

Steven McCarty Veteran, Operation Iraqi Freedom

Testimony of Steven McCarty
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Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to testify today before the Veterans Affairs Committee. I look forward to sharing my story with the Senators here this morning.

My name is Steve McCarty and I am a Lance Corporal in the US Marine Corps Reserve with the 14th Marines Headquarters Battery out of Fort Worth, Texas. On June 1, 2006, I was part of a detachment that was activated with 1st Marines 24th Division. We were sent to Fallujah, Iraq from September 24, 2006 to April 15, 2007. During this time I served as a member of a truck platoon, primarily driving a 7-ton refueling truck.

In February of this year, while I was still in Iraq, I was concerned when I started experiencing diarrhea with blood in the stool. My symptoms were consistent with what has since been diagnosed as ulcerative colitis. When I confronted my corpsman, he gave me the option to either keep going and do the missions or go to medical and receive treatment and possibly miss operations. I chose to keep going.

Upon returning from Iraq in April, the stress of demobilization and jubilation of getting reacquainted with family and civilian life overshadowed the discomfort of my symptoms which seemed minor at the time. After being deactivated off of active duty on June 1, my family and I traveled to the Midwest. While driving home from visiting my grandmother in Indiana, my symptoms got to the state where they could no longer be ignored. I was in severe pain, had bad diarrhea, and was vomiting. My parents were now aware of my deteriorating health and convinced me to stop at the VA Hospital in Marion, Illinois.

Upon arriving at the emergency room, the doctor ran various tests which included blood work and a CAT scan. The results of these tests were negative. At this time, the ER doctor, who was a surgeon, admitted me and diagnosed my symptoms as possibly being appendicitis. He recommended removing the appendix and doing exploratory surgery. After he consulted with other doctors, some of which did not agree with the diagnosis, he took the advice of a second surgeon who recommended doing the surgery laparoscopically. We were more comfortable with this technique due to the shorter recovery time and lack of a large incision. The doctors thought I would be ready to leave the hospital in a few days.

I had surgery at the Marion VA on Friday, June 15. After the operation, we were told that the appendix did not look as bad as they had anticipated. Although I had been suffering for four months the surgeon thought I must have a virus since the antibiotics were not having any effect.

On Sunday, two days after the surgery, my symptoms were getting worse. In addition, my stomach was now swollen. However, the doctors continued to follow the timetable for recovery and release after having appendicitis. At this point one of the nurses told my parents that she would get me out of there if I were her son. She said the doctors did not know what was wrong with me.

Seeing my deterioration, my parents began asking for specialists on Monday, June 18. They were told the specialists were part of the clinic and were not available to attend to hospital patients. After receiving outside advice, my parents spoke with the patient advocate at the hospital. We were told there was not a gastroenterologist but an infectious disease specialist was available.

Four days after my surgery, my stomach still swollen and the other symptoms still there, an infectious disease specialist finally came to see me. Within minutes, he diagnosed me with dysentery and changed my antibiotic but he could not explain my swollen stomach. I honestly looked like I was 9 months pregnant. That night my mom asked a nurse about this and she said she had never encountered a situation like this. Another nurse told us that she would never take her family to any doctors there. She goes to doctors in St. Louis, Missouri-a two-hour drive from Marion.

After 7 days at the Marion VA, my condition had stabilized enough for me to attempt to travel and my parents asked for assistance in getting me quickly and safely home. The only assistance given was the cost of one ticket for the shuttle that runs from Marion to the St. Louis airport. When I was discharged, I was supposed to take the new antibiotic with me but they mistakenly gave me the old and less effective one.

Upon returning home to Texas, my close Marine buddy informed us that we still had TriCare. The morning after returning from Illinois, we went to the emergency room (ER) at Harris Methodist H.E.B Hospital. The doctor noticed the severity of my symptoms and did the same tests I had received in Marion. Upon reviewing the test results, the ER doctor discovered that my colon was perforated and I had free air under my diaphragm. My waste was actually pouring into my abdominal cavity. The ER doctor immediately called the specialists.

I was taken to surgery that afternoon. Two sections of my colon had to be removed. Those two sections were in the same location as two of the laparoscopic incisions. Due to the severity of the infection, the wound had to be left open. After the surgery, the doctor told my parents I was lucky to be alive. If I hadn't been in such good shape and young, I would be dead.

I spent the next three weeks in the hospital and was discharged on July 11, 2007. I celebrated my birthday while still in the hospital. I was attached to a wound vac for 6 weeks. I now have both a colostomy bag and ileostomy bag. The doctors at Harris Methodist H.E.B. Hospital finally diagnosed the symptoms I had been experiencing since my service in Iraq as ulcerative colitis. The part of my colon that remains is not functional at this time.

This has affected the quality of life for me and my family. This has prevented me from drawing unemployment and working. It is also hindering my advancement in the military. I have no

source of income and I am told it will take one year for the VA to process my disability requests. I have also applied for incapacity pay but have not received anything to date.

In closing, I have a colostomy bag, an ileostomy bag, a large open wound, and multiple laparoscopic incisions. I will be unable to effectively serve in the Marines at home as well as unable to deploy. The actions of the VA hospital in Marion have removed this Marine and countless other veterans from the war on terror. These wounds are not a result of insurgents, they are a result of incompetence on American soil.

Thank you for allowing me to share my story today. I am happy to answer questions about my experience.