

## INTRODUCTION

CHRISTOPHER J. BUTTON

I am honored to introduce readers to this special issue of *Air & Space Operations Review*. The genesis for this issue was born out of the 2023 *Æther: A Journal of Strategic Airpower and Spacepower* special issue focused on moral injury.<sup>1</sup> The pages that follow represent the dedicated study of professionals who devote their life's work in the service of others to address suicide, this most perplexing of human problems.

The articles contained herein vary in perspective and focus, ranging from the role of organizational and leadership factors in suicide prevention to the potential deleterious effects of failing to validate individual emotions in current resilience approaches. Chaplain Charles Seligman, for example, illuminates the protective influence of spirituality, which gives rise to hope, purpose, and meaning—three ingredients critical to the preservation of life. Lieutenant Colonel Elisha Pippin proposes a postvention program to address the often-overlooked aspect of support for our caregivers, who balance caring for patients and grieving the loss of our Airmen. While these articles seem superficially disjointed, they—along with the others in this issue—collectively reflect the multifaceted nature of the problem we face. They are undoubtedly part of the inevitable solution.

As someone who reads every suicide death report and leads our suicide expert review panels, I offer a few observations and recommended actions. First, suicide is an incredibly complex problem. Most decedents faced similar stressors categorically, but the nature and confluence of the stressors within each situation were as unique as each service member.

Second, suicide is preventable. In my nearly 20 years of treating suicidal patients and in reviewing hundreds of records of those no longer with us, our Airmen most often chose to die over seemingly ordinary reasons, problems that were solvable if only they had accessed the right resource at the right time.

Third, time-based prevention works. The evidence is clear. If we collectively desire to rapidly reduce this unnecessary loss of life, everyone must join in placing time and distance between individuals vulnerable to experiencing emotional distress and ready access to lethal means. Safety is a part of our service's culture. Time-based prevention is simply about safety. Most suicidal people are ambivalent about dying. By safely storing firearms, medications, and other means of suicide, individuals experiencing distress are afforded time for their emotions to dissipate and for ambivalence to return, mitigating their engagement in life-ending action.

Fourth, postvention is critical to individual and collective recovery. Postvention is often fumbled due to concerns of perpetuating suicide risk. When done well, postvention facilitates healing, mitigates risk, memorializes the life of the decedent, and ensures mission readiness.

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Lieutenant Colonel Chris Button, USAF, PhD, serves as the Department of the Air Force suicide prevention program manager, Headquarters Air Force, Integrated Resilience.

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1. *Æther: A Journal of Strategic Airpower and Spacepower* 2, no. 3 (2023), <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

Finally, as a service, we own the preponderance of the reasons our most vulnerable fail to use our care and support systems. Although intended to mitigate risk to the mission, our policies are frequently cited by both our Airmen and the loved ones of those who passed away too soon as the primary reason individuals fail to seek help. Instead, most Airmen remain safely on the job while privately suffering from the very symptoms of distress that our policies were supposed to prevent from exposure to the mission.

This raises some questions: Are our policies working as originally intended? Do they unnecessarily expose the mission to undetected, unreported, and untreated risk? Do they unnecessarily prevent Airmen from getting the care they need, sometimes at the expense of their lives? My life's work has led me to conclude that we are naive to believe our Airmen will accept this personal risk. Therefore, we must review our policies to ensure Airmen are willing to receive help in the context of minimal fear and an accurate understanding of their personal risks, while also safeguarding the mission.

If I had one message to impart, it is that we can curb this trend in our ranks. I offer the following recommendations toward that end. First, do not dismiss everyday problems; without resolution they compound and may grow into suicidal crises. Address problems while they are singular, small, and ordinary. Support our Airmen in solving ordinary problems quickly and effectively.

Second, within your scope of influence, seek to enhance the quality of life for those around you. Individuals do not die by suicide when they lead lives worth living.

Third, recognize the systemic factors in your scope of responsibility that give rise to distress. Systemic factors are impossible for individuals to modify. When one's sense of self-determination is removed, hopelessness and helplessness set in. Left unchanged, suicide risk may soon follow.

Finally, in the wake of suicide loss, acknowledge others' grief. Suicide impacts each of us differently. As such, the path to recovery differs vastly. Support one another and do not fear talking about the loss, the impact, and most importantly, the memory of those who have gone from us too soon. Their lives mattered and they should be remembered.

One more thought—this special issue serves as a capstone to the dedicated service of guest editor Dr. Mary Bartlett, who resigned her position from Air University in pursuit of her life's purpose, advancing military suicide prevention. After 10 years of devoted pedagogy, she leaves a lasting impact on her students, the university, and the broader Air Force.

In closing, for each reader who has lost someone to suicide in the Department of the Air Force, I know I am unable to bring you any resolution to this tremendous loss. I promise you I wake each day in pursuit of an answer to prevent the next loss. In this, I hope you can find some solace in knowing that your pain and your loved one's loss are not meaningless, and that they will ultimately contribute to finding an impactful solution so others may not leave us before their time. ➔✳

## *Introduction*

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