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OUTDOOR ODYSSEY  
YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND LEADERSHIP ACADEMY  
"GROWTH THROUGH ADVENTURE"

Written Testimony Submitted to the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

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"VA Mental Health Care: Evaluating Access and Assessing Care"

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Outdoor Odyssey Youth Development and Leadership Academy

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Dear Chairman Murray and members of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs: Good morning. My name is Tom Jones, and I serve as the Executive Director of Outdoor Odyssey as well as an Adjunct Staff Member of the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA). In 1998, I founded Outdoor Odyssey and have served as its Executive Director in a voluntary capacity since that time. I am very pleased to have the opportunity to appear before the Committee this morning on this very critical subject. Although, unlike other speakers this morning, I have no certified expertise in mental health, I have been privileged to gain a great deal of experience in dealing with service members who continue to struggle with mental health issues and have witnessed countless examples of success, attributed in no small measure to the power of the team, cohesion and one-on-one genuine concern. My experiences are the by-product of my involvement with wounded warriors as an active-duty officer, reinforced after my retirement through my role as a Board Member of the Semper Fi Fund and the fact that I founded and oversee the activities of Outdoor Odyssey. I will briefly outline my perspectives on the issue at hand in the following sections: Background; Semper Fi Odyssey; Cadre of Support; Salient Outcome, Lessons Learned and Opinions.

**BACKGROUND:**

Although I have visited wounded Marines and Sailors weekly since the initiation of combat action soon after 9/11, and have certainly gained key perspectives from those same visits, my insights have been honed in large measure by the approximately thirty (30) weeklong sessions I

have hosted at Outdoor Odyssey designed to assist wounded warriors make the transition from the military to the civilian sector. These sessions, now known as Semper Fi Odyssey, represent the collaborative efforts of two nonprofits, working with the Wounded Warrior Regiment of the United States Marine Corps.

As mentioned above, I founded Outdoor Odyssey in 1998, geared to identify and impact at-risk youth; at-risk in this context are those elementary-age youth identified by educators as those who face significant challenges to successful achievement in school. The focus of Outdoor Odyssey identifies strong, potential leaders among high school juniors and seniors and prepares these youth through a Leadership Academy to engage, bond with and then provide follow-on care to at-risk youth from their own community through an aggressive mentoring program. These high school mentors are themselves mentored by community leaders, serving as Umbrella Mentors. Leveraging the success of this program with 38 school districts in western Pennsylvania, programs have been created over the past 14 years to engage countless other educational institutions to provide leadership development and team building opportunities. At the risk of appearing arrogant, I have been blessed at Outdoor Odyssey, as the success of these programs has allowed Outdoor Odyssey to expand both facilities and programs to become a high adventure leadership academy rivaled by few and surpassed by no other similar organization that I have had the opportunity to visit. I offer this information, as programs incorporated at Outdoor Odyssey associated with mentoring, bonding, goal setting, etc., represent the by-products of my lengthy Marine Corps experience and set the stage for development of the Semper Fi Odyssey experience.

Due to my involvement with Outdoor Odyssey, I was able to assist a wounded Marine Corps' Captain pursue his dream of building a transition program for wounded warriors who could not remain in the military. I met this young man during my visits to what was then known as Bethesda Naval Hospital and discussed his dream with him on numerous follow-on visits. Due to my experience with starting a 501©3 nonprofit, I helped him create a nonprofit and agreed to host the first session at Outdoor Odyssey and later assisted him by traveling to other sites in the United States to hold follow-on sessions. The original concept was to have quarterly sessions in different regions of the country; follow-on sessions were held in Vail, Colorado; Tampa, Florida and New York City. While the plan was conceptually sound, it precluded development of continuity of effort and the creation of a cadre of volunteer support; moreover, it soon became apparent that the costs associated with such a concept were staggering and, therefore, prohibitive to success. Due to the potential that I saw in the program and the obvious and compelling need of the wounded warriors, I went to my fellow board members of the Semper Fi Fund to assist with certain of the financial requirements. In an effort to significantly reduce financial demands, I offered to host the next four sessions at Outdoor Odyssey. The initial weeklong program, then known as COMPASS, gained immediate traction with those who oversaw the Wounded Warrior Regiment and visiting mental health professionals. I was able to recruit significant help from associates within the Washington, D.C. and Pittsburgh regions, and the weeklong programs evolved from one solely oriented on transition from the military into one providing the participant bona fide skill sets in all aspects of his/her life. Most important, the sessions became a vehicle to identify and deal with a growing number who were struggling with mental health issues. A noted Psychiatrist, Dr. William Nash, along other mental health professionals, visited the sessions regularly and requested my support in sharing the power of these sessions with

others at major mental health gatherings; the aforesaid led to my involvement in a major project sponsored by OSD (P&R) and connected to the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA).

