

Brandon D. Jones

Testimony of Brandon D. Jones

August 17, 2007

My name is Brandon Jones. I served on Active Duty from 1994 to 1997, and have been a member of The Washington Army National Guard since January 2000, and am a Veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom. I was deployed to the Middle East with the 3rd Brigade of the 1st Cavalry Division in 1996 and I was activated, and deployed with the members of the 81st Brigade beginning in November 2003.

I want to share my experience and observations about the difficulties my Family and I faced during my activation in 2003, and also to talk about what I saw my fellow Soldiers' experience that made the process of serving our Nation and Community trying, and at times emotionally and financially overwhelming.

In November 2003, when I was called to full time duty with the 81st Brigade. I was given a very short notice that my unit was being mobilized. In that time I had to give up my civilian job - an income loss of about \$1,200 a month- and my wife had to drop out of classes at Olympic College to care for our children.

I went from living at home and seeing my children on a daily basis to living on base - just one mile from home - and visiting my children periodically. To my kids, I went from being their dad to the guy who drops by the house for a visit once in a while.

The three months of mobilization before my deployment were very stressful. We struggled financially. Although we reached out for help, we were told that the only financial resources available were strictly for active duty soldiers at Fort Lewis. It wasn't until we were threatened with eviction and repossession of our car that my wife was able to obtain a small amount of assistance generally reserved for Active Duty Soldiers. Our families helped us make up the rest. About 60 percent of what we were in need of.

The stress made it difficult for my wife to keep a positive attitude, for our children to feel comfortable and for me to concentrate on the mission ahead of me. When my wife and I reached out for marriage counseling prior to my deployment, we were made to feel that the few sessions we were given were a favor to us and that we were taking up a resource meant for active duty Soldiers from the base.

Let me remind you that all of this happened before I was even deployed.

After 110 days in theatre, I was MEDEVAC'd due to a heart condition. In our MED Hold, soldiers were left to figure things out on their own. There was no information posted or available for incoming soldiers as to where they could seek help or counseling for issues related to their deployment. I found this very surprising, since some of these soldiers were MEDEVAC'd after being injured in an explosion, mortar attack, or other combat related incidents.

During my first deployment to the Middle East in 1996, I developed a sleep disorder due to the stresses I experienced while I was there. When I was MEDEVACED in 2003, I experienced many of the same disturbances in my sleep pattern. I explained to my MED Hold platoon sergeant that my sleep disturbances may impact my performance, and he helped to get me referred to the community mental health clinic at Madigan.

There I was seen by a mental health professional and was offered sleeping pills to get me through the disturbance, but was not offered any help to treat the underlying problem. I, like many other Soldiers, was threatened with UCMJ action when my sleep disorder interfered with my duties as a Soldier, like when I showed up late for formation or when I fell asleep during duty. My only saving grace was that when I was counseled, I wrote in my statement that I had tried to get help for my sleep disorder but had not received anything. My sleep disorder has continued to effect affect my civilian employment. I never get a full night's sleep and I thank God for my wife who pushes me out of bed if I do oversleep so that I can make it to work on time.

Another thing I observed in Med Hold was that Soldiers were using alcohol and sometimes drugs - both prescription and illegal - to treat themselves. This was because they weren't aware of services available to help them. While on MED Hold I perceived a mentality of "return them to duty, or send them home", and if anything caused disruption in that process by a Soldier having behavioral issues caused by using alcohol or drugs, no time was taken to help the soldier, but UCMJ action was immediately initiated.

I was often frustrated by the fact that non combat veteran Soldiers were put in charge of the care of combat Veterans. I do not believe that it was a lack of caring on the part of the leadership, and command, but rather a lack of sympathetic understanding, and lack of appropriate training of how to deal with combat related stress issues.

Ultimately this sort of lack of understanding, and information resulted in the loss of life through suicide by a close friend of our family. My friend was MEDEVAC'd because of his inability to cope with the stresses of combat. His wife informed us that he was supposed to be on suicide watch. He was supposed to have been receiving help and intervention in the form of counseling and medication. He was sent home ALONE!!! He was not released to the care of his family, he was sent to dwell within his own mind to the point that he could not handle it any longer. He put a gun to his head and took his own life. His widow and two step children asked over, and over again: "how could this have happened, and what could we have done differently?"

I find myself asking the same question whenever he comes to mind. More so I find myself asking where was the appropriate care? Where were those assigned to ensure his well-being, and were they aware of the resources available, and did they have the appropriate training to recognize the mental health conditions this Soldier suffered from? Obviously there were not enough resources, training, or information. Otherwise he might be here today, instead of me telling his story.

I hope that something will be done to increase the communication of available resources for Soldiers AND their families. I hope that MORE will be done to raise awareness of PTSD, and combat related stresses, not only for the Soldier that goes off to war, but for the Families, and Children that bear the burden of having their loved one taken from their home.