

STACY PENNINGTON, SISTER OF SSG. STEVEN GREGORY OCHS, IRAQI OPERATION
FREEDOM AND OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM VETERAN

STATEMENT OF STACY PENNINGTON
SISTER OF SSG. STEVEN GREGORY OCHS, IRAQI OPERATION FREEDOM AND
OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM VETERAN &
REPRESENTING SSG. MATT BUMPUS, IRAQI OPERATION FREEDOM VETERAN
FOR PRESENTATION BEFORE THE UNITED STATES SENATE SENATE COMMITTEE
ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
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Honorable Chairman Akaka and Honorable members of the committee:

Good Morning. It is an honor to be sitting before the United States Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs. Thank you for your leadership acknowledging the exposures happening to our troops. My name is Stacy Pennington and I was asked to speak to you from a victim's standpoint of the affects of exposure to dangerous toxins produced by burn pits that are used to dispose of such items as medical waste, fuel, plastic, vehicles, trash and ammunition. I sit here in front of you with heavy heart to share the stories of two families who know how it feels to have a "burning pit" in our souls.

My brother, SSG. Steven Gregory Ochs, chose the military as his career serving our country for 14 years. SSG. Matt Bumpus served his country for 8 years and 9 months. Both were called to fight in Operation Iraqi Freedom. SSG Ochs served 3 tours in 12 – 15 month intervals from 2003 – 2007 and SSG. Bumpus served his tour onset of the war in 2003.

Both of these brave soldiers you see before you dodged bullets, mortar attacks, road side bombs and suicide bombers. Eventually their tours of duty would take their lives. The ultimate sacrifice for a soldier, for his country is death. However, their deaths did not show up in the manner you may assume.

In Balad is the site of the infamous enormous burn pit that has been called by Darrin L. Curtis, Lt. Col., USAF and Bioenvironmental Engineering Flight Commander as "the worst environmental site" he had ever visited. SSG Ochs and SSG Bumpus were both stationed in Balad and war as strategic as it is followed them home. Death lay dormant in their blood and waited for them to return safely home and into the arms of their loved ones. Like every silent ticking time bomb, it eventually exploded.

On September 28, 2007, just months after Steve's return home from his 3rd tour, he was diagnosed with Acute Myeloid Leukemia, also known as AML. He spent the next 10 months as a patient, more like a resident, at Duke University Hospital. Doctors at Duke said his aggressive form of AML was definitely chemically induced and like Steve both agreed it was due to the exposures he experienced while in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, the doctors refused to go on record citing as the reason that they could not prove it.

The aggressive AML that Steve endured was similar to bullets ricocheting in the body causing torturous pain. The graphic images embedded in my mind are of Steve's last screams for air as he was rushed into ICU. Steve waved goodbye to my husband. Steve with very little strength

said, "I love you sis" and my Mom kissed his forehead and said we will see you when they get you comfortable. 5 minutes later while in the ICU waiting room the nurse came in to tell us Steve went into cardiac arrest and they were working on him now. My mom ran into ICU; fell to her knees as she realized her son was dying. Screams filled the air as we begged God to keep Steve here with us. We know Steve heard us as tears were in Steve's eyes. Doctors and nurses pumped on Steve's chest trying to revive him. But I knew immediately he was gone. His spirit that surrounded my dear sweet brother was gone. We were left alone with Steve's body for hours as we were all in pure shock. My mom looked upon my brother's face and wiped away the tears puddled in his eyes. And at that very moment our lives were changed forever. Steve died on July 12, 2008. Two weeks later on the opposite side of the coast SSG. Bumpus would succumb to the same fate.

For SSG. Bumpus, the ticking time bomb exploded with a vengeance on July 31, 2006. Matt was rushed to the hospital by ambulance with acute appendicitis. In Matt's own words I quote, "the next thing I remember is hearing that I had been diagnosed with AML." Doctors declared that there was chromosome damage due to exposures he must have come in contact with while in Iraq. Matt ended his prestigious service to the Army one short year before the war zone chemical warfare showed signs of its presence.

As if this was not enough suffering, SSG Bumpus' family was met by the VA with harsh claims of denial to benefits. This battle continues to this day as Lisa, SSG. Bumpus' wife is left alone with two small children to raise with no VA or military benefits for her family.

The aggressive assault of the AML in Matt's body was taking claim. Jo, Matt's mother recalls the haunted look in Matt's eyes as he revealed to her that the AML invasion was back. Matt's mother will never forget the discouragement and sadness that overwhelmed Matt as the realization that promises he made to his wife and children to provide for his family, to love and protect them and that his sacred word would be broken. He knew now that the battle was over and he would be leaving his family behind. Tuesday, July 29, 2008, Matt once again entered the hospital with fever and septic infection that discharged throughout his body. Doctors notified the family that it would just be days before his demise.

Matt was heavily sedated as the pain and incubation was unbearable. Nate, Matt's 10 year old son, bravely entered his father's hospital room to lay on his Daddy's chest as he said his final goodbye. Nate curled up by his Dad and cried and cried. Despite Matt's heavy sedation, Matt too was crying. Matt being a devoted Christian appropriately passed away on a Sunday morning surrounded by his wife, mother, father and sister as they expressed to Matt their everlasting love. They too, were in shock and stayed with Matt's body as the realization overwhelmed them that Matt would not be going home. Matt died on August 3, 2008.

While serving in Iraq both soldiers complained of ailments from colds, major fatigue, headaches, sinus problems, loss of hearing, and SSG. Ochs contracted TB while in Afghanistan due to exposures to masses of dead bodies. Steve and Matt were men of large strong stature, standing over 6 feet tall, weighing over 200 pounds and both men were the perfect image of Army strong soldiers. Two brave men, who served their country courageously, committed to the cause, dedicated to our country and entrusted the military.

Grief, sadness and depression have gripped our entire families. Their wives are emotionally broken and incomplete. Their mother's are emotionally unstable and engulfed with grief. Their father's are lost. Their children are fatherless.

Sadly, Steve and Matt are not alone. Laura Bumpus and I have spoken to over a hundred families suffering the same fate. We are aware of hundreds more suffering similar ailments. These men are casualties of war. They deserve the respect of this fact to reflect in their Army records. My family, the Ochs family, proudly displays our Gold Star pin presented to us during Steve's funeral by his Commander. Unfortunately, SSG. Bumpus' family does not have this same privilege. This must be rectified. We are proud military families and will continue to be in the future. We both have family members currently serving our country. We deserve to display the gold flag in homage of our beloved. This too has been a benefit that both of our families have been denied.

In conclusion, our families will continue to live with the emotional battle scars caused by the terminal injuries our loved ones suffered as a result of the exposures of the burn pits. I assure you it is a heavy cross to bare. Our wish is for this committee to begin the actions it needs to take to stop this nightmare. You have the power to save our courageous heroes who serve our country and who protect me and who protect you.
Thank you for your time and for hearing our voices