

Mr. John A. Fernandez

Statement of

Lt. John Fernandez

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?Back from the Battlefield, Part II: Seamless Transition to Civilian Life?

Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen. My name is 1LT John Fernandez (RET), and I am honored to be invited to testify about my experiences after being injured during Operation Iraqi Freedom. I would like to begin by first thanking Chairman Craig, Ranking Member Akaka and members of the committee for giving me the incredible opportunity to testify.

To give you a brief background?again my name is 1LT John Fernandez (RET) and I am from Rocky Point, NY. I am a 2001 graduate of the United States Military Academy and former captain of the Army Lacrosse Team. Before receiving my injuries on April 3, 2003, among other responsibilities, I was primarily a Multiple Launch Rocket System Platoon Leader. I was married before deploying to Kuwait and will be celebrating my daughters 1 year birthday at the end of April.

Though my military career was brief, I enjoyed every opportunity that I was given to lead my soldiers. This was especially true during my deployment to Kuwait, and the ensuing invasion of Iraq. It was the culmination of years of training and hard work that gave my soldiers and I the confidence to perform like a well oiled machine. We were thrown many obstacles, but overcame adversity in every instance. We frequently found ourselves doing our primary job of firing rockets, but often, also found ourselves doing things we never thought that we would do as a Field Artillery unit such as: raiding buildings, traveling across the desert providing security for downed vehicles, and pushing ourselves to points once believed to be out of reach?however, we never faltered, and we grew as a team.

Unfortunately, after passing through the Karbala gap, and reaching about 20 miles south of Baghdad, our team took a big blow. After traveling for many hours we set up our battery, and conducted security patrols preparing to provide supporting fires for units fighting to our north. We then prepared security shifts and started to fire rockets. After my shift, I tried to catch up on long awaited rest. However, that was cut short when I woke up on the ground, surrounded by flames, with numbing pain in my legs. I felt for my legs, realized that they were still there. I then pulled off my sleeping bag, and realized that my life had changed forever. I had seen that my feet were very badly hit. But not knowing what had occurred at the time, it was instinct to spring in to action. I crawled to my HUMMWV and grabbed my rifle, flak vest and Kevlar helmet. I looked for my reconnaissance sergeant in the HUMMWV, but he was not there. I saw fuel spewing from the bottom of the vehicle and realized that I had little time before the ammunition exploded. I called for my gunner, who called back to me. I crawled to his location, and after realizing the severity of his injuries, attempted to pull him away from the burning HUMMWV.

That night at least five of my men were seriously injured, of which my injuries were the most severe. But more regrettably, the three men that I worked side by side with everyday, died, including the soldier that I attempted to save.

Immediately following the incident I was medevacked to field hospitals within Iraq, then to Kuwait, and following Kuwait to Spain. Spain was my last stop before reaching Walter Reed Army Medical Center on April 11, 2003. Throughout my journey to Walter Reed I received

good medical care, highlighted by the effort to save as much of my feet as possible. No amputations were attempted until I reached stateside. After arriving at Walter Reed, I was told that I was going to receive a right below the knee amputation, and left symes (or below ankle amputation). The medical care that I received at Walter Reed was in my opinion phenomenal. The doctors cared a great deal for me and gave my family the courtesy and respect they deserved during a time of uncertainty.

During this time my wife quit her job to and left school to stand by my side. My whole family took a great amount of time off of work, and incurred the travel expenses to come visit me on various occasions. My family's lives were flipped upside down in the wake of my injuries. Luckily, there was a great amount of support from not only my local community, but also from across America as a whole. Without the monetary help that I received from friends and family I would have suffered large financial losses. There was an immense amount of financial stress placed on me, and that would continue throughout my transition from military into civilian life.

Though the medical care that I received was great, there were also many difficulties that I encountered when transitioning into my new lifestyle. The Army heavily pushed for a quick discharge. However, after educating myself on the process I knew that I could not be discharged until I reached maximum medical benefit. Facing a large pay decrease after being discharged, I had to fight to stay on active duty until I felt that I reached "maximum medical benefit" which for me was getting as close to my prior physical condition as possible within a reasonable amount of time. I was even told that I would receive dual compensation, or VA disability benefits and Army retirement benefits. Which only applies to disabled retirees with 20 or more years of service. I always conducted my own research, but my concern was "How many soldiers in similar situations were enticed with incorrect information??" Initially, I did all of my own research, however, I have since received continued help from veterans organizations. Without these outside veterans organizations, such as the wounded warrior project, soldiers such as myself would be very lost. And this just should not be. There is an overwhelming need for precise information as injured soldiers have to negotiate through a bureaucratic process to transition into a new situation. And it is the governments' job to provide this information in an effective manner, in order to facilitate the future success for injured soldiers.

I finished the medical board process 16 months after being injured, and entered military disability retirement where I took advantage of the VA services offered. Again, I was lucky enough to have veterans organizations help me parley the overwhelming amount of information. My wife and I are attending graduate school full-time, on dependant's education and vocational rehabilitation benefits respectively. I will also be using the VA grant for specially adapted housing. However, because of the financial strain of preparing myself for future employment, which is not a short process, it was necessary for me to also obtain social security disability benefits.

I am very grateful for all of the services that have been provided from my government. I never realized how great America was until I went to Iraq and saw how differently I could have been raised. I am truly proud to be an American. If I had the chance to go back in time, I would choose the same path to defend this country every time. The country has stood by my side and provided me with a great amount of financial help. However, I was injured in the beginning of the war, and can only hope and advocate for the same support to continue for the soldiers being injured today. Because, I know without the help of American society, I would have been in much more dire financial distress. However remarkable the support from society is, the question remains: should this be the job of the American public?

I would like to thank you again for this opportunity to testify. I would now be willing to answer questions that anyone may have.