

Statement of William Thompson, SSG, U.S. Army (Ret.),  
For the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs

March 10, 2021

My name is retired SSG William Thompson. I served 23 years, 3 months and 11 days in the United States Army and WVARNG. I have deployed twice with the WVARNG to Iraq. During my last deployment, I was stationed at Camp Stryker at the Victory complex. My symptoms of frequent coughing started around September of 2009 while in Iraq, in which my doctors and PA's treated me for what they thought were allergies. I returned to Fort Stewart, GA and after I mentioned to the doctors, I was having frequent cough, they did a CXR that revealed bilateral pneumonia. They treated me with antibiotics and sent me home to WV to follow up with my PCP in one week. After a week, I followed up with my PCP Dr. Remines, and he discovered after more testing that I had pulmonary fibrosis with nodules and stated that my lungs looked like an "80-year-old coal miners' lungs". He referred me to Walter Reed Army medical center pulmonary department where I was treated by Dr. Jacob Collins for 6 months. He admitted me to the Warrior Transition unit at Walter Reed and after 6 months of testing which included an open lung biopsy, I was informed that I had titanium, magnesium and iron in addition to silica in my lungs. They diagnosed me with Hypersensitivity Pneumonitis and Pulmonary Fibrosis. I gained 60 lbs. from the high amounts of steroids I was on daily. Because my lung disease was chronic, I was referred to Inova Fairfax Hospital by Walter Reed and was told I would most likely need a lung transplant in the future. I have been seen by Inova Fairfax Hospital Lung Transplant Clinic from February 2011 to the present time. During

that time, I have been on oxygen as high as 10 liters continuously. On June 6, 2012, I received a double lung transplant, after 2 months of follow ups, I was able to return home to start pulmonary rehab. The first year was a good year. I took all precautions and followed all the orders that were instructed by my doctors. Despite this, over the next 3 years, I went through periods of lung rejection and infections and decreased oxygen levels. I was back on oxygen again. On March 9, 2016, I underwent another double lung transplant. Lung transplants unfortunately are more susceptible to complications than other organ transplants since the lungs are exposed to everything from the environment.

My life and my family's life have changed since I returned home in 2010. I have to wear a mask in highly populated areas. I know wearing a mask is typical these days, but I have been wearing one since 2012.

It's hard to hang out with my kids only to tell them "I can't do that".

"Dad, let's go skiing" ...sorry kids, I can't do that

"Dad let's go swimming" .... sorry kids, I can't do that

"Dad, can you give me a piggyback ride?" Sorry Ava, I can't do that

"Dad, let's go fishing" Sorry Ethan, I can't do that because of the bacteria on fish

"Dad let's go to the beach" Sorry kids, I can't do that because of the bacteria in the water and the sun with my transplant medications makes me more prone to skin cancers.

Speaking of skin cancers, I am currently battling Trigeminal Neuralgia after having a skin cancer removed from my left cheek that aggravated my trigeminal nerve. This is a very painful, debilitating condition that is also known as the "suicide disease" and is known to be one of the most painful disorders known to medicine. It causes sudden, shock-like pain in my face that lasts from minutes to

hours at a time. Because of this disorder, I have added numerous medications to my previously very large daily pill regimen.

I don't feel like a man because my wife has had to take that role from me. There are so many things that I can no longer do.

I am a warrior of the United States of America. I gave my lungs for my country. The toxins in the air from burn pits and the dust in Iraq has changed my life. I am glad to be alive and home when so many did not make it home. My illness and injuries are different. I have heard so many times from the VA "we don't know how to treat you", or "you don't qualify or fit into our parameters for benefits". I have been denied TSGLI because the army does not think having a lung transplant is a "traumatic event". Luckily, we found the group, Semper Fi fund/America's fund who works with veterans and provided the funds to make my bathroom ADA accessible. Since then, the VA has helped me with one housing HISA grant, but only after being denied several times. My injuries are illnesses are different from other more common injuries from Iraq and because of that it took the VA 3 years to provide me with an air purifier in my home to keep my home free of allergens and dust. They also denied help in removing carpet in my home that was instructed by my doctors, so we had to pay for this ourselves. We have also taken out a loan to build a workout area in my home where I can work out and continue my pulmonary rehab during times of my illness or times when cold or flu season is at its peak. Although, I was 100% service connected through the Army and VA, I don't qualify to receive my retirement until age 60 because my injuries were not "combat related". I may not live to be age 60- I turn 50 this year.

Every day for me is a battle I continue to fight. I still have to battle infections and try to keep my body healthy from lung rejection. I still have to fight secondary problems related to my transplant. Hopefully, after hearing my story, it will bring awareness for not only me but others who are battling the same or similar injuries related to burn pit exposures from Iraq or Afghanistan. Thank you allowing me to share my story.