

A Hero's Determination

Justin Fitch & Carry The Fallen

By Chris Tessier



Spending my time with like-minded people who enjoy participating in friendly competition with a focus on safety is one of the key components that keeps me coming back to IDPA. If you are a fan or competitor in the shooting sports you know shooters are obsessed with numbers. What's the round count? What was my raw time? How many points down was I? More on the social interaction and camaraderie in a moment.

First, I'd like to ask you to consider this number... 22. That represents the number of men and women who faithfully and honorably served this country who suffer from PTSD and choose to take their own life daily. Yes, daily. Let that sink in for a moment, 22 veterans commit suicide every day... that's more than 8,000 each year. If you struggle to comprehend that number you are not alone and I imagine you are as floored now as I was when I learned of that stark fact.

The story behind how I first became aware of this epidemic rate at which our veterans are succumbing to PTSD is as humorous as it is tragic. It serves as an

example of how the social interactions and camaraderie at IDPA events can be both fun and life changing at the same time.

It was at an IDPA match on a hot summer day that I met Justin Fitch, an army officer who served two combat tours in Iraq. Justin and I were placed in the same squad together. We were relaxing behind the firing line, waiting for our opportunity to shoot, and watching our fellow competitors go through their paces. Justin, with his wife Sam, were seated in front of me on a couple of camp stools with the late afternoon sun high in the sky. In an effort to loosen up a bit

from the several hours she had already spent crouched over on her camp stool, Sam stood and stretched her arms toward the sky. It was at that very moment she was about to sit back down when the mischievous little devil on Justin's shoulder got the better of him... and he took her stool out from underneath his wife's descending backside. Needless to say Sam hit the sand with a solid thud kicking up quite a dust cloud. Her backward momentum caused her to rock from her butt onto her back with her feet flailing in the air like a helpless turtle might do. I don't believe Justin thought she was going to hit the ground quite as hard as she did.

It only took a moment to realize she was not physically injured, she was however, thoroughly embarrassed. I simply looked at Justin and laughingly said, "You're a dead man!" The smirk

Photo (above): © Dave Kammi/US Army photo



Promoting the Carry The Fallen stage, S&W Indoor Nationals, 2015

on Sam's face told me she was thinking something along those same lines. After that we began to chat hitting the usual, standard small talk topics you might hear at an IDPA match. Once we covered the guns and gear we moved onto more personal questions. Where are you from? How long have you been married? How much longer do think you'll be married after that stunt? What do you do for work? I learned that at the time Justin was still serving on active duty at the Natick Soldier Systems Center in Natick, MA. He told me how much he enjoyed serving his country and how seriously he approached his responsibility as a leader.

Things continued on in that tone for a while, both of us sharing humorous anecdotes about the military in general. It was when I asked him in which sandbox he'd served, Iraq or Afghanistan or both? "Two tours in Iraq," he replied. Not being a combat veteran myself and not wanting to force the conversation, I offered the only thing I could think of to say at the moment, "I'm sure that was tough." His demeanor changed in an instant. His eyes grew narrow, but it wasn't anger. His voice was different, not trembling or shaky, but firm and serious. Then it hit me, he was laser focused on me as if he wanted to be absolutely sure I heard and understood

what he was about to say.

It was during the ensuing conversation Justin proceeded to educate me, inspire me and motivate me with his own personal story. "Every day, 22 veterans commit suicide -- 8,000 per year. That's more than the number of U.S. troops killed in Iraq and Afghanistan combined," he said. "That's what's tough."

I just sat there dumbfounded while my brain tried to digest this information. Justin told me he had suffered from PTSD in silence after the loss of a close friend and had nearly taken his own life. Had he not thought of his friends as he sat with the muzzle of his M4 to his head, round chambered, selector switch on fire, finger on the trigger... he wouldn't be here. "I felt like there was no way out, better just death before dishonor," he said. "So I almost put 4.5 pounds of pressure on the trigger just to end it." The expression on my face must have been one of combined shock about the number of veterans committing suicide and surprise that this man, I just met, shared such a personal story with me about a rarely spoken subject.

Justin's eyes never left mine as he described how he had sought help to deal with his PTSD. "Seeking help, I believe, made me a stronger person," Fitch said.

"I learned how to deal with those dark things in my mind and face them head on. When I learned that 22 veterans are killing themselves every day, I was just blown away. I knew that was something I wanted to get involved in fighting. It has become my final mission."

