

First Sergeant Robert Kauder, Washington Army National Guard

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Senator Murray,

My name is Rob Kauder and I present this testimony today not as a National Guardsman but as a veteran with nearly two decades of service to his country. My comments and concerns presented here reflect my experiences in the process of demobilization and reintegration, attempting to leave the Guard as a soldier on stop-loss and the challenges soldiers face with processing claims through the Department of Veterans Affairs. The opinions expressed in this testimony are mine alone and should not be construed as an official position made by a National Guardsman.

I am currently a news producer for a television station in Spokane, Washington, but for the better part of the last 18 years I have also served in the Armed Forces in varying capacities. Following graduation from high school in 1987 I enlisted in the United States Marine Corps, where I served on active duty for six years. During my enlistment I participated in Operations Desert Shield, Desert Storm, the United Nations Mission to Somalia (UNOSOM) and two counter-narcotics missions along the US-Mexican border with Joint Task Force-Six.

After my honorable discharge from the Marines I went to college in Ellensburg and joined the Marine Reserves and served three years. In 1998 I joined the Army National Guard and have served in Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 161st Infantry for the better part of the last seven years. During the last year-and-a-half I have served on active duty with my Guard unit as part of the general mobilization of the Washington Army National Guard's 81st Brigade in November of 2003.

During the last year I served as an infantry squad leader and participated in full-spectrum stability and support operations in and around the Green Zone in Baghdad, Iraq with my unit, which was attached to the 1st Cavalry Division out of Fort Hood, TX. I returned from the theater of operations on March 1st, 2005 to begin my reintegration back to civilian life.

I wish I could come to you today and tell you the reintegration of myself and fellow members of my unit has gone smoothly; the reality is that a number of men in my platoon are struggling to come to grips with their adjustment from the combat zone to the homefront. Several men have left long-term relationships or are going through divorces; others have not adjusted emotionally to a world where they don't have to be on a near-constant state of alert, ready for attack from any quarter at any moment. At least one soldier, offered a lucrative tax-free contract, has gone back to Iraq with a private security firm; several others, struggling to cope with life back home are considering volunteering to go back to Iraq as well.

On the surface, the demobilization process went fairly quickly and smoothly upon our return from Southwest Asia to Fort Lewis. After our aircraft touched down at McChord Air Force Base, we were given a flurry of briefings before being allowed to leave with our loved ones for three days of rest and recuperation before beginning the demobilization.

For the majority of the men the demobilization process took approximately five days. During outprocessing soldiers are given a variety of briefings including discussions about a myriad of support networks and programs available through the Department of Veteran's Affairs, but to be honest the briefings were nothing but a hazy blur. I paid attention to nothing more than checking each box on the outprocessing sheet and checking my watch to see how much time was left before we would be done and out of the Army.

It wasn't that the information wasn't important to myself or any of the other men; it was just that the overriding concern among those in attendance was to be done with the whole process, be done with the seemingly never-ending red tape, be done with the active duty military and be back home in the civilian world.

I would sum up the demobilization phase with a comment made by one of our instructors at Fort Irwin prior to our deployment to Iraq. He said once that war is controlled chaos and Americans thrive at war because we practice controlled chaos on a daily basis. Following his reasoning then soldiers must also thrive on outprocessing as well.

After outprocessing, the soldiers of Charlie Company were told to return back to their respective platoon armories in Wenatchee, Spokane and Moses Lake. For some reason, there was an assumption that each soldier had their personal vehicles to drive to their home armories from Fort Lewis so no government transport had been arranged. As a result soldiers had to arrange for their own transportation for themselves and their equipment from the demobilization site to their respective armories.

Upon our platoon's return to the National Guard Armory in Moses Lake we were told that 5th Army had mandated that we were to stay at the armory for two days; there was however, no plan from what I could ascertain as to what exactly we were supposed to do during this period other than have friends, family and community members come to the armory for an open house. From the perspective of the enlisted man, we had finished our demobilization and had been told we were to spend two more days at our home armories with no tangible agenda other than to spend two days at our armories.

At every other phase of our deployment while under federal orders we had been provided food and lodging; for some reason when we returned to Moses Lake there was no contingency for providing either for the soldiers, which proved inconvenient for those men who did not live in the immediate vicinity particularly when we were told that since we were under federal orders we were not allowed to stay in the armory.

