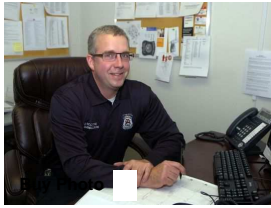


# A cop, a veteran, and the bonds of war that brought them together

Jay Grossman 10:28 a.m. EST November 12, 2015



(Photo: John Stormzand | Staff Photographer)

Eric Thompson knew his life was falling apart.

The Army veteran had spent a year deployed in Iraq and was now hooked on Xanax after being diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. He was drinking all the time, his personal relationships were in shambles and he started having suicidal thoughts.

It was the toughest of times for a young man who served his country honorably on the battlefield. And then, it grew even tougher.

He was driving around one night with a bottle of booze in his lap when a patrol car in Beverly Hills pulled him over. Thompson panicked, hit the gas pedal and fled from the police officer. Shortly after, he lost control of his car and crashed.

No one was injured, but Thompson faced an OWI charge and a second count of fleeing and eluding. He was looking at jail time.

“With me, the big factor was depression as a result of all my symptoms,” Thompson said, looking back on the episode. “But I think a lot of veterans go through it. They may have their different reasons, but it’s all for the same cause: just wanting to be numb.”

Today, Thompson is in the process of turning his life around. But his battle with drug addiction and mental health issues is a story that resonates with many veterans across Michigan — especially those who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Military veterans make up roughly 7 percent of the U.S. population, yet they constitute around 10 percent of the overall prison population and 18-23 percent of all suicides in the country, according to studies by the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Justice Department.

In addition, studies indicate that anywhere from 11-20 percent of all veterans serving since 9/11 have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress, which can cause anxiety and emotional outbursts.

In Thompson’s case, it took a veteran to save a veteran.

## Military men

Tom Danielson is a detective with the Beverly Hills Public Safety Department, and a Navy veteran. He happened to be working the night that Thompson was arrested.

“I was asked to follow up on the case, so I called the gentleman,” said Danielson. “We got to talking and I quickly realized there was some other stuff going on in his life. I learned he was a veteran with the U.S. Army — he had been over in Iraq and was going through PTSD. He told me over the phone he needed help and he didn’t know if he wanted to live. I was a veteran myself and I reached out to him and got him some help.”

Growing up in Dearborn Heights, Thompson always knew he would serve in the military one day.

“It’s in my blood,” he said matter-of-factly.

Both his parents served in Vietnam — his father with the highly-vaunted USMC Force Recon — while his two grandfathers fought in World War II and Korea. Thompson was next: he joined the Army in 2002, two weeks after graduating from Crestwood High School.

He was barely 18 when he enlisted. He was promoted to sergeant at the age of 20 and looked to have a promising career in the military.

Only it didn’t work out that way. He began suffering from anxiety attacks and bouts of depression in 2005, the same year he was discharged. He was first prescribed Xanax in 2007 and it didn’t take long before he developed a fierce addiction.

Danielson, 47, served in the Navy from 1998-2003 with a special operations force called SWCC. Part of his service included two deployments along the Mediterranean Sea, where he helped enforce U.S. sanctions against Iraq.

A year after he was discharged, Danielson began working in Beverly Hills. Happily married with two young daughters, his life took an unexpected turn in



**Army veteran Eric Thompson and his fiancée, Jo Tyler. Thompson is set to graduate from veteran's court in two months.** (Photo: Jay Grossman)

2012 when his patrol car was struck by a drunken driver who happened to be fleeing from the police.

Danielson recalled how he shared his own accident story with Thompson.

"I was hurt pretty bad," he said. "A lot of people came forward and gave me a hand — people I never met before: doctors, police officers from other agencies, citizens of Beverly Hills ... just good people. I didn't know these people and they paid it forward, so I paid it forward to him and asked him to do the same thing — help someone out. That's what it's all about."

With the help of his supervisor and the Oakland County Prosecutor's Office, Danielson arranged for Thompson to enter veteran's court.

### **A duty to help**

The rules of veteran's court are pretty straightforward: veterans who opt into the program are required to complete an intense probationary process that includes drug and alcohol testing, counseling, plus meetings with a probation officer and VA representatives.

Only non-violent offenders are eligible for the program, and if they complete their requirements they can usually re-enter society with a clean record.

James Badeen is a retired Army officer who volunteers his time for the 17th District Veteran's Court of Redford Township. He coordinates a mentoring program for veterans to help get them reintegrated back into civilian life.

"We as a society have a duty to help the veterans in our community," he said. "These were the kids next door who delivered the paper or ran track at high school. They heard the call of our nation — they went off and served and they've come back to us ... and many of them are not the same kids as they left. They've come back broken somehow."

Badeen then rattles off a number of alarming statistics to drive home his point:

- 1 out of 6 veterans who served in Iraq or Afghanistan suffers from substance abuse.
- 43 percent of those same veterans have documented brain injuries; 67 percent were diagnosed with depression, and 76 percent reported nightmares and having trouble sleeping.
- Nearly 1.5 million veterans are at risk of becoming homeless. Of those, over 90 percent have earned honorable discharges.
- Each day, an average of 22 veterans take their own lives.

"This is not something new," said Badeen. "We used to call it 'battle fatigue' and for the most part our country turned a blind eye to it. Basically, when you go to war and you come out of battle, you're not the same person as going in. I can also tell you from experience that while it's darn hard to make a civilian into a soldier, it's even harder making a soldier back into a civilian."

He thinks veterans today face even more stress because of multiple deployments. Another factor is the battlefield itself.

"This isn't like WWII where the Allied forces wore one uniform and the enemy wore a different one," he said. "The modern battlefield is not the same — when you step off the plane in today's battlefield you're in a war zone because you don't know who your enemy is and who isn't. You're always kind of on a razor's edge."

There are 22 veteran courts across the state of Michigan. The Redford court opened in 2011 and Badeen said 70 veterans successfully graduated last year. The approach is obviously a lot cheaper than sending someone to jail.

"There's a practical reason as well as a moral reason to doing this," he said. "We're doing the right thing, and at the same time it's saving us money. When these guys finish treatment, they go on to do great things in many cases. They get jobs, they become productive people. They become leaders in our community."

### **Brighter outlook**

Thompson, 31, now lives in Westland and is engaged to get married in June. He's been in the court program for about 18 months and is set to graduate in January. His goal is to become a mentor so he can help out other veterans.

"Once I started taking it seriously, it did a lot of good," he said of the program. "I still need help but I'm getting a lot better."

He admits it was difficult meeting Danielson for the first time.

"I felt terrible to begin with," he said. "And I felt even worse after I heard about his story ... and he still didn't hold it against me. If he didn't get me the help I needed right away, I don't know if I would still be here."

While he's understandably reluctant to talk about his past, Thompson said he hopes his story will inspire other troubled veterans to seek out help. Clear-eyed and confident, he believes a big part of his recovery came from setting personal goals.

"There is hope," he said. "If you stay on track, good things come about. It takes a lot of hard work – you just have to be motivated to do it."

There's also a lasting friendship and solid bond that's formed between two veterans. Thompson already invited Danielson to his wedding.

"I'm not sitting here saying he didn't do anything wrong — he obviously did," said Danielson. "But you could tell he comes from good cloth. You hear about the struggles, the guys who are coming back and aren't being taken care of. So when you can help someone out, you do it ... or at least you try."

*jgrossman@hometownlife.com | 586-826-7030 Twitter: @BhmEccentric*

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