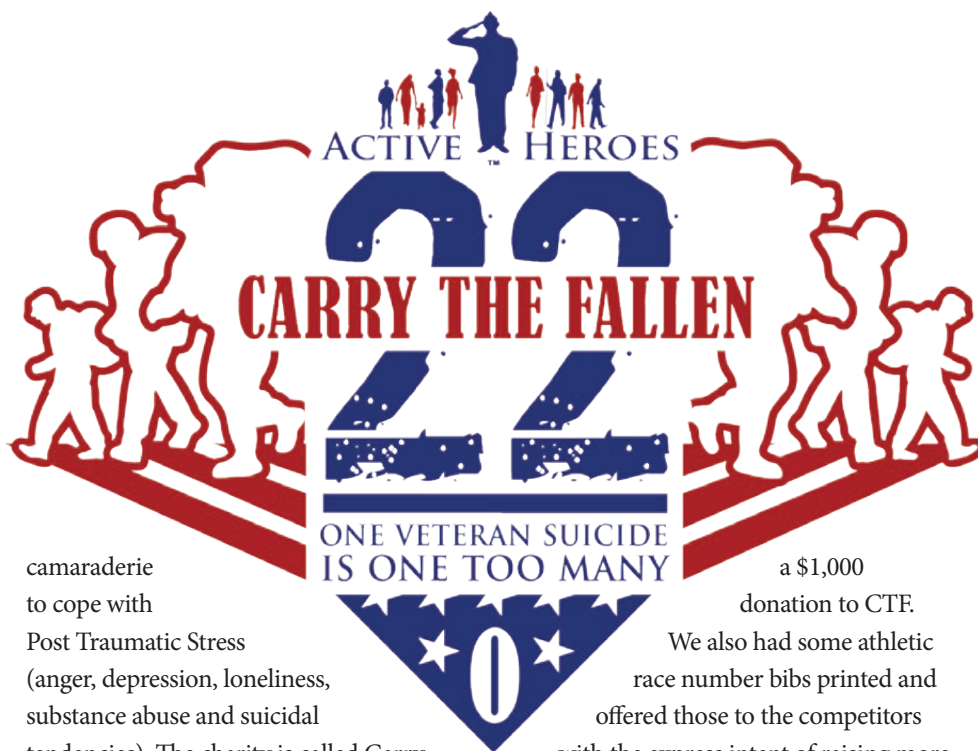
I wasn't sure what he meant. Final mission? "Do you have some sort of job in the Army counseling fellow soldiers?" I inquired, thinking his career in the Army was coming to an end and he would simply move on with life. "No," he said. "I have stage four colon cancer, I'm dying"

I was astonished. Here before me was a 30-something year old man who had overcome severe depression, served a second tour in Iraq only to come home and be told he isn't going to live much longer. There is no self-pity in this man, nor does he want any from others. He has chosen with all his heart to spend what time he has left on this earth in service to his brothers and sisters who are fighting some of the same demons he himself has faced. It was in that instant I knew I had to do something to help our veterans.

As our match continued on so did our conversation. I learned that Justin was heavily involved with a charity focused on building a national retreat which veterans and their families could visit establishing



Justin taking part in a 2014 match in NH.



camaraderie to cope with Post Traumatic Stress (anger, depression, loneliness, substance abuse and suicidal tendencies). The charity is called Carry The Fallen (CTF) and it is a ruck-march (hiking) event under the umbrella of ACTIVE HEROES, a 501c3 charity. Justin was the Volunteer Team Leader of Team Minuteman based in Boston and had built the largest and most accomplished team in the country. His charismatic personality and his absolute conviction that we, you and I, can do something to help our veterans was something I could not get out of my head. If this dying man could take up the fight against veteran suicide until he physically collapsed from exhaustion I knew I could do more... I knew I would do more. I made a donation to CTF that evening, but I still couldn't shake this feeling of insignificance about doing so little to help. It was then that I thought what I need is a force multiplier... I have only so much disposable income and time to give. I need to spread the word about how many of our veterans are in crisis and convince others to give their time and/or money to help move that 22 a day number toward zero.

Our efforts began at Harvard Sportsmen's Club in June of 2014, where the folks from Metrowest Tactical offered

a \$1,000 donation to CTF. We also had some athletic race number bibs printed and offered those to the competitors with the express intent of raising more awareness. There was no charge for the bibs, but donations were accepted and the competitors gladly dropped an additional \$484 in donations into the collection bucket.

