



ILLUSTRATION: GINA TOOLE SAUNDERS; THINKSTOCK

# SOCIAL SERVICE

Veterans use the Internet to stay connected,  
support causes and even save lives

By Matt Alderton

**“B YEEE BITCHES.”**  
Those were among the last words spoken by 28-year-old Daniel Rey Wolfe. Only he didn’t speak them at all.

Rather, he typed them, posting them on Facebook alongside a picture of two half-empty liquor bottles. More cryptic posts followed, culminating in graphic photos of his blood-soaked arm and leg.

The next day — May 6, 2014 — police found Wolfe’s body inside an empty house in Broken Arrow, Okla.

Wolfe, a former Marine who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), had live-blogged his suicide on the world’s most popular social network. If he’d belonged to the 1st Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment, however, social media might have helped

him save his life instead of end it.

“In 2014, we set up a Facebook page that was like a military reunion page for our unit,” said Garrett Anderson, a combat veteran who served in both the Marine Corps and the National Guard. “The idea was: If somebody on Facebook starts looking froggy — if they start posting things that look like they’re in crisis — whoever sees it can post an alert to our private Facebook group, and we will respond.”

About 100 former Marines belong to the 1/3’s “Emergency Contact Network,” which has mobilized on several occasions to help group members in crisis since its formation in November 2014. Once, for example, the group activated to help a member believed to be homeless. Another time, a group member drove from Texas to Louisiana to offer in-person support to a suicidal peer.

“It’s the most productive thing I’ve seen

that’s come out of social media,” continued Anderson, now a student at Portland State University in Oregon. “The guys are happy to participate because everyone’s on Facebook all the time anyway.”

Indeed, 74 percent of online adults use social networking sites, according to the Pew Research Center. That includes veterans, who are using social media not only to prevent tragedies, but also to seize opportunities — personally, professionally and politically.

## ‘CONNECTEDNESS AND CAMARADERIE’

Early this year, clinical psychologist Eric Pedersen decided to conduct an experiment. Startled by a statistic that 50 percent of veterans struggle with mental

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**Social media** has become a key way for veterans to communicate with one another, and for organizations to get their messages across. The Department of Veterans Affairs has a presence on Twitter, above, Facebook, Flickr and YouTube. Civilians can use hashtags to offer support to veterans, as HBO star John Oliver, right, the husband of a U.S. Army veteran, did with #GiveThem20 — 20 push-ups on video to honor veterans.



DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS; YOUTUBE

health issues, but only half of them seek care, he hypothesized that social media would be an effective channel for reaching veterans in need of mental health services. To test his theory, he and his colleagues developed a series of Facebook ads aimed at young adult veterans, who were asked to volunteer for a research study. In just over three weeks, 1,023 veterans volunteered.

"To get 1,000 participants for a research study normally takes months, sometimes years," said Pedersen, a behavioral scientist at RAND Corp., a Santa Monica, Calif.-based research firm. "What that tells us is that (many) veterans are on social media ... and that social media can be a great way to connect with veterans."

Yinon Weiss agrees. That's why he co-founded RallyPoint, a social network for military personnel and veterans, in 2012.

"People used to have Rolodexes on their desks. That's how they maintained relationships. Now relationships are maintained on social media," explained Weiss, who said participating in social networks can be especially poignant for veterans. "There is an incredibly strong bond that is formed in the military, and that kinship — that sense of belonging — is lost when someone leaves the military. Social media is a way to continue having that sense of connectedness and camaraderie."

Like civilians, veterans use social media to stay in touch with friends, particularly those they served alongside in the military.

In addition to keeping tabs on veterans they know, however, they also seek support from veterans they don't, according to 35-year-old Air Force veteran Edward Riefle of Anchorage, Alaska.

"I'm in an isolated environment, so there aren't always a lot of resources available to me," said Riefle, who this year started his own business: PostalZen, which allows users to send photos and letters in the mail from their computer. "I've been able to reach out to other entrepreneurs across geographies on LinkedIn, and they've been extremely helpful."

