

Operation Deep Dive™

Annual Report | 2023



In Memoriam of...

Brandon Michael Knapp

February 26, 1986 - July 1, 2006



In Memoriam

The cover image of this document is of the Knapp family. Denton Knapp is a US Army veteran and the 3rd generation to serve. Brandon Michael Knapp, Denton's son, was born on February 26, 1986, in Gillette, Wyoming. He was an Army Brat from the beginning, son of 2LT Denton and Heather Knapp, and big brother to Scott by 3 years. Brandon grew up in Fort Lewis, WA; Fort Benning, GA; Fort Irwin CA; and Fort Stewart, GA. He traveled with his family from assignment to assignment, attended new schools, made friends, and played football, track, basketball, golf, and his passion...soccer. Brandon loved spending time with friends and girlfriend, attending high school at the Bradwell Institute in Hinesville, GA.

School was difficult for Brandon since his dyslexia made reading and testing difficult. Regardless, he overcame his challenge and graduated high school, followed by attendance at Savannah Technical College. Brandon attended evening classes and worked at construction jobs and a funeral home during the day. His goal was to be an accountant after college. During his high school years, his father, LTC Knapp, deploy for a year to Saudi Arabia, and then Iraq twice, each a year long. Within six months of returning from Iraq, LTC Knapp received orders to move to Missouri.

Brandon made the choice to stay in Georgia, since he was now 20, working, going to school, near his friends, and most importantly to him, with his girlfriend of two years. His parents moved him into an apartment with his buddy, gave him a pickup truck, and bid him farewell on May 30, 2006.

On the morning of July 1, 2006, Brandon had been golfing, and had spoken to his mother on the phone, excited about Independence Day weekend. That evening, Brandon and his friends were drinking and heavily intoxicated. Brandon's girlfriend came by and had a verbal argument and she left. Brandon told his friends he was going to kill himself and went to his bedroom. When his friends kicked down his door, Brandon pulled the trigger on his skeet/trap shotgun, ending his life at 20 years old by suicide.

He was not very different than most military brats, expected to move every couple of years, make new friends, make sports teams, and do well in school. They are expected to be strong, resilient, and okay, while dealing with their own stress of a parent's deployments, raising siblings, helping with the household, all while dealing with their own adolescence. Brandon's departure showed deeper hidden problems and pain we could not see. He is loved, missed, and remembered by family and friends.



Brandon Michael Knapp

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Introduction

Our mission at America's Warrior Partnership is to partner with communities to prevent veteran suicide. In alignment with our mission, in 2017, we implemented Operation Deep Dive™ (OpDD™). OpDD™ is a community-based study aimed at understanding the individual, organizational, and community factors contributing to death by suicide and certain non-natural causes of death among former US service members* (FSM). Duke University researchers joined the study in 2022, at the request of AWP, as collaborators to redesign the study for Phase II. Any previous work for Operation Deep Dive™ was conducted by researchers with the University of Alabama (Phase I).

**We use the term former service member (FSM) to be inclusive of all who have served, regardless of time served, role, branch, and character of discharge. It includes members who served in the Guard and Reserves.*

The goal of OpDD™ is to identify risk factors associated with suicide and self-injury among FSMs—particularly across communities. Key findings will be used to develop an upstream approach to target these risk factors as a means of improving the quality of life for FSMs thus creating a community public health approach in preventing premature death. We will use the findings to develop targeted recommendations for national, state, and local strategies aimed at preventing suicide, overdose, and certain non-natural causes of death. Additionally, we plan to identify specific areas for improvement in clinical and public health practices, particularly for those with a history of military service. With the commitment of national, state, and local partners, we aim to change the trajectory of FSM suicide and non-natural death prevention efforts to ensure that we can truly be of service in effectively and proactively addressing this epidemic.

Operation Deep Dive's success would not be possible without the commitment of our national, state, local partners, and funders. We would like to offer our sincerest thank you to the many partners across the country who are committed to supporting this effort.

Thank you for your support!

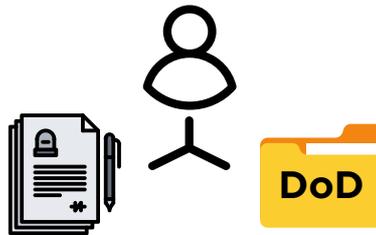
Operation Deep Dive™ Aims

Aim 1 (Quantitative component)

- Identify demographic, socioeconomic, military, and geographic characteristics that contribute to a higher or lower risk of premature death among former military service members.



- Obtain death certificates from participating states and link these to military personnel files from the Department of Defense to obtain detailed information about each former service member's life and death.



Aim 2 (Qualitative component)

- Conduct interviews with loved ones of former service members who died by suicide or self-injury causes of death (including overdose, asphyxiation, accidental gunshot, drowning, suicide by law enforcement interaction, or high-speed, single-driver accidents) in the last 24 months, using the Sociocultural Death Investigation (SDI) tool.
- Using qualitative methods, analyze interviews to identify factors that can be addressed in suicide prevention and accidental overdose interventions.