At this point it became very apparent that the shooting community with members from all walks of life were appalled at the suicide rate of our veterans and wanted to help raise awareness and money to support those who served us.

We have continued our efforts to support CTF since then in many different ways with my home club and the competitive shooting community in the northeast fully embracing Justin's final mission.

Charlie Taylor, A477518, coordinated a Noche Mexicana Fundraiser at 11 Margaritas Mexican Restaurants on the same night. Each store was staffed by a rep from AH-CTF for the evening. Our shooting community members simply went to dinner on Oct 13th 2014 and told the staff they were there in support of AH-CTF and 15% of their pre-tax check went to the charity. More than \$560 was raised during that one evening!

Jon Wolfe, A402401, the Pioneer IDPA program director took immediate action during the 2014 LFOD NH State IDPA Championship match when the Matrix stage was thrown out for a technical rules violation. He ran the Matrix stage as a side stage with all the proceeds going to AH-CTF and added more than \$170 to the pot by re-purposing the hard work done on the Matrix stage by Adam Taylor, A604639.

James Davis, A526796, took the lead during the November 2014 Steel Challenge match at PSI with help from Seneca Higgins, A37242, and the green light from the Steel Challenge chair Andrew Nash, A21175. This match was nothing short of amazing. James secured two corporate sponsorships for the match in the amount of \$500 each. In addition, the PSI board of directors agreed to donate 100% of the match fees. We bumped up the match fee to \$30, had a cold and rainy day and still the shooters came by the dozens to shoot and support AH-CTF. Match fees and the proceeds from a fastest gun side stage added an astonishing \$2,600 plus to the pot.

Mike Critser, A20835, passed the hat during the 2014 Smith & Wesson IDPA BUG Nationals and again the competitors from across the country found the cause worthy and dug in their pockets to donate what they could to the tune of nearly \$1,200.

With the momentum and the successes of our efforts in 2014, we doubled our efforts in 2015. Bob Stonehill, A32515, the match director for the 2015 Smith & Wesson IDPA Indoor Nationals allowed us to create a stage with a Carry the Fallen theme. We had some shirts made which we gave to competitors for a donation to CTF of \$25 or more, we handed out some informational brochures and answered questions about the plight of our veterans. The shirts were gone half way through the first competitors shoot day! There was no hard sell as the competitors coming

through the stage would simply drop their donations in the collection bucket as most of them kept asking what more they could do. We were humbled by the generosity of the shooting community once again when we tallied the donations and found \$2,000 was donated in this one match.

Once the spring/summer season arrived we doubled down on our efforts and we had a side stage at nearly every regular monthly Pioneer IDPA match and Pioneer Steel Challenge match. Our July IDPA match saw 100% of the registration fees and the side match donations go directly to CTF.

During this year's LFOD NH State IDPA Championship match we had two wonderful ladies, Sarah Cadden and Patricia Tessier, offer to do a bake sale with all their goodies offered to the competitors in exchange for a donation amount of their choice. Their sweet treats garnered more than \$800 dollars! Additionally, Matt Dworman, A52360, a PSI member and the master craftsmen owner/operator of Qline Design offered one of his NightGuard End tables to be raffled off for \$10 donation per ticket. Nearly every competitor who saw the table wanted a chance to win it and in the end the raffle tickets totaled more than \$2,200. Combined the weekend saw the

largest single match donation amount of more than \$3,000.

That put our fundraising for 2015 at nearly \$10,000! We are humbled by and proud of the generosity of the competitors and staff who saw fit to donate to support our veterans through CTF. We offer our thanks with the full knowledge that it doesn't nearly represent the full measure of our gratitude.

The successes of this season and this match were tempered for myself and many others. It is with a heavy heart and deep sadness that I tell you Justin died of colon cancer after a long, courageous fight October 4th. He passed peacefully at home with his wife and family surrounding him.

We learned of his passing in the midst of the final day of the LFOD NH State IDPA Championship match. Word quickly spread from bay to bay and those who knew Justin hugged each other and let their tears flow without reservation. We stopped the match and asked all staff and competitors to gather on a single range. Once gathered Mike Crister made the announcement to the stunned crowd. We bowed our heads and had a moment of silence for our fellow competitor. It was a very touching moment, one which many will remember for a long time to come.

Yesterday I cried... selfishly for the loss of my friend, a man who inspired me, a man who called me his brother and the only man I have known personally who I would bestow upon the honor of calling a hero. I cried for his wife Samantha, for his family, for his friends and for those who wouldn't have the privilege of knowing him.

