

A letter from Todd Vance, BA, Social Work

U.S. Army Veteran

Founder, Head Coach and CEO of POW

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### A Call for Innovative and Effective Treatment Options for Veterans and Active Military Suffering from PTSD

In 2010, I was stunned to discover that intense physical workouts were helping me re-adjust to civilian life. At the time, I was studying social work at Point Loma Nazarene University, and fighting a desperate but losing battle against symptoms of PTSD. That realization changed my life.

But let me step back a moment.

I was a Sergeant Squad Leader in the U.S. Army's 3rd Striker Brigade. Prior to Sept. 11, I had four months left on my contract. After the attacks on the World Trade Center, I knew it was my duty to re-enlist. During the war in Iraq that ensued, I led over 250 combat missions and 75 raids. During the height of the insurgency, my unit was ambushed, attacked and blown up on a regular basis. On one of the worst days, the Stryker Vehicle that my squad rode in was hit by a total of six rocket-propelled grenades. The battle spilled out onto the street and into the night. We resorted to close quarter, hand to hand combat. That night seemed to last forever.

There are many glossy and idealized portrayals of war in literature, film and the media. Invariably, there's a gripping story, some fantastic action, and a tidy ending. The novel-turned-film "Dear John" by Nicholas Sparks, my cousin, was based on my life while serving in the Army. There are a few things he changed to make the story more entertaining, but on the surface, it's a pretty accurate depiction of what really happened. In the movie, my character returns home, the war is over, and his life resumes. But in real life, there is no "end" to war. The fight goes on, but it's a silent war no one else can see or understand; and quite honestly, not many really want to. If you're a combat veteran and you're reading this, you know exactly what I mean.

Hyper-vigilance, insomnia, detachment, isolation, and nightmares followed me home. The symptoms of PTSD were competing for attention with my school work, job and personal life. I was nearing the end of my rope. At the time, there was only one treatment option on the table: Be medicated, either by a physician or by myself. I tried both, but I wanted neither.

While at Point Loma Nazarene University, when I was at my breaking point, I channeled my energy into pursuing martial arts and challenging fitness routines. It wasn't long before I realized that the tough workouts were helping me cope with PTSD and feelings of helplessness. I enlisted some other veterans to train with me. When they experienced similar results it became eminently clear that I had identified a missing piece to the recovery puzzle. With the aid of some brilliant professors, many brave veterans and social work methodology, I built POW, an evidence-based program designed to improve the mental, physical and emotional well-being of veterans and military members through specialized MMA-style fitness, yoga and peer-to-peer support.

POW is now a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization offering 14 classes per month and a very active peer-led network of support. There are no costs associated with participation in POW: Classes are always free, there are no "sign-up" fees or costs for gym membership and no special equipment is required. It is POW's goal to continue offering the program at no cost to veterans and active military in perpetuity. We've also opened the program to spouses and partners, again at no cost.

I'm proud to report that many POW participants have gone on to great success in their careers and personal lives. The transformations I've witnessed among veterans and active military members indicate that physical fitness regimens and a healthy lifestyle are incredibly important and peer-to-peer support is critical.

Our next big goal for POW is to grow the program regionally, and then nationally. Why? Because there are thousands of veterans out there who still need help. A Department of Defense (DoD) report stated earlier this year that 118,829 individual cases of PTSD had been reported among those deployed since 2000. That doesn't include cases that were not diagnosed in a military setting or reported to the DoD. According to a report released by the

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in February, 22 veterans die by suicide each day. That's one death every 65 minutes. The VA also reports that one in five deaths by suicide is a veteran (despite the fact that veterans make up about 10% of the U.S. population) and 30% of all veterans have considered suicide. The statistics are unsettling and as a nation, we should find it unacceptable. After all, these are not just numbers, they're individuals: mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, children, neighbors, co-workers, friends and heroes.

As a country, we have a lot of work to do to ensure our veterans are better cared for. And as a society, we have a lot of work to do when it comes to discovering new and effective treatment options and support programs for our nation's heroes. We need to think outside the box and we need to act now.

If you have veterans in your family or your circle of friends, chances are you know someone who struggles with the symptoms of PTSD (it may even be you). They may have thoughts of suicide, or they may be feeling lost in a sea of medication. They need to know that they matter, that support is out there in the form of family, friends and peers, and they need to know that traditional treatments aren't the only answer. Help is available.

Please share this letter with someone you know, and be sure to reach out to your representatives in government about the need for new and better treatment alternatives for our veterans. It's going to take all of us, together, to make this change.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'TV', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Todd Vance

Phone: (858) 449-9045

Email: [calivance619@yahoo.com](mailto:calivance619@yahoo.com)

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