Fellow veterans have shared resources, answered questions, related experiences and even made introductions to business contacts. "LinkedIn has ... provided a conduit to reach out to other vets who have made (career transitions) for support," Riefle said. "It's nice to have people you can connect with and learn from because of the military bond you share."

### TWEETING FOR CHANGE

Many veterans are leveraging social media to support causes they care about. This summer, for instance, Army veteran Chad Longell participated in #GiveThem20, a social media campaign sponsored by American Corporate Partners (ACP), a non-profit organization that facilitates mentoring of transitioning veterans by civilian business leaders.

Like the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, the

campaign asks participants — including celebrities like Jon Stewart and Jimmy Kimmel — to create a video of themselves dedicating 20 pushups to American veterans. Participants are encouraged to share their video on social media, using the hashtag #GiveThem20, to challenge others to create their own videos and, finally, to volunteer 20 minutes a week giving online career advice to veterans through ACP's website.

"I challenged all the presidential candidates, all the members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the president himself," said Longell, 28, of Arlington, Va., whose video posted on the *Independent Journal's* website and on Facebook has garnered nearly 800,000 views. "There's a huge disconnect between the civilian and military worlds. This challenge is a fun way to bridge that gap to help veterans feel more integrated into the country they served."

It's also a way to communicate with policymakers.

"With social media, veterans can pull out their phone and make complaints in front of a substantial audience," said Marine Corps veteran Paul Szoldra, founder of *Duffel Blog*, a satirical news site that parodies the U.S. military. "In the case of *Duffel Blog*, we criticize policies through satire that's seen by millions of people — including, in

## SOCIAL SAVVY

Although it's no war zone, social media is littered with its own kind of land mines. Veterans who wish to make the most of their online experience should consider the following social networking tips:

► **Be discreet.** Avoid sharing sensitive information about yourself or your service, especially if you participated in classified missions. "Don't post something on social media that you don't want the public to know, even if it's a private group," said RallyPoint CEO Yinon Weiss. "That's rule No. 1."

► **Avoid conflict.** Use social media to unite, not divide. "There are some (social and political) issues that are very volatile and polarizing," said Marine Corps veteran Johnny "Joey" Jones. "I'd stay away from those things as much as possible so as not to alienate someone from hearing my message as a veteran, which is about overcoming adversity, treating problems as a community and finding a positive outcome when there doesn't seem to be one around."

► **Don't take things personally.** If you do engage in political discourse, make sure you can handle opposing views and criticism. "You're going to encounter negative feedback, so you have to have rhino skin," said Marine Corps and National Guard veteran Garrett Anderson. "In our community, for example, there are still people who stigmatize PTSD. So if you're going to bring up PTSD, make sure you're emotionally stable enough to handle some nut making a comment that isn't respectful."

► **Sign off sometimes.** Don't use social media as a substitute for face-to-face interaction. "Make an effort to see your buddies you served with in person," said Army veteran Brandon Friedman. "Veterans should hang out with each other sometimes. It's very important to do."

— Matt Alderton

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**The Boot Campaign** uses photos of celebrities wearing combat boots — including Dwayne Johnson and Dolly Parton — to raise awareness of veterans' needs as well as money. The photos are shared on social media.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BOOT CAMPAIGN

some instances, the Pentagon.”

Combat-wounded Marine Corps veteran Johnny “Joey” Jones likewise believes in social media’s ability to catalyze change. His organization, Boot Campaign, raises money and awareness for veterans’ causes by photographing celebrities in combat boots and sharing the pictures on social networks.

“(Social media) has given the veteran community an opportunity to get its message out,” said Jones, who calls social networks a “virtual Legion Hall where veterans find one another, express their views and concerns, and befriend like-minded individuals.”

