While history seems to glorify wars and the soldiers who fight in them, it often overlooks the people in uniform once they've returned to their homes during peacetime. For every war that is fought and for every soldier that does not die in the line of duty, a veteran returns home to try and start their life anew in the country they had just fought to protect. These veterans, having gone through and been reshaped by the horrors of war, often have a difficult time readjusting to civilian society.

Whether it’d be coming back to a broken family that could not withstand the hardship of long term separation or simply coming back broken, veterans need all the support they can get when it comes to re-integrating to normal society. And in the case of the many who develop mental health issues due to their time in service, they require this support for a long period even after a successful re-integration to civilian life.

In the early 20th century, military psychiatrists believed that the best way to prevent mental health issues among soldiers was to screen enlistees and weeding out those that were predisposed to mental breakdowns.

This started during WWI where those who already had existing mental problems such as Schizophrenia or Psychosis were rejected from the army which excluded 2% of possible soldiers from enlisting. Later, in WWII, the screenings were expanded and included for things such as societal maladjustment and homosexuality which lead to the rejection of 12% of applicants, nearly 2 million men. These screenings bared little fruit as the total number of diagnosed mental health issues among soldiers doubled compared to WWI, which is mostly believed to be due to the nature of the war putting soldiers into more open areas with greater risks and smaller combat groups. It was at this point that the psychiatrists finally realized that no one, no matter how mentally strong, was immune to the horrors of war.

“Every man has his breaking point”

Starting with the Vietnam War, the US army began to limit the tours of soldiers to 1 year to reduce mental fatigue and even started deploying mental health teams as part of their fighting forces to combat mental health problems as they developed in the field.

Starting in WWII, the army also started to provide psychiatric aid to soldiers when they returned home. This, coupled with the booming war-time economy of the time which allowed returning soldiers to quickly find jobs and re-integrate into society, allowed for a lower rate of post-war mental health problems for WWII veterans.

The same could not be said for Vietnam veterans, a minimum of 15% of which, suffered from PTSD with another 25% to 30% suffering from episodes of PTSD throughout their lives. Unlike in WWII, the returning veterans did not benefit from quick employment and, though the veterans of WWII were regarded as Nazi/”Jap” slaying heroes, Vietnam veterans were reviled for their (mainly involuntary) role in an unjust war.

Fast forward to modern times and every year, approximately 200,000 veterans return to the US to restart their lives. In the current economic environment, these veterans are doing extremely well in terms of employment with only 4.3% of current veterans being unemployed which is better than the national civilian unemployment rate of 4.7%.

What is startling, is that despite the abilities of new veterans in finding jobs, veterans are currently committing suicide at a rate of over 20 per day. Many of them, 69% to be exact, are over the age of 50, indicating that they have been in service for a long period or are Vietnam veterans who did not have a responsive support system relative to the modern incarnation of the Department of Veteran Affairs. With an increase in age and, with it, isolation, coupled with the traumatic experiences that they underwent in what was perhaps the most horrific war in recent memory, as far as soldiers are concerned, these older veterans find it harder to maintain a grasp on life.

Since 2001, suicide rates among veterans have increase by 30.5% and 85.2% among male and female veterans respectively and given that many of the Vietnam veterans are starting to take their own lives 40 or so years after their return, some, such as Brian Kinsella, an Iraq war veteran and founder of Stop Soldier Suicide, believe that “There’s probably a tidal wave of suicides coming.”

To aid with the prevention of these suicides and the mental rehabilitation of veterans, the Federal Government has been increasing the budget for the Department of Veterans Affairs and helped expand programs such as the Veterans Crisis Hotline but the overall numbers still remain shockingly high.

For a country at war as often and as hard as the United States, despite their efforts to take care of the mental health of their veterans, they seem to fall behind. While in a historical context, the quality of treatments, services, and government support have increased since the early 20th century, they are nowhere near where they should be. As it currently stands, more soldiers die as retired veterans than on active duty, meaning the real war to be fought is at home, not abroad.