“Outside the lifelines”

Good Morning/Afternoon,

My name is Joe, I’ve served for nearly 22 years active duty, and 7 years ago this past summer I came a single footstep from ending my life.

One year before that day I arrived to the Coast Guard Cutter Morgenthau, a frocked and newly minted Chief Petty Officer. It’s a big shift, becoming a chief. It’s a defining moment where we have so much to learn. This was my third cutter, but this time was different, I was separated from the camaraderie of the crew in ways I didn’t understand at that time. I had a group of 12 others instead of the hundred or so E-6 and below I was used to. I remember feeling alone, even when surrounded by an entire crew day in and out. While I don’t know if everyone feels this way putting on the anchor, I’d imagine it’s not uncommon.

We finished a couple of patrols, where I struggled with low performance and slow qualification. I cried quietly through a failing marriage and lack of any real friendships on board. Don’t get me wrong, I was cordial with the crew and my fellow chiefs. We shared stories and went out together in port calls like you’d expect. But I still managed to feel like an outsider as my personal pain and depression worsened. I signed up for CCTI under social pressure and then dropped out as I couldn’t handle the stress. This only exacerbated my internal lack of confidence and misguided feelings that the mess hated me.

We ended the year in dry dock in the bay area, right across the island from Base Alameda. By this point I was covering the pain of my loss from divorce and the separation from my children with a new relationship. It’s a cliché, an unhealthy relationship entered into under false pretenses, even if subconscious. When it ended abruptly, the loss from the divorce on top of the rejection from the new relationship caused a depressive spiral.

I found myself on duty as the OOD while our cutter was up on blocks in the shipyard down the shoreline. My life felt truly empty on that warm night in July. My training and experience allowed all of this to go unnoticed as I moved through my day, performing the rote duties I’d qualified for. But I was a ghost walking. I had No children, no marriage, no girlfriend, no support system, no home, and a job that felt empty as I continued to underperform. I was on my round of the cutter just after midnight and stopped on the flight deck. I can remember how the lifelines had been removed and they had strung up nylon rope along the stanchions in an almost comical attempt at safety. My boot tips touched that knife edge, as I stared down at the steel deck over a hundred feet below for what seemed like hours. My mind raced in a confused torment, unable to make sense of the painful thoughts. I was consumed by it. I just wanted the fear and anguish to stop. I was so scared. I stood there, outside those makeshift lifelines, leaning over the knife edge.

My phone rang. I’m lucky my friend Roy is a mild insomniac. I can remember feeling relief as I backed away and answered it. He heard something in my voice and immediately asked me what I was doing and where I was… I spent the rest of the darkness of that night telling him about everything that had led me to this moment. It was a torrent of hoarse words and tears, but when it was done, as the sun came up, I had been convinced to go get help.

I was relieved from OOD and got the duty driver to drop me at the base here, where I went to the clinic and told them I’d tried to kill myself and needed help. By the end of the day I was in the mental health crises ward at Travis AFB. I was exhausted both physically and emotionally after explaining these same events to at least 5 different HS’s, nurses, or doctors. Each time, reliving the trauma of the experience. But it’s ok to talk about it, I know now. It’s actually better. But it never really gets less exhausting or difficult. I would tell this story a lot while in the hospital. Group therapy was really helpful.

Leaving the hospital, two JO’s from the cutter were sent to retrieve me from the hospital and escort me to get my things and put me on a plane. I was being transferred TLD, they told me. I found out later it was Temporary Limited Duty, but I still had no idea what it really meant or what the rules were concerning it. I was returned to the cutters home port in Honolulu and was given a barracks room until I could find somewhere to live.

After leaving those two young officers, I spoke to no one from the crew for months. No one called or checked in after that. Maybe they called my supervisors, those looking after me, but never with me. I found out I was being permanently removed from Morgenthau when DA emailed me that I had orders waiting in airport terminal. The only call I got was from my former EMO asking me for bullets for my marks. I did not give him any. Self-reflection while recovering from wanting to kill yourself is nearly impossible. They say depression is living in the past, and anxiety in the future. If you have a member in this situation? I would look for advice from EPM on what to do, because my marks were the lowest they’d ever been during that year. They accurately represented my performance, but they didn’t have a way to capture what was happening to me. I don’t say this to condemn my command or fellow crew members, but to implore each of you to remember that we are more than our billets in operational units, especially when we’re left behind on the pier.

It took nine months to be well enough to go back to Active duty. I was given leeway at the ESD in Honolulu to recover. Weekly therapy appointments and daily check ins by the CWO4 who supervised me. I will never forget CM Polvado and how he helped me recover, how genuine and understanding he seemed. He was and always will be my coast guard hero. He saved my life.

In the end it was the CO of Base Honolulu, Captain Ed Sheppard, who gave me the push into advocacy. I would not be standing here today if he hadn’t given me the opportunity at the end of my tour to speak with a prospective commanding officer group being hosted by the Leadership Development Center. I shakily stood in front of that crowd, with no speech or real guidance on what to say. I simply said “I tried to kill myself and now I’m recovering.” They had a bunch of questions about how to avoid my situation in the future with their crews. I didn’t really have answers for that. I couldn’t tell them what to do. I could only tell them what I did. I received a standing ovation and a coin that I still carry to this day. It was a powerful moment, and one of the purest forms of leadership I’ve ever witnessed. Thank you Captain Sheppard, for the opportunity.

I’m happy to be here today to speak to all of you about this experience, as difficult as it is, because I want people to know the next part. The part where I spent 10 days learning about depression and its effects on the mind, about how the mental health discipline has been created by observing reactions to depression and anxiety in millions of others over many years. What I was going through was normal, the way anyone would react under similar stressors who was depressed and struggling through these contributing factors. This is the key. Or at least it was for me. I wasn’t alone in how I was feeling.

That simple discovery was what made me feel safe for the first time since that night. If I wasn’t alone, I could always rely on these people to help me, because if they know all these things about how we react to depression and stress, then there is a solution somewhere out there. I gained conviction from this thought process, a recognition that I did exist among a community, no matter how alone I might have felt.

Since leaving Morgenthau and my recovery in ESD Honolulu, I served 4 years and 3 months aboard the FORWARD out of Portsmouth VA. Surrounded by family and my safety network back in my home state. I did every possible position on that cutter, slowly earning my self-confidence back. My final year I was humbled to serve as the Command Chief, where I was able to advocate for my crew and realize it’s what I want to do for the rest of my career. I’ve since made Senior Chief, become an Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training Instructor, been selected for a competitive special assignment, and look forward to a tour as a silver badge again. My career trajectory has never been clearer, I’ve never been more focused or dedicated, and I’ve never felt more valued than I do today. Not only have I survived this event, but I am thriving. All because of the support I received for speaking up about my depression.

For anyone listening to me today, who may be having the worst day of their life? Please know you are not alone. That you can receive help and not lose your career. That you deserve to be heard and to be treated with compassion. You are worth saving from suicide. Please don’t suffer outside the lifelines alone, we can help.

Thank you.