Interview



Analyze



Identify

2023 Milestones

Oct 22

- Duke researchers receive Massachusetts death certificate data. This is the first set of state data Duke receives.

March 23

- First quarterly OpDD™ Coalition Meeting. The idea behind the coalition is to invite key stakeholders that formally organize efforts and approaches for FSM suicide and overdose prevention. The coalition is comprised of state directors from states whose data is received and being analyzed as well as partners of OpDD.

May 23

- Duke researchers receive Michigan death certificate data.

Aug 23

- A Memorandum of Understanding was formerly executed between AWP, Duke, and the DoD's Defense Suicide Prevention Office (DSPO) in late August 2023. From this agreement, Duke researchers were now able to collaborate to request military records of FSM.
- Duke researchers presented an update on OpDD™ at the 10th Annual Warrior Symposium.

Oct 23

- Data from state death certificates were prepared and sent to DMDC to link to military records. Data from the following five states were sent: Alabama, Massachusetts, Michigan, Montana, and Oregon.

Dec 23

- The fourth quarterly OpDD™ Coalition Meeting took place.
- To date, we have conducted 58 SDI interviews for 35 deceased former service members in 16 different states.

Sept 22

- Contract agreement with Duke is initially signed.

Feb 23

- Clint Romesha MOH recipient and AWP friend testified on Capitol Hill and was instrumental in facilitating the law in North Dakota being changed so that the state could share death data with us.
- Approval from the Duke IRB for the SDI portion of OpDD™, and recruitment/consent, so in February 2023 the SDI interviews resumed using the new revised and updated interview guide.
- Duke researchers receive Alabama death certificate data.

April 23

- Duke researchers receive Montana death certificate data.

June 23

- The second quarterly OpDD™ Coalition Meeting took place.
- Duke researchers receive Oregon death certificate data.

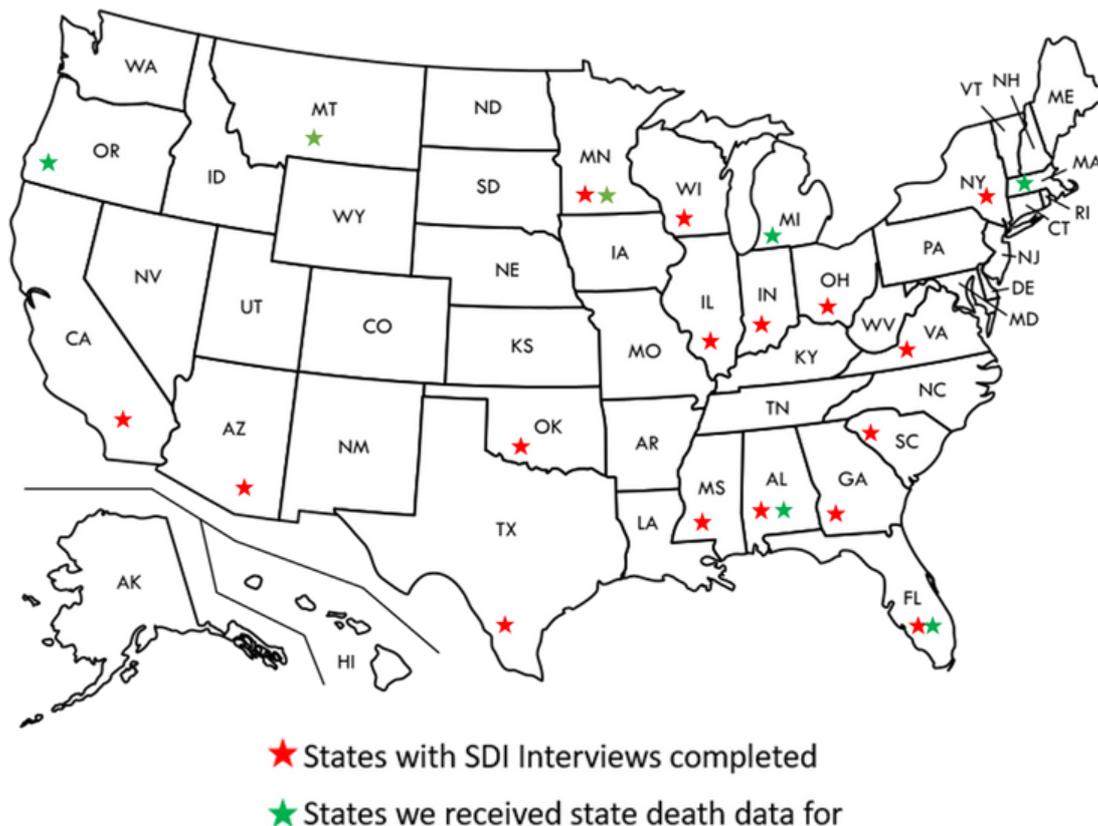
Sept 23

- The third quarterly OpDD™ Coalition Meeting took place.
- Jim Lorraine was a guest speaker for the podcast [Welcome Home – A Deep Dive into Veteran Suicide and Overdose Prevention Strategies](#).
- Duke researchers receive Florida death certificate data.

