

Staff Sergeant Kevin Romanelli, Army (Retired)

Good morning, Senator Murray. Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today on my behalf, and on behalf of fellow veterans who have faced challenges since their return from Afghanistan and Iraq. I will share my experiences with you in the hope that you will use that information to improve our transitions into civilian life.

My name is Kevin Michael Romanelli Staff Sergeant (E-6), United States Army, Retired. I served a total of 26 years in the Army and Washington State National Guard. During that time I served two tours in Kosovo, and one tour in Afghanistan. I volunteered to go to Iraq, however, I was found non-deployable because of my medical condition.

On 3 February 2005 I was placed on the Temporary Disability Retired List (TDRL) after the Medical Evaluation Board (MEB) at Madigan Army Medical Center determined that I was 30% disabled.

The Medical Evaluation Board determined that I would only receive disability ratings for a fraction of my diagnosed medical conditions. I received a 20% rating for my spinal conditions (upper right extremity pain and weakness impinging at C-7 nerve group; herniated disc at C-6 and C-7; and C-6 pinching spinal cord at C-5 and C-6), and 10% for my neck condition (neck pain and restricted motion with insidious onset during AD tour image shows large herniating at C-6-7), for a combined rating of 30%.

I also have severe migraine headaches, chest wall lipoma, hypertension and hyperlipidemia the Medical Evaluation Board determined that those conditions met retention standards, they did not award me a disability rating for them. During the time I was going through the Army's Medical Evaluation Board process I was told to wait until that process was complete before I filed my VA claim. If I had been able to submit the claim during my MEB process I would have received my VA disability rating when I was transferred to the TRDL list, which would have eliminated the hardships that my family and I have experienced.

I have a claim pending with the Department of Veterans Affairs. I am seeking service connection for thirteen separate conditions. I was diagnosed with all these conditions while serving on active duty. They include: PTSD, bilateral degenerative joint disease in my knees, hearing loss, tinnitus, and problems with my eyesight - which are residuals of an episode of Bell's Palsy, herniated discs, limited range of motion of my neck, hyperlipidemia, hypertension, migraine headaches, acid reflux and a hiatal hernia. My compensation and pension exams were conducted by QTC. They referred me to three healthcare providers for tests and examinations.

I am receiving bills from the places that QTC referred me to telling me that my bills are past due. I inform them that the VA is responsible for the bill. QTC sent me to a doctor in Moses Lake who conducted a separate examination, he conducted an upper GI it revealed that I have acid reflux and a hiatal hernia. The doctor did not have my medical information when he conducted the exam. QTC sent me a letter informing me not to bring my medical records because the VA would send the appropriate medical records to the examining physician before the exam. All they sent him was a questionnaire. I brought my own medical records, despite their letter. This gave the doctor something to go by otherwise he would have had nothing. QTC also sent me to

Wenatchee Valley Medical Center for X-rays. Wenatchee Valley had not been notified that I was coming. If I had not brought my referral slip the x-rays would not have been taken. I am being billed for \$66.75 the bill is due on August 6, 2005. QTC also sent me to Chelan-Douglas Behavioral Health Clinic for my PTSD examination. (I have combat tours going back to 1999, Bosnia, Kosovo and in 2002 Afghanistan at Bagram Airfield) I arrived there 20 April 02 to 16 October 02.

I applied for Social Security disability and my claim was denied. They said that my claim was denied because they were unable to get my medical record.. They requested information from the VA, from the physician Dr. Quinn where I referred by QTC and Valley Medical, no reports were received so my claim was denied. The denial that although SSA realizes that I cannot do the jobs I had done previously, because of my age, education and past work experience I could do other work. My previous work experience is as a firefighter, a . Police officer and a heavy equipment operator. With all the pain medication I am taking; how could I work in this condition?

The most difficult thing for me is the hardship that has been imposed on my family. We are living on \$300 per month. My car, bed, washer and dryer have been repossessed. When I was on active duty my basic pay and VHA came to \$4000 per month. Now, I receive 50% of my basic pay. My family of five is living on \$1300 per month. My rent is \$1000 per month, so my family is actually living on \$300 per month. While waiting for my VA and Social Security disability claims to be processed I had to seek financial assistance VFW and the American Legion with rent and bills. I am constantly contacted by bill collectors who want to know when I will be able to pay them. When I contact the VA 800 number to find out how long it will take to process my claim, so that I something to tell the bill collectors, I am told they long it will take and that I need to contact them in writing. I need the help now.

There are many veterans living in the same situation that I am in. I hope that something can be done to help them. Another sergeant I know was discharged on November 20th. He was wounded in Iraq and is a purple heart recipient. His claim still pending. On Friday he was just notified by QTC that his compensation and pension examination appointments have been scheduled.

Other soldiers were not able to endure the challenges and uncertainty they experience when they come home. Three soldiers from my platoon have committed suicide after they were separated. . One of them One individual lost his home, his wife left him and his vehicle was repossessed. He did not have anywhere to turn. He was trying to get answers and he couldn't get any. I learned about his death through a former platoon member.

When I came back from Kosovo I was contacted by a VA rep immediately. He wants to know how I was doing and offered support from the VA. Unfortunately I did not have the same experience after I was put on TDRL. I had no contact with anyone after the MEB. I attended a general VA briefing, however, no one follow up with me. When I out processed they sent me to Ora Robe from AMVETS she helped me fill out the 21-526 in 17 March. I was notified about my first compensation and pension appointment 23 May 2005. I had to wait for payday. Then I returned and filed the claim through AMVETS.

Things began to look up for me after I received a letter from am here today because of a letter from Governor that informed me about the services available to me. I called for help Tom Riggs called me back and he has been helping me ever since. He is working with me on my claim, he has resolved my prescription medication issues and I received in these couple of weeks than in the entire time that I have been out.

Thank you again, for giving me the opportunity to testify