

In honor of John Davison, who served faithfully in Vietnam and then as a Reserve Officer in the Walnut Creek Police Department.

John was a wonderful friend to Michael Sugrue, and he ultimately saved Michael's life.

John came to sit awhile on my porch and touched my heart with his spirit and his story.

Bearing witness to, writing and sharing his story is my tribute to John, a good man whose memory will live on in the pages of *RELENTLESS COURAGE: Winning the Battle Against Frontline Trauma.*

Doc Springer

March 26, 2025

RELENTLESS COURAGE

WINNING THE BATTLE
AGAINST FRONTLINE TRAUMA





HIDDEN IVY PRESS

(San Francisco, CA)

***RELENTLESS COURAGE: Winning the Battle Against
Frontline Trauma***

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Publisher's note:

This publication is designed to provide insights about first responder trauma. Reading this book is not a replacement for professional therapy. There are many high-quality resources listed in the appendix of this book. If the support of a licensed therapist is needed, readers are urged to get this support from a culturally competent professional who understands the kinds of insights that are shared within this book.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022902768 ISBN: 978-1-7368244-1-

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WAKEUP CALL

This chapter includes some graphic content. It is necessary to tell the story of Michael's dear friend John Davison, a Vietnam Veteran and Walnut Creek reserve police officer whose suicide attempt pulled Michael out of his self-destructive tailspin. Thankfully, John survived his attempt and went on to live for many more years, until his passing from health conditions of aging in 2025. On March 26, 2025, in Orinda, CA, where John was born and raised, John's life was celebrated by many loved ones, and by many in the Walnut Creek Police Force, as well as with an Honor Guard for his service in the military. This chapter is based on intimate interviews that I had with both John and Michael.

“On the night of the street fight, John and I were on patrol together. We got called out to a bar fight in downtown Walnut Creek. When

we got there, we found 30 men brawling in the street in front of the bar. We were the only law enforcement presence on the scene, surrounded by 60 smashing fists. It was like being dropped into the middle of an alligator pond during a feeding frenzy.

So, John pulls out his baton and starts swinging it back and forth. Normally a soft-spoken, easy-going guy, John suddenly summoned a commanding presence that broke through their drunken minds. I was just as surprised as everyone else there. John ordered everyone to GET DOWN ON THE GROUND NOW! as he continued to swing his baton in a wide arc. Guys started dropping to the ground all around him, until all 30 of them were lying belly down in a circle around both of us. It was a glorious night.”

— Michael Sugrue

(What follows is John’s story, in his words)

When I got drafted to go to Vietnam, I had pictures in my mind of natives living in huts who would welcome us as rescuers. We’d fight for their freedom, stick it to the Commies, and come home as heroes.

It turned out that my year in Vietnam wasn’t spent defending the Vietnamese people. I spent it instead defending myself against our

own people, many of whom would have killed me if they had had a weapon.

After finishing my training, I was detailed to Long Binh Jail (LBJ) to serve as a prison guard in what was to be a temporary stockade for American soldiers. Some of the prisoners were a danger to their fellow soldiers when they arrived – others were suffering from PTSD and other mental health challenges.

They were brought in from the jungles of Vietnam, many of them with sores on their bodies, jungle rot on their feet and a thousand-yard stare. When the first ones arrived, I felt so bad for them. In the early days, I had the urge to be tearful when I saw these broken men, but I pushed that urge away until it went away for good.

Some of the prisoners were temporarily held at LBJ with a sentence considered “bad time.” This meant that their time at the jail would not count towards their 365-day tour in Vietnam. Others were just passing through – on their way to places like Fort Leavenworth. We housed the minimum-security prisoners in tents and the maximum-security prisoners in sheet metal or wood boxes, or in CONEX containers. Imagine being locked up in a metal box with no windows in the wet, tropical heat of Vietnam.

We got shelled some nights – incoming mortars landing all around

us. The ground rocked and I watched as the prisoners jumped from their beds to kneel and roll on the floor, weeping and praying for mercy. There was no way to escape it – we were all captives just the same. Somehow, their weeping and praying made me angry. We were all just sitting ducks – what was the point of crying about it?

LBJ was greatly understaffed. It would take about 300 guards to adequately control the situation, and to keep ourselves and the prisoners safe from each other. There were less than 100 guards. Racial tension was very high between some of the African American prisoners and the guards, especially the white guards. They frequently told us that they would kill us if given any chance.

