

## *For Veterans, Bonds Forged in Battle Are Tested by 2020's Rancor*

Toxic rhetoric and political polarization are doing what nothing else could: driving apart former Marines who had one another's backs through wars and the stresses of civilian life.



By Dave Philipps

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After surviving some of the bloodiest combat in Afghanistan, the men of the Second Battalion, Seventh Marine Regiment stayed connected on social media for support at home as they grappled with the fallout of war.

It was a rough transition to civilian life. Many men were disillusioned about why they fought; others struggled with post-traumatic stress. Suicide stalked their ranks. Those close online connections offered something the veterans' health care system did not: common ground, understanding, friends ready to talk day or night.

But the connections that held strong through all those troubles have been frayed to breaking by the partisan rancor of 2020. The Facebook group the men once relied on for support is now clogged with divisive memes and partisan conspiracy theories, disputes over policing and protests, and, of course, strong views on the president.

The din has driven a growing number of members to log off in dismay. Many say they still want to support their fellow Marines but cannot stand the toxic political traffic.

Party strategists and analysts tend to treat veterans as a homogeneous voting bloc, conservative-leaning and focused mainly on defense and benefits issues. But veterans are increasingly diverse in their outlook, and deeply divided over the coming election.

The explosive issues of a strange year and the unconventional presidency of Donald J. Trump have pried veterans apart, just as they have divided families at kitchen tables and friends in now-canceled softball leagues. Like many other Americans, veterans can find it hard even to agree to disagree when so many see November as a critical turning point.

And those cracks are clear among the veterans of the 2/7. Many from the battalion have unfollowed longtime friends. Some have left the unit's online support group entirely.

"It hurts my soul to see all this childish drama," said Keith Branch, a former infantryman from the battalion. "Brothers that formed bonds in war, I see them becoming broken over childish arguments. I disconnect from it — I'm already dealing with post-traumatic stress. It hurts too much to look at it."

In 2015, veterans of the battalion's combat deployments had a suicide rate 14 times the national average, and Mr. Branch, who lives in Texas, helped to set up the rapid response network of volunteers who could race to the scene when a fellow battalion veteran was contemplating suicide. The group made several critical interventions to save lives.

Now, he said, members of the Facebook group are much less willing than before to open up about their feelings amid the partisan hostility, and real discussion about the fallout of combat has grown rare.

"People are saying they are never going to talk to each other again, and calling each other names," said Mr. Branch, who voted for Gary Johnson, the Libertarian Party candidate, in 2016 and does not plan to vote this year. "I don't get it. We went to war to fight extremism. I don't understand why we can't find common ground."

In 2016, exit polls showed that veterans backed Mr. Trump over Hillary Clinton by nearly two to one. Demographics are part of the reason — veterans skew old and male and white, and so does the core of Mr. Trump's support.

"He had a message that also resonated with a lot of vets," said Alex McCoy, a former Marine who is now political director of Common Defense, a political action group working to mobilize veterans to vote against Mr. Trump.

As a candidate in 2016, Mr. Trump blasted the politicians and generals who had perpetuated the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and had ignored problems with veterans' health care, Mr. McCoy said: "He picked the right enemies, he was yelling at the right people."

It is unclear now whether Mr. Trump will be able to muster as much support.

As president, Mr. Trump has steadily drawn down troop levels abroad and has expanded veterans' access to health care, two broadly popular accomplishments. But at the same time, many veterans have been turned off by what they see as Mr. Trump's lack of character and leadership skills.

Though military voters are often portrayed as uniform in their views, they have become increasingly divided over the last four years, Mr. McCoy said. Younger veterans and active-duty troops, who tend to include more women and are less white than older veterans, are especially split. And with those splits have come the same type of infighting among veterans that is now so common at family gatherings.



Ruben Sevilla, a former lance corporal, keeps in touch with a small group of friends from the battalion but has drifted away from the larger group, he said, in part because of the partisan bickering. Taylor Glascock for The New York Times

“There are many stories of battle buddies that fought together in combat together, and now they won’t talk because of politics,” Mr. McCoy said. “It’s heartbreaking.”

The Second Battalion, Seventh Marines deployed to Iraq during the troop surge of 2007, and again to Afghanistan in 2008. Many came home wounded or reeling from loss, uncertain how to move on in a civilian world that seemed oblivious to their sacrifice.

Danny Kwan was one of many Marines who nearly killed himself after coming home. With the support of friends from the battalion after the suicide attempt, he graduated from college, interned for a congresswoman and became a firefighter. He has backed both Democrats and Republicans over the years, but in 2016 both parties’ presidential nominees turned him off, he said, so he voted for the Green Party candidate, Jill Stein. This year he plans to vote for Joseph R. Biden Jr., he said, mainly because he fears a second Trump term.

Mr. Kwan, a registered Democrat who lives near Los Angeles and voted for Bernie Sanders in the presidential primary, has watched the battalion’s Facebook group, where he once turned for camaraderie, become increasingly dominated by QAnon conspiracy posts and screeds assailing the protesters demonstrating against violent policing.

“I’ve been greatly disappointed,” he said. “Some folks I’ve unfollowed — even guys who served in the same squad. People are so dug in to their positions, they’re so emotionally invested. They’re talking about killing protesters, and I feel they’ve lost touch with humanity.

“These are guys I used to get together with, and reminisce about the old days. It just shows how social media has changed things. Unfortunately, the tools designed to bring us closer are actually pushing us apart.”

Losing friendships over social media posts is an experience many Americans have had, but it is all the more venomous when the lost friends were part of a vital support group.

Veterans of the 2/7 say their comrades still heavily favor Mr. Trump despite the disputes the president has had with top military leaders and with the families of soldiers killed in action, and despite reports that he has called America’s war dead “suckers” and “losers.”

Their support endured even after Mr. Trump’s split with his first secretary of defense, Jim Mattis, a retired Marine general who was so popular in the ranks that Marines often posted memes of Mr. Mattis with robes and a halo as “Saint Mattis of Quantico, Patron Saint of Chaos.” They wore T-shirts with his face and put up posters of him on their walls.

“Guys loved Mattis — they practically worshiped him,” said Ruben Sevilla, a former lance corporal from the battalion who lives in Chicago. But “it didn’t make any difference” when the split came, he said. “Guys who loved Mattis before were just, like, ‘Screw him,’ as soon as it happened.”

“At this point, for a lot of guys, I don’t think Trump can do any wrong,” he added. “It’s like the civilian world — people aren’t budging.”

Mr. Sevilla, who has voted for Republicans in the past, voted Libertarian in 2016 and said he may do so again in 2020. He keeps in touch with a small group of friends from the battalion but has drifted away from the larger group, he said, in part because of the partisan bickering.

“All it seems to be anymore is, ‘I’m right, you’re wrong, fight me,’” he said.

Several veterans in the battalion said they were determined to ignore the extreme political views and try to keep the group together.

Andrew Bird, a former sergeant who lives in Maryland, said he purposefully tried to keep politics out of the battalion’s discussions, steering things toward their common experiences instead.

He noted that despite all the political feuding, when a veteran in the group recently shared on Facebook that he had lost his house in a wildfire in Oregon, others immediately mobilized to help him.

“It’s good for us to remember,” he said, “that the guy you might want to fight with on Facebook probably ran across a field under fire to do something for you — and now you’re arguing over two old dudes who say they’re going to change your life and almost certainly won’t.”