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CommunityOfVeterans.org – “Alone”

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## Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America

### **BACKGROUND AND CAMPAIGN OBJECTIVES**

The mental health consequences of combat threaten to overwhelm a new generation of veterans. There are 1.7 million men and women who have served, or are currently serving, in Iraq and Afghanistan. About one third of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans struggle with serious mental health issues, ranging from depression to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), as a result of their service.

Untreated, these conditions can cause or aggravate other debilitating problems in the veterans’ community including high rates of unemployment, suicide, homelessness, substance abuse, divorce, and child abuse. Additionally, according to the U.S. Department of Defense, more than 230 active soldiers, airmen and Marines committed suicide last year, which is the highest military suicide statistic in nearly 30 years. Many avoid seeking help because of the stigmas around seeking treatment or being diagnosed with a mental illness.

Other Key Facts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 30-40% of new veterans could face serious psychological injuries</li><li>• More than 60% of veterans with mental health problems are not receiving proper treatment</li><li>• Less than 1% of the U.S. population has served in the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, adding to the isolation felt after returning home</li></ul>

The challenges facing returning vets are myriad and will not be solved overnight. This campaign’s long-term objective is to increase the number of vets who seek help and minimize the negative impact of PTSD. This campaign is designed to get vets to take that safe, first step in getting help.

- **Veteran Support Campaign:** To increase the number of Veterans who seek treatment for the mental health issues they face by connecting them with other Veterans. This connection will create a comfortable setting to begin discussing the issues – big and small – that they face as they readjust to civilian life.

## **RESEARCH STORY**

The facts and statistics paint a grim story of the challenges faced by our men and women in uniform as they attempt to transition back to civilian life. Whitman Insight Strategies (WINS) was tasked by the Ad Council and BBDO to design and execute a 2-phased research program to:

- Examine attitudes among Veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan toward the process of returning home, and PTSD-related struggles in particular
- Determine the barriers and triggers to seeking help
- Evaluate conceptual ideas and executions for the development of the campaign

We faced three major challenges in designing and executing this research program. First, recruiting recent veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan to participate in qualitative interviews when they are off-base and not currently deployed posed a significant challenge. We employed a comprehensive recruitment strategy that relied on outreach through IAVA membership rosters, extensive “friend and family” referrals, and the use of online social networking websites to contact veterans who were put through our screening procedures and invited to attend the groups.

Secondly, we were challenged with recruiting a diverse mix of veterans not only across standard demographics such as age, gender, and race—but also among the divisions of the U.S. Armed Forces. This meant not only recruiting from the Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Army—but also inviting a mix of active duty, National Guard, and Reservists to attend.

Thirdly, talking to veterans about sensitive issues such as mental health can be difficult. Although one-on-one interviews are sometimes the ideal structure to discuss delicate issues, we felt that a secure group setting with 6-8 combat veterans would allow vets to connect with one another and more openly discuss their shared experiences. Discussions were not overly directed by our moderators, and we took a very organic approach to group conversation and flow. We were also careful to take military rank into consideration, only grouping together veterans of similar ranks for the discussions, and conducting officers groups separately from groups that included enlisted men and women.

In the exploratory phase of the research, we conducted six focus groups among Iraq and Afghanistan veterans in three markets across the country: Austin TX, Nashville TN, and New York NY.

## **PHASE I – FINDINGS FROM EXPLORATORY RESEARCH**

The research revealed that **combat is a “leveler”**. The challenges faced by returning veterans transcend race, gender, rank, and branch of service. Furthermore, the coming home process is often rushed, and the **transition** back is often **abrupt and difficult**.

The **problems** that combat veterans face when they come home are **very common** and all too **real**. Some vets talked about having nightmares, or punching/kicking in their sleep. Others talked about anxiety in public places, difficulties driving (combat driving vs. civilian driving), and how the similarities between the sound of fireworks and mortar fire make spending the 4<sup>th</sup> of July with their families a

difficult time. Still others told stories of troubles or loss that were even more heartbreaking. The inability to fully share in these activities only **worsens** the feeling of **isolation** that many vets experience.

Many veterans expressed **difficulties talking** about what they feel with their civilian loved ones, family, and friends, which can lead to feeling that they are **alone**. The only ones who **truly understand** are those **who have been there**, and experienced the same things. Vet to vet communication is key.