Under continual threat like this, some of the guards had lost connection with their humanity. One of the tactics I saw some guards use to subdue the most dangerous prisoners was to place a wooden 2x4 on the back of their heads and hit it repeatedly with a hammer. It didn't crack their skulls, but it scrambled their brains.

One night, I heard a terrible sound coming from inside of a CONEX container. Another guard explained “prisoner breakdown” as he ran by. I grasped the wire fence with my fingers and watched the rocking of the CONEX container as someone inside flung himself wildly against the wall. I began to shake as I gripped the

fence so tightly that blood started oozing from my fingers. I broke down, my body shaking with tears and a terrible grasping despair. After running back to my quarters, I stripped down and stood in the shower for a very long time, trying to wash all the badness away. But it didn't erase the horrors inside my head.

I was there for the 1968 riot, when about 200 inmates attacked and attempted to overthrow the guards. They set fire to the buildings, burning the mess hall, the barber shop, the latrine and some of the administration and finance building. Black and white rioters attacked each other in brutal, racially driven ways. The prisoners barricaded themselves inside the administration building for over a week. The riot left more than 50 inmates and 63 guards injured. A prisoner was beaten to death with steel rods.

I survived that year of captivity and continual threat from American inmates by the skin of my teeth.

Being a prison guard is about the last thing I ever imagined doing. By nature, I'm easy going. While I was in military training in Augusta, GA, one of my favorite memories was strolling into the room with my guitar and singing "This little light of mine...I'm gonna let it shine" to perk up the spirits of my brothers in arms.

They began to smile and joined in. My heart was pounding as we went from song to song. It was the first time I had felt truly happy since leaving my home. I was doing what I did best, making others laugh and sweeping everyone along with my music, to help them forget the misery of that time. This memory shows who I am at the core.

I had a good childhood, with parents who loved me. To give you a window into some of my childhood, you need to understand the relationship I had with my dad. He was a successful salesman who took a personal interest in helping me learn the trade. He helped me develop a sales pitch for things I would sell door to door to the women in our affluent town. As a very young kid, I would knock on the door and say ‘good morning, ma’am. I’ve got something that every woman in Orinda needs...(long pause) greeting cards.” They would burst out laughing but I didn’t get the joke until much later. My dad also had me selling Christmas wreaths door to door, but we came to find out that what we were selling by accident was actually funeral wreaths. My dad made me give him 30% of everything I earned. I got to keep the other 70%. When I was older, he gave me access to an account he had set aside where all my earnings went. That account helped me pay for college. That was the kind of family support I had.

When I came home from Vietnam in 1969, I was on a natural high for the first few weeks. After a few months of this, though, it all crashed down. I suddenly had an overwhelming feeling of depression, a feeling like some ghastly creature was gripping me. All the sadness I pushed down, the tears I suppressed when American soldiers came to LBJ, being surrounded by broken men in despair, my own captivity, the constant fear and threat to our lives, having to treat our own soldiers like my enemies (because they would have killed me if they had the chance), it all collapsed in on me. I had continual nightmares of being trapped. I lost my job and spent my days in my mom's basement, exhausted, and spinning out of control. All the sorrow and the badness felt like a virus that had been sitting there waiting to take control of me.

My sister's support became critical to me during this time in my life. Joanne was always on my side. She was one of the most important people in bringing me home after I returned from Vietnam. My mom stepped up as well and helped me get counseling. Their support and the counseling arrested the tailspin I was in. I stabilized and reconnected to the idea of having a future worth living for.

Ten years after I went to Vietnam, in 1978, I took a job as a reserve police officer for the city of Walnut Creek. It was a position I would

hold for 35 years, from 1978 to 2014.

A reserve officer rides out on patrols with the full-time officers. It's an important job because we are their eyes and ears. We are the ones who have their back when they make a traffic stop or go into other potentially dangerous situations.

All the reserve officers wanted to ride out with Michael Sugrue. In fact, we fought among ourselves to ride with him. He drove that car like NASCAR legend Parnelli Jones. He was just plain good – no one ever got away from Michael. When we had to make a traffic stop or go into a situation, he got dead serious. He was a total professional. Between things, we'd spent hours talking, joking about some of our past dates with women and other things. I told him about my time in Vietnam, and he gave me dating advice. He told me that I needed to go online to meet women, and I told him, "Michael, I don't even have a computer." I could talk to him about anything. Over countless nights together in the patrol car, we became very close friends –family, really, to each other.