But with Justin, it was never about him... it was always about helping others and his final mission to combat veteran suicide. And so today, in his honor, the crying stops and I move forward with his mission.

Our little club here in New Hampshire has been able to raise a lot of awareness and nearly \$10,000. Our primary method of fundraising were the side stages we held at our monthly matches. The stage design is very simple, five targets on the same plane at 7-10 yards. The course of fire is one shot on each target, a reload and a second shot on each. This is easy to setup, is quick to run competitors through, easy to score and offers another opportunity for folks to compete against each other. We often set this up using steel targets and call it a fastest gun stage.

It's true every dollar helps and every person who becomes aware of the epidemic of veteran suicide adds light to the beacon of hope that this tragedy ends. Imagine for a moment, what we as the larger shooting community could do if each club took it upon themselves to do the same. Some clubs might be able to do much more and some a little less. There is strength in numbers and if each of the 462 IDPA affiliated clubs were to raise an average of \$1,000 per season... that would be nearly a half million dollars to be used to provide services to our veterans in need.

I ended every correspondence and conversation with Justin with "Fight on brother, Fight on!!" to which he would respond "F.I.D.O.!" Now his fight is over, but his mission continues with us for as long as there is a need.



Photo: © Dwight Pries

Competitors at the LFOD NH state match offer a moment of silence to mark the passing of Justin Fitch.



Photo: © Chris Tessier

Chris Tessier & Justin Fitch

As a tribute to Justin's love of competitive shooting and as a way to continue his mission and build upon his legacy we worked with Active Heroes to create a new, national event-based project under the Active Heroes umbrella.

Aiming for Zero, will provide the competitive shooting community a channel through which to focus their efforts to raise awareness of and fund-raisers to end Veteran Suicide. Individuals, groups and clubs can register to host side stages, full matches and other creative methods of increasing awareness and fundraising at their local ranges to benefit Active Heroes and help with the fight to end veteran suicide.

We have veterans in need... the start signal just sounded... what can you do to help?

Aiming For Zero web site:

AimingForZero.org

Active Heroes web site:

ActiveHeroes.org



Photo: © Sara Cannell

November 10th was the 240th birthday of the United States Marine Corps and Veterans Day followed the day after. Though I have thought about my brothers and sisters who have served before me and those who are serving now, I find myself focused on the silent majority of the military family. Specifically, I have been thinking of those spouses whose husband or wife has chosen to serve their country. Today, our armed forces are staffed entirely by volunteers, which is an amazing fact all on its own.

But I think we often forget about the spouses who voluntarily support those serving. They run the household, raise the kids, keep friends and family updated with information about their spouse. For those of us who are married, they do everything you and your spouse do all while putting on a brave face over the loneliness and worry which must be ever present.

I couldn't put my finger on why my mind was focused on the spouses on this particular year. And then I looked at FB and saw a post by my friend Justin Fitch and I knew it was again Justin causing me to pause and think of others. Those who know Justin are aware he is veteran with terminal cancer who has chosen to use his remaining life blood to continue to server others by fighting against and educating people about the epidemic levels at which veterans are committing suicide.

Then my mind turned to Justin's wife Samantha. I don't know Samantha very well, but I do know she is a shining example of the values my beloved Marine Corps instilled in me many years ago.

COMMITMENT

She has been and continues to be Justin's primary caregiver and emotional rock. She committed to Justin when they were married and stayed the course through combat tours, PTSD, cancer diagnosis and the plain truth that her young husband will not grow old with her.

HONOR

From the moment I met Sam she's carried herself with dignity and honor in the face of the many challenges which have come her way. Many others have withered in the face of any one of the curve-balls life has thrown at Sam. I've never heard her complain, nor seek the pity of others.

COURAGE

Though I think Sam has taken on life with the courage of lion without a doubt. I have been fortunate to benefit from her courage many times. You see, Sam has had the courage to share her husband with full knowledge his time with her is shorter than she deserves. Whether it's a ruck march, a television interview, a photo shoot, an all-day fund-raiser on the range... she supports Justin and his mission by allowing others to be inspired by her husband. The complete and utter selflessness with which she shares her time with Justin is astonishing.

So today while I think of my brothers and sisters in arms, I will pause to remember all those spouses who sacrifice every bit as much those who wear the uniform. They deserve the same levels of respect and thanks if not more.

So to Sam I just wanted to say thank you.

Semper Fi

~ Chris Tessier, #A52115