Nov 23

- Duke researchers receive Minnesota death certificate data.

OpDD Participation



CHALLENGES & SUCCESSES

Challenges:

Quantitative | Executing data use agreements and MOUs with federal and state-level entities to obtain and share data is a complex process. In our ongoing efforts to acquire death certificate data from states, we encountered states with regulations that conflicted with Duke policies and that required protracted negotiation between the legal teams at Duke and the state. For the states without open record policies, we additionally experienced delays in onboarding new staff, as each new staff member needed state approval before they could access the data. Other challenges arose from data harmonization between states, which required extensive programming and manual quality control to ensure that data would be consistent across the participating OpDD™ states.

Qualitative | To date, the majority of FSM represented by the interviews are White men in the Army or Marines. We are planning to roll out additional recruitment efforts with the goal of recruiting a more diverse participant base, representing a more diverse set of FSMs. Additional recruitment efforts include (1) using Facebook ads to recruit beyond existing networks and (2) diversifying flyers and other study materials. Another challenge is tailoring the study path to people with a different level of closeness to the FSM. We have developed a process for better understanding the closeness of the interviewee before the interview to tailor the questions asked to the interviewee's experience and understanding of the FSM in their last year of life.

Successes:



Quantitative data analysis | Duke received death certificate data from 7 states, signed a Memorandum of Understanding with DoD and began the process of linking these death certificates to military records.



Participation improvement | Participation has improved since modifying the eligibility to no longer require the FSM and the interview participant to have lived in the same community.



Subscription Platform | At the end of 2023, we had a total of 30,730 subscribers/partners who signed up to receive quarterly updates about OpDD™. Each quarter we highlight key findings, updates, and next steps for the quantitative and qualitative components of the study.



Training | At the end of 2023, we have a total of 6 individuals who are fully trained and approved to conduct the Sociocultural Death Investigation interviews.



Collaborative | AWP and Duke met quarterly for OpDD™ Coalition Meetings with federal, state, and local stakeholders.

UPDATES & NEXT STEPS

Duke University researchers have begun procuring, overseeing, and managing data collection, designing an analytic plan, conducting analysis, and preparing manuscripts.

Quantitative:

- State Death Data
 - Completed:
 - State death certificate data was received from Alabama, Florida, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, and Oregon.



- In Progress:
 - Applications submitted for California and North Dakota.
 - Application in process for Indiana.



- Next Steps:
 - Complete application for New York.
 - Continue to identify and request data from states with large proportions of former service members and that have data use agreements that would allow Duke to link their data with military personnel records.
 - Request newer years of data from each state.

- Dept of Defense (DoD) - Military Service verification and records
 - Completed:
 - Fully executed Memorandum of Understanding with DoD.
 - Sent state death certificates from Alabama, Massachusetts, Michigan, Montana, and Oregon to DoD for linkage to military personnel records



- In Progress:
 - Preparation of Florida and Minnesota data for DoD linkage.



- Next Steps:
 - Clean and standardize data received from DoD.
 - Continue to send state data to DoD for linkage as we receive it.

Qualitative:

- Analysis: Duke University researchers, as part of Phase II, are currently collecting new data using a revised semi-structured interview guide and survey. Duke aims to use a mixed methods approach to analyze this data throughout 2024. Duke researchers are also currently moving forward with the analysis of Phase I data. Phase I data analysis includes targeted transcription of the interviews as well as analysis of the quantitative data collected using the SDI in Phase I.



- Interviews: To date, we have conducted 58 Sociocultural Death Investigation interviews for 35 individual former service members who died by suicide or self-injury
- Next Steps:
 - AWP and Duke will continue current OpDD™ interview participant recruitment as well as expand the campaign to increase the diversity of the sample by targeting specific recruitment efforts towards female FSMs, FSMs of color, and FSMs who lived in rural areas
 - AWP OpDD™ staff as well as members of the Duke OpDD™ team will continue to conduct interviews in 2024
 - Duke University researchers will transcribe and code past interviews in preparation for analysis

- Duke will continue to analyze data collected by AWP through structured interviews conducted in Phase I, which describes the experiences of former service members from the perspectives of their loved ones. This data will be used to explore signs and symptoms observed in the last 12 months of life and to continuously refine the interview guide for Phase II.
- For Phase II, AWP will continue to interview individuals closely connected to former service members who have passed away due to suicide or self-injury causes of death. These interviews aim to better understand the social, economic, and other various health-related factors that a former service member experienced in the last 12 months of life. Duke researchers will then apply a rigorous mixed methods approach to identify themes to help understand factors related to former service members' deaths

We plan to present interim findings as opportunities arise and share those key findings from OpDD™ with our partners across the country.

To stay updated on all things OpDD™ or to see if you are eligible to participate in an interview, please visit:

www.americaswarriorpartnership.org/deep-dive





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*Partnering With Communities to
Prevent Veteran Suicide*