We worked late at night, often on the graveyard shift. Sometimes I would doze off. Some of the officers would jerk the car to the right really hard so that you'd hit your head on the door and wake up, but Michael never did that. He was always kind. But there was this one

time when he pulled into a Starbucks before our shift. He turned and said, “OK, John, I don’t want you falling asleep on me tonight” and he buys me this drink that had something like ginseng in it. I stayed awake for 72 hours straight. [When Michael and John and I talked about this night, Michael cracked a smile and said, “I did you a favor really. Think of all the things you got done those three days. You got your car washed, and your lawn mowed at 3 a.m....”]

I was especially close with Michael, but I was close to other officers as well – that happens when you risk your life together repeatedly. Some people bond when they go through something difficult just once. This kind of bonding happens over and over when people ride out on patrols together. I remember this one time when I was with another officer. We got called out to pick up a guy who was high on PCP. He was out of his mind. He had grabbed a civil war sword and had sliced himself and his girlfriend up badly. She was still alive but there was blood everywhere. The PCP gave him superhuman strength. It took two of us – me and the other officer - to push him forcefully into the back of the patrol car after we arrested him. I remember touching his forearm. Though it was slippery with blood, it felt like it was made of concrete. The PCP had turned him into something like the Incredible Hulk.

As we were driving him to the Martinez jail, he started spitting on the back of my neck through the wire barrier between the front seats and the back of the patrol car. He asked me “were you in ‘Nam?” and when I said yes, he said something like, “It’s going down now...” I asked my fellow officer for permission to subdue him with a can of mace and he said, “Yes, please do.” What I didn’t realize was that the windows were locked so I maced all of us. There we were, all of us choking and coughing, totally disoriented, our eyes streaming with tears. When we finally arrived at the Martinez jail, all of us looking like something the dog dragged in, they said that the prisoner was too injured to be received at the jail. They told us to take him to the county hospital to get his wounds treated first.

When we got to the county hospital, he was put on a gurney, still completely out of his mind. As we helped transfer him to the gurney, he sunk his teeth into my partner’s arm. My partner used his baton to knock him back flat against the gurney. We heard the shrill voice of a doctor from across the room saying “police brutality” without understanding that my partner was effectively defending himself against a man who had turned into something like a rabid dog. The doctor walked up to the prisoner, now secured on the gurney, and he spit right in her face. Her face hardened and she said, “get this son of a bitch out of here.” People make all kinds

of judgments about what we do in law enforcement when they are at a safe distance. They often see a different side of the story when they are in the same situations as we are.

We later heard that when he came off his PCP high, he wanted to know the names of the officers who brought him in (me and my partner). He said, “I can’t remember their names now, but they were cool. I really liked those guys.”

Anyway, I had many good years with the officers, to include Michael most of all. I was in a relationship with a beautiful lady, and I had a nice home. I had fleeting thoughts of sorrow and grief about Vietnam, but it never really overran me until 2016. In 2016, I lost my two dogs, one right after the other. They were extremely bonded to each other. I think the second one died of a broken heart. Those two losses brought Vietnam flooding back to me – the sorrow and the despair. When I was off duty, I spent full days sitting in my room, overwhelmed by hopeless thoughts.

The theme in my thoughts during that time was that with my dogs gone, I had nothing to look forward to in life. I withdrew because I was ashamed of what I felt. I was ashamed about the suicidal thoughts and the feeling that I had lost control of my life. I was ashamed that I was falling apart and didn’t want everyone to see

how bad it had gotten. So, I retreated and hid myself away while I formed a plan to end my life.

Then one day, I decided to do it. As chance would have it, Michael was one of the two officers to get the call about the suicide attempt. He showed up as soon as I had been transported to the local ER. They rolled me in on a gurney, covered in blood. I distinctly remember Michael looking deep into my eyes with his piercing gaze and saying, “John, you’re going to make it.” He was willing me to live.

I had been through a year of Hell in Vietnam. But the hardest thing I ever had to do was to tell the people I care about that I was suicidal. I was so afraid that I would lose everyone who loved and respected me. What actually happened is that nobody in my life ever said a critical word to me about my suicide attempt. Again, my sister Joanne stepped up in support of me, taking me into her home during my recovery, while I was in an outpatient program at a hospital in Monterey. Her family’s kindness and support of me was remarkable. In addition, my sister’s friend Maurine went above and beyond to support me during this time of need. She proved to be one of the truest friends that I have ever known. Also, as I was recovering from my suicide attempt, my fellow officers would sit with me – overnight even – continually talking with me until I was

well again. They had my back, just like I had had theirs, all those years while we were on patrol together.