As I am writing this I realize that this week marks the one-year anniversary of my original end-of-active-service (EAS) date; like numerous other soldiers, I was placed on stop-loss prior to our deployment. As I look at today's date I also realize that it has been almost five months since I returned from the combat zone and yet to this day, technically, I am still in the Washington Army

National Guard, even though I had been under the assumption that all stop-loss personnel would be released from their National Guard service 90 days after their release from federal service. I was released from active duty in the first week of March and finished terminal leave the first week in April, which would mean that the 90-day period would have expired the first week in July.

Here's where the situation gets confusing.

I talked to a soldier at the armory in Moses Lake and was told that I was mistaken; all soldiers including those that were on stop-loss were required to attend the next regularly scheduled drill weekend near the end of August which, for reference, would be almost six months following our release from active duty (REFRAD). It was made clear to me that any soldier that did not show up for this important drill weekend - which would include an award ceremony and a picnic - would be designated AWOL.

I took the matter up with the battalion S1 (Administration) office at Geiger Field near Spokane and it was explained to me by the non-commissioned officer on duty that the 90-day period for stop-loss personnel was incorrect; all soldiers had been extended - according to their orders for federal duty - through 2031, and stop-lossed soldiers awaiting release from Guard service would be released when the paperwork was completed. No date was given as to when that would take place.

So then I talked with my former platoon sergeant and he explained in detail that any soldier that was on stop-loss had to be released at the end of the 90-day period as long as they turned in all of their military equipment and the paperwork was finished. After talking with him I spoke with another soldier who I served with overseas who confirmed that according to my records my end of active service (EAS) date had been July 10th.

My concerns about this situation are several. Over the last five months, the National Guard Bureau has seen fit to send multiple mailings to my home filled with messages highlighting different programs to help with reintegration for soldiers and their families, messages of congratulations from various officials, and yet in the four months since I finished terminal leave there has not been one letter explaining the final procedure for stop-loss personnel outprocessing out of the National Guard.

I have taken the initiative and inquired about the procedure I have been given several contradictory stories as to what the procedure is for stop-loss personnel leaving the Guard and when I would be released from stop-loss. It was only through contacting someone outside my chain-of-command that I was able to ascertain my EAS date; nobody within my chain-of-command was able to give me a straight answer as to when I would be released from service. In summary, I would say that I have fulfilled my active duty obligation and received an honorable discharge for that service and now I am curious as to when exactly I will no longer be contractually obligated to the National Guard.

After returning home and beginning my readjustment back to civilian life I found myself experiencing varying degrees of anger, frustration and stress. I've had difficulty sleeping and

have experienced bouts of insomnia, night sweats, tossing and turning in my sleep, shouting while sleeping and on occasion woken up to the sound of incoming mortars that weren't there. I've had a hard time relaxing and have found myself going on-alert in an instant, my internal fight-or-flight mechanism triggered by the sound of a passing helicopter, a back-firing car or even the smell of diesel fuel.

I realize that no man is an island, and took action to contact the VA and begin receiving treatment for what has been diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder. While I took that step to get help, many of my brothers-in-arms have not. Living in backwater communities across eastern Washington, access to VA medical care isn't as easy for some soldiers as it is for those of us that live within close proximity of the handful of VA clinics across the state.

The other thing to keep in mind when it comes to the VA is the feelings of the individual soldier, which can be summarized in two words: shame and guilt. Many soldiers I have served with are suffering in silence, unwilling to admit they are having a hard time coping with life back in the States. To admit they cannot cope on their own would be an admission of weakness to some of them. They would rather turn to alcohol or turn inwards and away from friends and family, reaching out only to their fellow soldiers who have "been there and done that" as they would be the only ones who could fully grasp the nature of their hidden pain.

Some soldiers I have observed also live with a lingering sense of survivor's guilt; our infantry company suffered several casualties, including two soldiers killed and a half dozen or so wounded and injured. While the numbers of killed and wounded among our ranks are a pittance compared to, say, an infantry company on D-Day in Normandy, the relatively light numbers of wounded and dead doesn't lessen the emotional trauma these men feel.

