

## TAKING ON VETERAN SUICIDE, ONE PAIR OF “RANGER PANTIES” AT A TIME

by **Eddie Molina** Oct 12, 2020



Active-duty servicemembers and veterans share many common experiences which often sets us apart from civilians. We can come together over a tour-of-duty station, a shared commander or unit, or the unforgettable aspects of our training. But it's often our dark sense of humor — stories about Jody, tales of ass-grabbing antics on and off post, and the ribbing of comrades and competing branches alike — which underpins military culture and unites the community. That's why I was excited when I recently discovered a growing non-profit organization, [Irreverent Warriors](#), whose mission is to bring service members and veterans together using humor and camaraderie. Their target is to improve mental health and end veteran suicide through humor.

I was intrigued.

Fortunately for me, Irreverent Warriors was organizing a very popular event that I could attend right in New York City: a Silkies Hike. The hike was designed to get veterans, active-duty soldiers, reservists, and retired servicemembers together (in Silkies shorts — also known as “ranger panties” or “Catch-Me-F\*\*K-Me’s”) to be among friends and build new bonds. The New York City Silkies Hike was just one of five going on that day. The hikes were held throughout the country and drew hundreds of hikers.

“As of now, we have 65 hikes scheduled for 2021,” Irreverent Warriors CEO Cindy McNally said. “We doubled the number of hikes in two years!”

But the group does more than Silkies Hikes. According to McNally, the organization has put together “camping trips, Silkies Olympics, boat trips, community clean-ups, events to serve disabled and senior vets, and much more.”

And the events are strictly for the military. The purpose is to ensure that members know that everyone who participates either wears the uniform or has worn it before.



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That was reassuring for me. I knew my dirty jokes and endless f-bombs would be welcomed — even encouraged. That toilet humor doesn't always fit well with civilians, but a soldier, airman, marine, or seaman (quick chuckle) will *always get it*.

So I went for it, Silkies and everything.



Warriors SP at 0830 hours led by event organizer, Marc Herzog, taking point and donning the black Irreverent Warriors flag.

As if sensing my newness, Irreverent Warriors New York Area Leader Marc Herzog told me that his first social event in 2017 "was the most amazing experience ever."

"I found my people for the first time," he added.

Another Irreverent Warriors member, a Marine named Kevin Bunn, assured me: "Many of us shared your experience... we're not gonna push you. I know where you were and I know what you're going through."

In fact, I was quite comfortable around every hiker. I knew what type of people was around me: gritty, hard-working, selfless Americans who would jump at any opportunity to help a brother or sister in uniform.

Kevin confirmed what my gut knew: "[The vets] need these events to [keep them from feeling isolated](#)," he said. "Just one or two events gets them through the year."



The Warriors report to formation for a photo in Times Square, NYC. (Photo courtesy of Arturo Martinez, Marine.)

I also knew they can party, as I have done many times before (probably too much). And some partying was the first thing I saw that morning.

As we mustered at the start point in Central Park, many Irreverent Warriors members cracked open beers. I'll admit I was a bit nervous that this affair would get out of control. As a former officer, I knew the math: *soldiers + booze = debauchery*.



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But it turned out to be everything but that.

No matter how many drinks some Warriors had, (and a few had a lot!) they knew what line not to cross. No one urinated on the street, left garbage behind, or damaged any property. With the exception of some slurring and a little stumbling, it was pure professionalism at its finest. I was impressed, a little relieved, and totally at home.

On many occasions, curious onlookers asked the Warriors about the purpose of the group. No matter who answered, the response was always the same: "*We bring veterans together using humor and camaraderie to improve mental health and prevent veteran suicide.*"



A small platoon-sized element poses for a picture at one of the checkpoints, Washington Square Park, NYC.

Another Warrior, "A.A. Ron," was asked what the group meant to him: "I met a lot of vets through IW," he replied. "Regardless of when you served, we're the same. We're here for each other to lift our spirits and to enjoy our lives and the lives of others lost."



The New York City hike hit its climax at Ground Zero. As we rounded a city corner in the Financial District, we were confronted by the Freedom Tower. The direct view of the building and how it dominated the landscape captured everyone's attention. The party atmosphere quickly dipped into a somber state. The group, whose mood had been one of partying and incessant chanting, became silent. We all felt the same way, we all knew what this meant.

As we mustered outside the Freedom tower, several Warriors took the stage to tell their stories of those lost and remembered. The message was clear: *you are not alone!*

After a moment of silence, a prayer, and warm hugs we gathered our belongings and carried on with the mission, as all Warriors do.

*If you want to get involved or donate to support the Irreverent Warriors mission, go to their website, [www.irreverentwarriors.com](http://www.irreverentwarriors.com).*

#### ABOUT EDDIE MOLINA



Eddie Molina is an OIF veteran and former Army officer. He currently works for a state law enforcement agency and writes about veteran culture, Law Enforcement and LEO.