### GRADING THE VA

In addition to friends and civilians, veterans can use social media to connect with the Department of Veterans Affairs, which has nearly 1 million likes on Facebook and 255,000 followers on Twitter.

Its VAntage Point blog ([www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage](http://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage)) and #VetQ campaigns are typical of the VA’s efforts, according to VA Director of Digital Media Engagement Megan Moloney. The former features VA news, information and success stories that are rebroadcast on social networks. The latter is a Twitter campaign whereby veterans can tweet questions about services and benefits and receive answers from VA staff and partners.

“A lot of veterans are used to communicating on social media, and initiatives like our #VetQ campaign are a way for us to try to get the right information to the right

audience in the manner they want to receive it,” Moloney said.

Its large following suggests that many veterans give the VA an “A” in social media. Others, however, give it an “F.”

“The VA seems to use its platforms as a megaphone where they control the narrative,” explained Jones, who said the VA does a great job talking to veterans but a poor job listening to them. “In a time where the VA is legitimately failing at its job, one can understand why they wouldn’t want much interaction with the masses of disgruntled and largely unheard veterans.

“However,” he continued, “I believe they are missing the mark. They should consider going ‘long and deep’ in responding to and caring for the veterans they can interact with on social media. ... Just think of the (good) that would result from a tweet turning into a saved life, or approved claim, or simply a heard voice.”

Moloney’s predecessor — Army veteran Brandon Friedman, who established the VA’s digital media function in 2009 — understands the criticism but emphasizes progress.

“The VA is years ahead of where it was in 2009,” said Friedman, now CEO of The

“That sense of belonging ... is lost when someone leaves the military. Social media is a way to continue having that sense of connectedness.”

— Yinon Weiss, Rally Point co-founder

McPherson Square Group, a public relations firm that he co-founded this year. “We were about a decade late dragging the VA into the 21st century, but we did it. As a result, veterans today are using communications streams to get information from the VA that they didn’t have access to before.”

### ANTI-SOCIAL MEDIA?

For the VA and veterans alike, the next challenge isn’t learning to use social media. Instead, it might be learning not to.

“When I was at the VA, I noticed that all the guys I served with in the Army were on Facebook. I also noticed, however, that we’ve never made an effort to have a reunion,” Friedman said. “Older generations of veterans had VFW halls and beer joints where you could go on a Friday night to hang out with your veteran friends. That sort of culture doesn’t exist anymore for younger veterans. They don’t have that face-to-face interaction, and I think there’s a cost to that.”

If there is, veterans like Wolfe may have paid it.

“The only fight I ever lost,” Wolfe wrote on Facebook the day before he died, “was the one to myself.” ●

## #BEST10

10 organizations and hashtags to follow on social media

**#Veterans, #vets:** These hashtags make it easy to find people and posts of interest to veterans.

### Department of Veterans Affairs:

The VA shares official information about veteran services and benefits. (Facebook: VeteransAffairs; Twitter: @DeptVetAffairs)

**#VetQ:** This VA-sponsored hashtag contains answers to veterans’ most common questions.

**Duffel Blog:** This satirical news site is *The Onion* for military personnel and veterans. (Facebook: duffelblog; Twitter: @DuffelBlog)

### Veterans of Foreign Wars USA:

The VFW is a trusted source of news and information about services for combat veterans. (Facebook: VFWFans; Twitter: @VFWHQ)

### The American Legion:

The American Legion provides news and resources for all veterans. (Facebook: americanlegionhq; Twitter: @AmericanLegion)

### Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America:

IAVA offers information and outreach to post-9/11 veterans. (Facebook: IAVA.org; Twitter: @iava)

**#SOV:** This hashtag — short for “support our veterans” — demonstrates support for veterans and veterans’ causes.

**The Joint Staff:** Updates keep veterans engaged in military news and events. (Twitter: @thejointstaff)

**#MilitaryMonday:** Every Monday, this hashtag pays tribute to veterans and military personnel with messages of thanks and support.