**Talking about problems** and experiences with others who have served is often **therapeutic**—living on a base can be a big help, but many Guardsmen and Reservists lack this built-in support structure. Though most vets were unable to really discuss their issues with civilian loved ones—many cited them as **catalysts for getting help** (“*I didn’t realize how bad it had gotten until my wife pointed out how I was acting.*”)

In communicating credibly to vets, **don’t overplay patriotism** and **don’t promise a cure**. Vets don’t like to be labeled one way or another, and they “cope” with mental health issues, they don’t “solve” them.

Finding work in the civilian world is a major challenge and a source of stress for many veterans. Vets use the internet and social networking sites to stay connected to each other, and to friends and family.

Some vets who hadn’t spent time with other veterans even cited the focus group discussions with other veterans as a “big step forward” for them. Many exchanged contact information, or talked about job opportunities and employment assistance after the sessions.

### **CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT**

As a result of the research, the BBDO team developed a set of concepts that sought to embody the key findings from the exploratory veterans groups.

The creative embraced the key research finding that opening up a rapport with this hard-to-reach group hinged on identifying as someone who has gone through the same experiences. Veterans talking to veterans. *We’ve been there, come home, and gone through the same things.*

Three of the key tenets of this were:

**The people that truly understand me are other combat veterans.**

**Back in the U.S., that is less than 1% of the population.**

**We were stronger together in Iraq and Afghanistan. We are stronger together at home as well.**

The communication to vets had not only to come *from* vets, but it also had to be authentic, true, and honest—with no gimmicks, promises of cures, or platitudes. The creative would be something new—with no teary-eyed references to patriotism, associations with existing veterans’ organizations, or explicit references to individual branches of the military.

The call-to-action of the campaign would be to join the online community created for Iraq and Afghanistan vets, where you could just listen in, share your experiences, and access resources.

## **PHASE II – FINDINGS FROM COMMUNICATIONS EVALUATION RESEARCH**

Prior to further development, we were asked to conduct a series of mini-groups among combat veterans to assess and evaluate their reactions to developed creative executions, and to test potential variants on the concepts. We conducted 10 triads (consisting of 3 respondents per group) among combat veterans in San Antonio, TX and in New York, NY.

Across the groups, one concept in particular stood out—and it went by the working name “Alone”. The concept was seen by veterans as embodying their feelings about the suddenness of returning home, and the loneliness and difficulty of not being able to share troubles and experiences with those that hadn’t been through the same things as them. It really connected on a deep level with veterans (“*This is it. This is exactly what it feels like. I’ve been this guy!*”). The image of a soldier, standing alone in normally crowded locations (an airport, downtown New York City) spoke to veterans in a powerful manner while at the same time not portraying a returning vet as angry or emotionally unstable (a significant problem from the Vietnam era).

While some of the other executions tested were also well-received, “Alone” seemed to establish the deepest initial connection with the veterans, opening a credible communications channel that we discovered through our initial exploratory is often very difficult to establish. Furthermore, the solitary image of the veteran, who ultimately meets another veteran was seen by the audience as having mass appeal (in some other concepts, veterans were shown with their families, which was seen by some single vets as hard to identify with).

The veterans ranked “Alone” at the top (or near the top) of all the creative executions they were exposed to, and the astounding depth of their reactions to the concept let us know that we’d found our spot.

## **THE CAMPAIGN**

The campaign directs veterans to the first and only community exclusive to Iraq and Afghanistan veterans through a new social networking website, [www.CommunityofVeterans.org](http://www.CommunityofVeterans.org), where they can listen, share their experiences and access resources. There are online as well as local resources, which range from help in coping with PTSD to employment advice and listings for veterans.

The campaign kicked-off with PSAs distributed to media outlets nationwide to coincide with Veterans Day (November 11, 2008). The campaign includes television, radio, print, outdoor and Web advertising. The TV spots feature Iraq veterans who are Purple Heart recipients. Because of the unique donated media model employed by the Ad Council, there is no definitive “media buy” but instead donated space made available by partner organizations.

Total donated media support for the campaign to date has been valued over \$50MM, and in Q1 of 2009 the campaign received more donated media support than any other Ad Council campaign. In reaching out to our target audience, SpikeTV, MTV and CNN have been strong supporters of the campaign. In addition CBS placed the campaign PSAs during the Army/Navy football game in both 2008 and 2009.

