

Sarah Lillegard

Statement of Sarah Lillegard
Before the
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

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My Name is Sarah Lillegard.

I was intelligence analyst with the Army for four years.

During that time I was stationed at Fort Lewis after training and assigned to the 5th Stryker Brigade Combat Team. I deployed with that unit to Afghanistan in June of 2009 and was away for 12 months. Our deployment in the Southern Part of the country was particularly bloody on both sides and many members of my unit lost their lives.

The impact that an experience like that has on you can only really be measured once you return home and start gauging how different you feel from the people around you. Although I didn't see nearly as many awful things or get shot at nearly as much as other members of my unit, I had trouble readjusting, which was made considerably rougher because of the weeks of presentations, screenings, checkups, and interviews that every soldier is herded through upon their return.

When I was diagnosed with PTSD a few weeks after getting back I was automatically enrolled in a program to treat the symptoms. Although having been automatically enrolled because of a questionnaire I filled out during a normal clinic visit and then getting a call later that day from someone who apparently knew all about me did nothing to help my anxiety and mild paranoia, the effect of the program was not negative overall. Someone called to talk to me on a bi-weekly basis and she was a kindly older lady who was not demeaning, and did not pretend that she knew what I was feeling (which was a relief). She was quite empowering actually, which was the polar opposite of many of the people I had contact with regarding transition issues once I got back.

My main problem with any kind of treatment was that my unit had an incredible amount of access to not only my medical records, but was actively trying to track who was being treated for anything in the unit, how it was going, and when and where their medical appointments were.

Because I did not want to have any more of my life controlled by my unit than was necessary I tried to stay off their radar and as a result I ended up refusing any kind of treatment other than this program that I had been put into without my say.

It was very painfully clear to me that the only thing that my unit and the majority of medical people I spoke to cared about was not getting blamed for some kind of outburst on my part. Which was yet another incentive not to talk to anyone about how I was feeling, truthfully. The people I talked to on the medical side of things and the higher ups in my unit cared a lot about whether or not I committed some act of violence now that I was back home, and very

obviously didn't or couldn't care about the acts of violence that I had seen and experienced while I was away.

The other reason why I didn't want to seek any further help was that I was told that it may delay my out processing, which was supposed to start a few months later. The same was true for a couple of my friends who were experiencing similar effects from the deployment. My best friend was explicitly told that if she was on paper for having mental or behavioral problems she wouldn't be able to move to a new duty station, which she wanted to do because she could then be closer to her family, which in turn would help her get through what she was feeling.

However, the number one reason that I did not want to seek further treatment and get really plugged into the Army health system was that I was processing out of the Army a few months after getting back. When you are out you are out and I saw no reason to get used to having a therapeutic resource planted in my life only to have nothing at all like it once I was out of the Army in a few short months. From all the horror stories that I had heard, and had myself witnessed, about VA claims and VA care, there was just no sense that I saw in trying that road. That being said, I wish that the opportunity to address these issues had been available after out-processing because that's when I had the time to really deal with them.

I made it through okay though, I took up kayaking and went to school, and it's seemed to work pretty well for me thus far.

The other issue that I was asked to speak about today was the GI Bill benefits. Now, whether we are talking about the Post 9/11 GI Bill or the Montgomery, the issue that I have remains the same: It's just not enough. I don't know exactly what can be done about it, but when you know that the DoD spends an astronomical amount of money on each soldier while deployed, and has some flagrantly wasteful practices both overseas and on home soil, and you give four years of your life, get out safely, and then look at how little money you have to go to school with...it's very disappointing.

And that's all I have.