And when I got to a place of recovery from my darkest period, Michael was quick to tell me this: “John, you saved my life. I realized that I needed help based on what you did.”

Doc Springer's Reflections

The preceding chapter was based mainly on an intimate conversation with John while we sat together on my back porch. The sun was shining, and the flowers were waving in the breeze as he walked me through his battle with darkness. At the end of our conversation, we put Michael on speaker phone. Michael teased John with his reaction to the “3 days awake” incident.

But Michael also said this, “John, when you were in a tailspin, we knew that you were struggling. We were reaching out to you because of it. Some of the guys and I were calling you and going out to lunch with you to check up on you. But maybe we weren’t pressing as hard as we should have.”

When people are struggling, it takes a rare form of relational courage on both sides to bring them back from the brink. Michael and his brothers were doing their best to show up for John in his time of need.

When people have altered, and our gut tells us that they are not OK, we must summon our courage to be a kind of “sapper” in their lives. A “Sapper” in the Marine Corps is someone who clears mines for other Marines (among other things). In other words, a “Sapper” blows up the things that would kill his brothers and sisters in arms to give them a clear path through dangerous terrain.

In terms of preventing suicide, we can be a “sapper” for someone when we blow up the obstacles that block them from sharing their hidden pain. In the context of these conversations, we can be a “sapper” by:

1. Emphasizing the universality of human suffering and the commonality of suicidal thoughts
2. Blowing up shame and smashing stigma by leveling with them about our own mental battles

The fact that this may not have happened is no judgment on Michael or his fellow officers, who were doing the best they knew to help John at that time. The situation Michael describes is all too

common. One person is silently struggling, unable to overcome their shame and acknowledge it, and the other doesn't have psychological x-ray vision into how dire the danger has become. This is why we must understand that "recognizing the signs of distress" and asking bold questions like, "Have you been thinking about hurting or killing yourself" is not sufficient if we want to keep our loved ones in the fight.

In fact, when we ask this question of someone who is struggling, if we do not lay the groundwork by expressing vulnerability first ourselves, we heighten the chance that they will simply continue to deny their struggles. Having denied their struggles once makes it all the harder for them to reverse direction and acknowledge these struggles.

This is a critical point.

We often stay in the channel that we build for ourselves. Like Peter who told Jesus that he would never deny their relationship, then promptly denied it not just once, but 2 more times, the pull to be consistent in our human communications is very strong. If you ask "the suicide risk assessment question" in the wrong context, you might get a less-than-candid response that moves the other person further from the reach of truth telling.

If you are a peer, not a professional therapist, and you think that all you have to do is “ask the question” about *their* suicidal state, without first acknowledging that you have had times of mental battles or other struggles yourself, you might drive them further into isolation and shame. Because asking this question without first leveling the power in the relationship does not create space for courageous honesty.

To be clear, I'm not saying that you must have been suicidal yourself at one time to help someone who is suicidal. It may be as easy as saying something like,

“I'm noticing a change in you that reminds me of times when I've had some serious mental battles. Mental battles – even really serious ones – are part of life for all of us. I know because I've been there myself. You are really important to me and there is nothing you could say that would change how I view you – nothing. I feel anxious because I see that something has shifted in you lately. I want to make sure you know you can tell me anything. What I don't want is to risk losing someone I love as much as you. Because of how important you are to me, I need to ask you, ‘have you been thinking about hurting or killing yourself?’”

For too long, the field of suicide prevention has been focused on

only one side of the equation, as if “recognize the signs and ask the hard question” is enough to save lives. To be sure, this will save some lives, but the more important thing is to create and maintain a “culture of emotional courage” within our relationships. And we do this by walking point, expressing our own struggles often enough that it becomes normal – not shameful – to be a human who struggles – sometimes mightily – at times. This practice builds the deep trust we must draw on to keep ourselves and those we love in the fight.

This is critical because without this kind of trust, lethal secrets stay secret. When these secrets get exposed in the context of a relationship of deep trust, they lose their power. This is why I continue to repeat, as a theme, this fundamental point: *When we connect, we survive.*