

TIM HORTON, LANCE CORPORAL (RET)

TESTIMONY OF
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BEFORE THE
U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

MAY 25, 2011

Chairman Murray, Ranking Member Burr, Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to speak about the challenges facing warriors as they transition from the military to the civilian world after experiencing what are often profound and life changing injuries.

My name is Tim Horton and I joined the United States Marine Corps in 2003. Just over a year after I enlisted I was deployed to Ramadi, Iraq with the 1st Marine Division Fox 2-5, which at the time was the most decorated battalion in the Marine Corps. February 5, 2005 marked the day my transition as a wounded warrior began when my Humvee detonated an improvised explosive device while I was on patrol. My injuries were severe and extensive. I suffered a traumatic brain injury, left leg below the knee amputation, multiple fractures to my right and left arms, nerve damage to my hands, damage to my eye lid that required reconstructive surgery, and still have shrapnel in my body as a result of the explosion. I was medevaced from Iraq to Landstuhl, Germany and then taken to Bethesda National Navy Medical Center where I completed the bulk of my rehabilitation.

Utilizing Benefits

My time at Bethesda drew to a close in June of 2006 when I was medically retired and I returned to the Midwest with my family to begin my life post injury. I completed the VA compensation and pension process while I was still at Bethesda and was assigned a rating of 60%. While the rating came relatively quickly, it was deeply flawed. Many of my injuries were not evaluated to determine my rating, despite being very clearly documented in my medical records. For example, I did not learn until I reviewed my initial rating that the VA had not considered my traumatic brain injury in my evaluation. I am not sure how this happened, as it was clear in my records that I lost consciousness for a sustained period of time after the blast. Because of issues like this, I have had to reopen my claim more than 3 times to ensure all my injuries were taken into consideration. Finally, after 6 years of examinations and providing documentation, the VA has assigned me a rating of 100% permanently and totally disabled. Were it not for the mentorship of other veterans – particularly Vietnam veterans I met at the VA medical centers – I would not have known how to advocate for myself and fight through the compensation and pension process to receive the benefits I have earned. I know other veterans who have grown tired of fighting VA to correctly adjudicate their claims. It should not take 3 or 4 times to get it right.

While my initial rating was deeply flawed, I was fortunate to receive it in a timely enough manner to begin utilizing my VR&E benefits shortly after returning home. In August of 2006 I

enrolled in a four year degree program at Oklahoma Baptist College. The process up to college enrollment was relatively smooth. I did not have to fight my counselor to establish an educational or employment goal. Our appointments were often brief and contained no real guidance concerning how to move ahead. While I didn't have to fight for what I wanted, I certainly was not advised of all the benefits that come with utilizing VR&E. Had I known the full extent of the benefits, it is very possible I would have pursued a path that led to a masters or doctorate degree in physical therapy. Instead, I pursued a bachelors degree in education. Although my VR&E counselor was largely receptive to my requests and responsive to my calls, utilizing my benefits at Oklahoma Baptist College proved challenging. During my four years at the college I had difficulty getting the VA and the college on the same page regarding tuition payment. Each semester was a struggle, and had it not been for my persistence in ensuring the two institutions worked together, I am not sure I would have successfully stayed enrolled.

I was proud to graduate and receive my Bachelor of Science degree in May of 2010, despite the prediction of a VA employee who I would characterize as less than supportive of my goals. While I was being trained to use a VA issued palm pilot to help me keep appointments straight and assist me with recording class assignments, a VA employee told me that because I had suffered a traumatic brain injury I would never be able to graduate college unless I cheated my way through. Her comment and perceptions of my capabilities and life goals were inappropriate and not reflective of the type of veteran centered focus the VA system claims to have. Luckily, I have never been a person to allow other people to tell me what I am capable of, and I turned the anger I felt as a result of those remarks into drive and motivation to succeed. But for many of my fellow veterans, that type of attitude and lack of understanding concerning one of the signature wounds of this war is incredibly detrimental and disengages them from the very system that is supposed to exist to help us thrive.

Prosthetics Care

I have worked hard to ensure my injuries and other people's perceptions of them do not define my way of life or limit what I am able to accomplish. Receiving timely and quality prosthetics care is instrumental to maintaining my activity level. The quality of care I have received through the Oklahoma City VA Medical Center is outstanding. VA contracts with a number of prosthetics specialists who are familiar with cutting edge prosthetic technology and are able to outfit me with the devices I need to maintain a high level of physical activity. Most importantly, my prosthetics provider has really taken the time to understand who I am as a whole person – not just a wounded warrior - and how that shapes my medical needs.

So while the quality of care I am receiving is very good, the process of going through the VA to receive those benefits takes far too long. When I need adjustments or replacement equipment, I must schedule an appointment with the medical center to be seen by a member of their prosthetics team who will then write the prescription to my outside prosthetics specialist. Sometimes it can take weeks for VA to actually send that prescription to the provider, further delaying my ability to get an appointment and ultimately receive the adjustments or equipment I need. Why is this the case? I know other veterans who live in close proximity to Walter Reed who are able to walk in and out with the services and equipment they need within the same day, all without ever needing to go through their local VA. It would make sense to me if I were able to

see my prosthetics specialist first, who could then communicate with VA about what I need and get the authorization, eliminating the wait time for an appointment. While waiting weeks for an appointment might seem like a minor inconvenience, for a warrior like myself, spending weeks without the necessary prosthetics equipment, or sometimes even worse equipment that causes extreme discomfort and other medical issues, can be wholly disruptive to our daily lives. The timeliness and consistency of care should not be a function of where warriors happen to live.

Acting as my own advocate

The most important thing I have learned in navigating my own transition and helping my peers through their own journey is that you must act as your own advocate. There are so many programs and benefits available to assist us, yet often we are never informed of these programs or the information is delivered in a time and place that is not conducive for wounded warriors to absorb it. We receive so much information at the time when we are newly injured. When I was brought to Bethesda, I was completely reliant on my mother as my caregiver. It took me two and a half months to regain the ability to feed myself. My sole focus was on my physical recovery. It was impossible for me to take in the vast amount of information coming at me during that time. I understand that since I have been injured the Federal Recovery Coordination Program has been put into place for severely wounded warriors to assist with this challenge. This is not a program I benefited from, nor did I know of its existence before preparing for my testimony here today. What I do know is that warriors need real help in discovering what benefits exist and how to utilize them so that they can thrive in their lives post-injury. Other veterans are out there spreading the word, but no one from VA is reaching out. That needs to change. I have spent the last several years sharing the knowledge I've gained through my own recovery and plan to continue that work as an outreach worker with the Wounded Warrior Project, but there must be a more systematic VA effort.

My hope is that - by coming before you today and testifying to some of my issues in navigating through the system - things will continue to improve for the warriors coming behind me. I thank you for taking the time to listen to my story and for your focus on improving the transition for my fellow wounded warriors. I look forward to answering any questions you might have.