Unfortunately, I cannot offer any realistic solution as to what the VA can do to help these soldiers. They have to want to reach out for help, to take that first step like I did, in order to get back on the path to sound mental and emotional health.

The VA right now does not have, in my opinion, an adequate outreach program to meet the needs of all of the veterans in eastern Washington returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan. The major facilities that are available - one in Walla Walla and the other in Spokane - are hundreds of miles away from where some soldiers live, making it difficult for them to schedule regular appointments to receive treatment. For example, while there are outreach clinics in Richland and Yakima, there is no VA support to population centers such as Moses Lake or Wenatchee. This means soldiers living in those areas have to travel to Seattle, Yakima, Richland or Spokane to receive treatment.

The problem with this is the VA, like the military, requires extensive inprocessing in order to get enrolled. It took me three visits over a period of a month to get enrolled in the VA and another two visits before I met with a clinician that could prescribe medications to help curb the effects of PTSD. Five hospital visits over a six-week period before I could receive medication isn't really problematic for me since I live 10 miles from the VA Medical Center in Spokane.

For a soldier in Wenatchee, however, that becomes a two-and-a-half hour drive one-way for a thirty-minute appointment. When you take into account that round trip time, multiplied over time

with the number of appointments a veteran needs in order to enroll and begin receiving treatment you'll find that it can be extremely prohibitive for soldiers living in north central Washington to receive adequate medical treatment.

In the years since PTSD was first confirmed as an ailment suffered by veterans - and traced back to battle fatigue (World War II) and shell shock (World War I) - there have been numerous advances in treatment and medications to support veterans returning from combat. While the VA provides a wealth of resources, there are many other opportunities that veterans can take advantage of to help them reintegrate back into mainstream society they may not be aware of.

For example, soldiers of Native American descent could have opportunities to participate in spiritual cleansing in tribal sweat lodges; two soldiers in my platoon were Native Americans and did this upon their return home from Iraq. Through my work as a TV news producer I've also become familiar with the owners of Hidden Creek Ranch, a North Idaho camp run by John Muir (a direct descendent of the famous naturalist) and his wife Iris. They have been running special week-long programs through their non-profit foundation to support relatives of victims of 9-11 since 2001; recent attempts to reach out to the military to help support family members of Iraq casualties in a similar fashion have been rebuffed by the military.

I use these two examples to highlight the fact that there are other opportunities that exist outside the VA to support veterans and their families, and would say that looking into programs like these and others that exist outside the DoD and the VA and informing soldiers of their existence can only help them in their search for resources to help them reintegrate back into society.

Many soldiers that I served with have come home frustrated and disillusioned; while a handful, lured by the opportunity of tax-free bonuses, have reenlisted in the National Guard, many that I served with have taken off their packs, so to speak, and are done. Several soldiers, myself included, have decided to end their careers with the Guard while others who have time left in their service contracts plan to get out at the soonest opportunity.

The average enlisted man feels shortchanged and harbors resentment towards the military for what has been done and what has been left undone. Many I have spoken with look at the camaraderie between the enlisted men as their only source of pride when it comes to our tour in Iraq; there is little if any esprit de corps for the National Guard or the Army in general. They've received the various blanket-awarded trinkets, hardy handshakes and thanks from a number of various, anonymous staff officers within the Guard and yet still feel cheated.

In general the average enlisted man probably isn't as well-educated as the average officer, but that doesn't mean that these soldiers don't understand the world they operated in. They lament about how at times the Army in general seems more concerned with force-protection or polishing its image than accomplishing the mission or troop welfare.

These soldiers survived a season in hell fighting unseen enemies and coping with life encamped in a foreign capital as part of an occupying army. Despite the hardships of life in the combat zone, these men were adequately equipped due in no small part to the billions of dollars spent to keep our armed forces battle-ready in Iraq. But now they've come home and don't have the same level of support they did when they were in-country.

Unfortunately for these soldiers, the war hasn't ended yet, and the federal government has an obligation to each of these men and women to give them the same amount of care through the VA as they did through the Army.

Therefore it is our obligation as a nation, in order to prevent another generation of returning war veterans from growing disillusioned with our country, to reach out not with parades, trinkets and handshakes but with quality medical care and adequate funding for the VA to respond to the requests for treatment from the thousands of war veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Respectfully Submitted,

Rob Kauder