Online, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), Hulu, NBC Universal, CNN and The New York Times have supported the campaign. Massive Inc., a video game advertising network launched campaign PSAs within a number of their games as well.

In the earned media sphere, New York Times columnist Bob Herbert lauded the campaign as “powerful” and said that it has the potential to “reduce the heartache of G.I.s and their families” as well as “to save lives.” The “Alone” campaign was also awarded a Gold Addy for Public Service at the National Addy awards last year, and also won the NY Regional Addy award as well.

## **RESULTS**

In the first month alone, more than 2,200 veterans had requested sign-up materials and 360 had completed the verification process (because of the confidential nature of the site and the discussions, all members must be verified before they are granted full access). Within 30 days of launch, CommunityOfVeterans.org had more than 2,200 vets request membership information, and 360 verified members.

Since then over 4,000 veterans have been verified as members and are actively participating on the site. Currently, the site has been visited over 700,000 times by 500,000 unique visitors and there are more than 200 groups within CommunityOfVeterans.org whose topics range from Purple Heart recipients, to PTSD Help, to Veteran Video Gamers.

Though this audience is notoriously a difficult one to research, and the issues around PTSD and getting help would be difficult enough to query among the general population much less combat veterans, the Ad Council did conduct a tracking study in November 2009 of 612 Iraq/Afghanistan veterans and found that those who indicated aided awareness of the “Alone” ads had significantly greater familiarity with CommunityOfVeterans.org and IAVA, and were more likely to join an online community designed for veterans. (Source: Ad Council Veterans Tracking Study 1, November 3-9, 2009)

Overall, this is a campaign whose success must be rated not by conventional awareness and tracking metrics, but by its ability to create an online space for returning veterans to connect and take the first steps toward getting the help they may need. In these terms, it is and will continue to be a campaign whose merits will be personal stories and testimonials. Though what happens on CommunityOfVeterans.org is largely confidential, for the purposes of this submission, the IAVA has shared a personal story of a veteran who was directly impacted by the campaign. It is attached in Appendix I.

## CONCLUSIONS

The results show that the “Alone” campaign has succeeded in building and populating CommunityOfVeterans.org into an active, robust community and hub of connectivity for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans—4,000 strong. More importantly, the online community is serving its purpose, as evidenced by the groups that have been created to discuss mental health issues and the personal testimonials of those who have agreed to share and make public their stories. The success today of CommunityOfVeterans.org may prove to be even more critical in the years to come, when the 1.7 million men and women deployed abroad return home, are faced with these same challenges, but have an existing, established community in place to help them.

Appendix I:

The below was provided for the purposes of this submission by the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA). It is a testimonial from a Marine who served in Iraq.

*My name is Rey Leal. I have been deployed twice to Iraq with 3rd Battalion 5th Marines out of Camp Pendleton, California. While stationed in Fallujah, I experienced some of the heaviest fighting of the war, earning a Bronze Star with valor as a Private First Class.*

*When I was discharged from the Marine Corps in February 2008, there were two questions I feared the most: “What was it like over there?” and, “Did you kill anyone?” Carrying that anxiety, I delayed my return to south Texas for as long as possible. I couldn’t bear the thought of being around familiar faces and that fear led me to push away those who cared about me the most, even my wife and infant son. Though I didn’t know it at the time, I was suffering from an invisible wound: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).*

*Most nights, I couldn’t sleep at all. While up watching TV one night, I was moved by an ad showing a veteran greeting a soldier returning from Iraq. It was a PSA from Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) directing vets to an online community; I signed up and sent in my paperwork proving I had served in Iraq immediately. The first time I logged in, I posted a question asking if others were having trouble sleeping. Within minutes, veterans from around the country wrote in with empathic responses. For the first time, I felt like I had found a group of people who understood what I was going through.*

*The online community, exclusively for OIF and OIF veterans, is a place where we can interact with one another in a private online community, share our experiences in a safe forum, and access critical resources. Thanks to IAVA’s community of veterans, I eventually signed up for psychiatric counseling, enrolled in college and successfully rebuilt my relationships with my family and friends.*

*There are two million veterans that have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. Each one of these individuals deserves the same support that I found when I was struggling with my transition home. IAVA has once again collaborated with the Ad Council on a groundbreaking and critical new campaign to let new veterans know that there is a powerful group of veterans at IAVA.org who have got their back.*