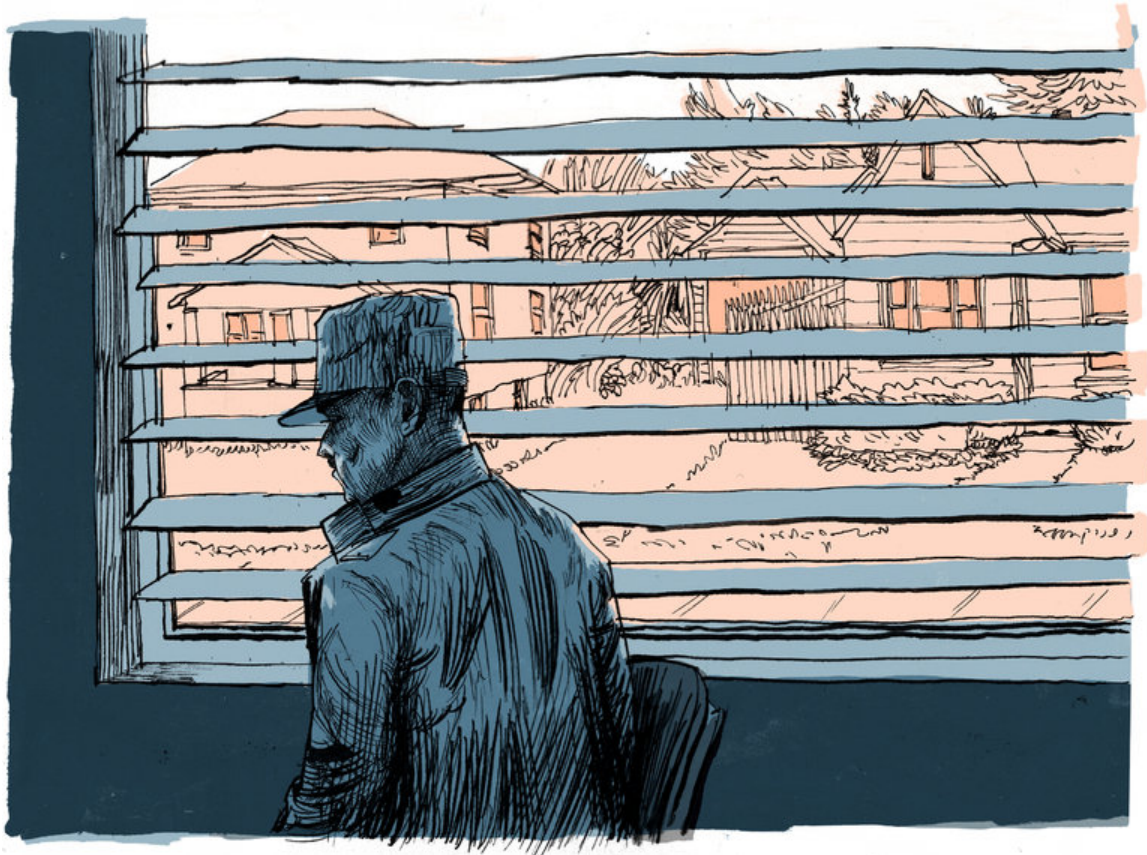
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# A Less Than Honorable Policy

By JOHN ROWAN

DEC. 30, 2016



CreditMatt Rota

Kristofer Goldsmith spent the end of his teenage years photographing mutilated bodies. Mr. Goldsmith knew that he would face bullets and bombs when he enlisted in the Army shortly after Sept. 11, and like almost every soldier of his generation, he volunteered to serve with the understanding that he would go to war. He made sergeant in just over two years and spent an entire year in Baghdad.

The battle that Mr. Goldsmith wasn't prepared for was coming home. He drank to get to sleep. He isolated himself so he wouldn't hurt his friends and family when he suddenly lashed out with rage.

Then he tried to kill himself. Rather than treat him medically, the Army treated Mr. Goldsmith like a criminal. Just a few weeks after his unsuccessful suicide attempt, he was issued a less-than-honorable discharge for what the Army labeled serious misconduct. There was no court-martial finding him guilty. In 2007, Mr. Goldsmith was separated administratively with a few strokes of a pen.

His undiagnosed and untreated post-traumatic stress disorder was hard enough for him to deal with — now he had discharge papers that looked like a criminal record.

Mr. Goldsmith has spent the last decade appealing his discharge. He has sought treatment for his PTSD and his depression. He's been invited to the White House to speak about mental health programs, and he's started classes at Columbia University. Yet the Army continues to deny his request for an honorable discharge, holding the line on its initial conclusion that a suicide attempt amounts to a serious act of misconduct.

The Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that as many as 20 percent of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan may have PTSD. Earlier this year, The New York Times [reported](#) that as many as 13 percent of post-9/11 veterans have received less-than-honorable discharges. Last year, NPR reported that between 2009 and 2015, the Army separated more than [22,000](#) combat soldiers for misconduct after they had received diagnoses for mental health problems or traumatic brain injury.

That's why Vietnam Veterans of America wrote to President Obama urging him to use his power to pardon all post-9/11 veterans who received less-than-honorable discharges without the due process of a court-martial. As outlined in a [recent memorandum](#) to Mr. Obama by the Veterans Legal Services Clinic at Yale Law School, using this presidential power is not without precedent. On his last day in office, President Gerald R. Ford issued a mass pardon, granting clemency discharges to Vietnam veterans in violation of the Military Selective Service Act or the Uniform Code of Military Justice between August 1964 and March 1973. President Jimmy Carter, in 1977, issued full pardons to those Americans who had refused induction via the Vietnam-era draft, erasing the felony-level offense of draft resistance for thousands of people. Today's veterans deserve similar consideration.

The "misconduct" the military frequently cites to justify less-than-honorable discharges is often related to PTSD, traumatic brain injury or other service-related illnesses and injuries. Yet the military itself is culpable, having for years underdiagnosed those problems. After service, things often get worse, since "bad paper" discharges can result in the denial of veterans benefits. Without proper care, and with the stigma of a less-than-honorable discharge, these veterans are often more likely to become substance abusers, homeless or incarcerated — or to die by suicide.

Because PTSD was not entered into the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders until 1980, countless Vietnam veterans were also separated from service unfairly with "bad paper" administrative discharges that denied them access to critical benefits. Now that we better understand the effects of war, it is unconscionable that our newest veterans are being discharged for similar reasons.

It is extremely [difficult](#) for veterans suffering from a service-related condition such as PTSD to successfully appeal for a discharge upgrade on their own. This process can cost tens of thousands of dollars for private doctors who can treat and document their conditions. Furthermore, the complicated process of fact-finding and case-building typically requires hundreds of hours of work by a lawyer. The federal government stopped sponsoring discharge-upgrade centers in the early 1980s, so veterans are stuck on waiting lists for years before they can find attorneys familiar with the process.

This could be rectified if Mr. Obama simply upgraded them all to honorable discharges. This action has the potential to save lives, and it would follow a long tradition of presidents' working to set things right for veterans before leaving office. The president should immediately grant access to PTSD and T.B.I. screening through the Department of Veterans Affairs for all veterans, regardless of discharge status. To avoid overwhelming the already-strained V.A. system, he should call on the broader medical community to help in the screening.

Mr. Obama should also start working with Donald J. Trump, who made improving veterans' lives a central campaign pledge, to ensure that this program extends as long as needed.

Our country should be ashamed that, after volunteering to serve in wartime, injured and ill veterans are forced to spend years fighting the bureaucracy to get the recognition and treatment they deserve. Mr. Obama, our commander in chief until Jan. 20, must stand up for these people.