Law enforcement is tough public service work. Fighting crime and ensuring order, while being constantly scrutinized by the general public is certainly difficult work, but can those who are sworn to serve and protect play a role in suicide prevention? Those in the field of suicidology clearly know that the answer to this question is a resounding YES, but how often does it play it out that way? If only there champion among law enforcement uniquely positioned to speak about the absolutely critical role that law enforcement can play in saving the lives of those in suicidal despair. In fact, there is such a person – Kevin Briggs.

Briggs cut his teeth in the United States Army, which he joined soon after his high school graduation. He specialized in weaponry, and was stationed in Germany during the height of the Cold War when he would encounter his first brush with death in the form of cancer at the age of 20. His battle against cancer left him weak and required some healing time which led to his leaving the service. He moved on to “government work,” but he was no pencil pusher. Two years “on the other side of the bars” at San Quentin was enough for him to seek alternate employment and he moved on to the California Highway Patrol – becoming a real-life Frank Poncherello (if you recall the famous TV show CHiPs). Briggs spent over 20 years wearing the beige uniform and most of his time in the department was as a patrolman covering the territory that included the Golden Gate Bridge.

In his long and decorated law enforcement career, Briggs interacted with over 200 individuals who had gone to the Bridge to end their life. While he had no special training, nor had he received any warning about the all-too-frequent, all-too-tragic dark side of this historic landmark, Briggs learned quickly that there was an entire skillset that he would need to master to be truly successful in his career. Briggs interacted with people who were literally on the precipice between life and death, as dense traffic whizzed by on the Bridge behind them creating noisy reverberations among the metal structures. Many times, the tepid climate of the Bay beneath them sent shivers of both fear and cold for the person whose life hanged dangerously close to the edge as well as the man who so often attempted to save them. While The Golden Gate Bridge is certainly a picturesque tourist attraction for many who approach it to snap photos with the historic landmark in the background, they will never understand the far more terrifying conditions on the bridge itself when a person’s life is on the line. Nevertheless, this was Briggs’ office – not from the warmth and safety of a crisis center call line or the plush (or at least furnished) office of a mental health profession – where most suicide interventions occur.

While Briggs shares the lessons learned from such a high-profile crisis response role, it is his humble and open self-disclosures of his near death experiences (cancer at age 21 is only the first of several brushes with death) and family history (he, like many, have been touched by suicide and depression) and his own challenges (depression, parenting and confronting suicidality in one’s own family) that make his narrative so personal. Having helped over 200 people “choose life,” since he (like all of us) doesn’t “save people, it’s their choice” on whether or not they climb back over the rail, Briggs has a very unique and powerful perspective on suicide prevention that occurs in people’s “darkest hour.”
I may be a bit biased in my review of this book as I have had the pleasure of talking with Kevin as he was a featured guest on the suicide prevention social media Twitterchat #SPSM that had a co-occurring video component. Nevertheless, this should be mandatory reading for police officers as they are often the ones engaging in the most immediate suicide crises. Crisis workers, irrespective of their discipline, training, or setting can benefit from the personal lessons and wisdom from Kevin Briggs – father, law enforcement officer, veteran, cancer survivor, TED talk speaker, and suicide prevention advocate.