Unfortunately, the nonprofit inspired by the young Marine Corps Captain did not survive for a variety of his (Captain) professional and personal reasons. Key lessons acquired during the weeklong sessions, however, provided ample evidence of significant success, and the Semper Fi Fund and Outdoor Odyssey collaborated to form Semper Fi Odyssey, with approximately thirty (30) sessions now having been held. To remove even a hint of any conflict of interest, I stepped down from the Board of Directors of the Semper Fi Fund and am now on the Board of Advisors of the Fund and maintain an Emeritus Status on the Board of Directors.

#### SEMPER FI ODYSSEY:

As mentioned above, Outdoor Odyssey and the Semper Fi Fund, have collaborated to develop Semper Fi Odyssey, working in conjunction with the Wounded Warrior Regiment for the identification of the majority of the participants. The vast majority of the participants are combat wounded, with a few struggling with illnesses such as cancer or undergoing recovery from injuries sustained in activities other than combat. With the exception of staff members of the Wounded Warrior Regiment who routinely participate, all of the participants will soon be medically discharged from the Marine Corps. Additionally, a growing number of veterans have been identified for involvement by case workers of the Semper Fi Fund; this cohort is exclusively comprised of those struggling to overcome mental health issues. Most of this later group have been clinically diagnosed with PTSD and/or TBI, and almost ALL diagnosed with PTSD are currently under a clinician's care. Moreover, and of significance, many of the participants who have been diagnosed with PTSD have not shared with the clinician the source of the stressor that ultimately led to the PTSD. For a variety of reasons, many struggling with PTSD have a very difficult time of developing a covenant of trust with the mental health provider.

Albeit it's virtually impossible to briefly describe Semper Fi Odyssey, suffice it to say that the weeklong session is a holistic approach to engage the Marine and through a covenant of trust help him/her build a realistic plan for the future. Rest assured, my use of holistic approach does NOT connote esoteric pabulum laced with lofty phrases but one-on-one, eye-ball level leadership, inspiring the participant to come to grips with the mental, emotional, physical and spiritual aspects of his/her life. Participants form teams and are led by very successful, volunteer veterans who are assisted by active-duty officers and senior noncommissioned officers who themselves have fought alongside the participants in Iraq and/or Afghanistan. The imperative to include the active-duty component became patently obvious as the evidence of operational stress grew in significance. All of the veterans who serve as Team Leaders have made a successful transition into the civilian sector, with the majority of this cohort having entered the business world; moreover, a sizable percentage of these veterans have experienced combat.

While the syllabus of Semper Fi Odyssey ranks as taxing and quite challenging, the underlying objective is the development of both professional and personal goals, supported by definitive, understandable and usable tools to reach these goals. Participants are LED to examine themselves VERY closely and are invariably inspired to share innermost thoughts and "demons." In general, participants arrive skeptical and somewhat tentative; however, the genuine concern of

the Team Leader invariably "breaks the ice," leading to team cohesion and trust among team members.

While the course includes the obvious pieces of any typical transition course, the focus of effort is to provide the participant the ability to know and talk about himself/herself, without falling victim to the commonly-known habit of building a resume that doesn't reflect in ANY manner the individual described. Without question, by the final day of the Semper Fi Odyssey session, the participant has grown immeasurably in his/her ability to understand and share insights about his/her strengths, while being armed with the ability and assistance to tackle weaknesses and challenges. More important, the participant leaves the experience with the skills to build and follow a plan to succeed, reinforced by the knowledge that he/she now has a cadre of supporters (read network) for the future.

I simply couldn't adequately outline all of the elements of the week's experience but will now offer but one vignette from our most recent weeklong event which concluded this past Saturday, the 21st of April 2012. We reinforce the classroom work and Team Leader time with physical activities to the degree possible, based on the physical challenges of the participants. As noted above, Outdoor Odyssey offers a wide variety of high adventure activities and facilities that enable sessions in activities such as yoga and physical fitness, using equipment usable to those with physical challenges. The participants thrive on events such as the zip line, high ropes course and climbing, obviously tempered by physical limitations. This past week, two Marines, having but one leg between them, executed the long staircase of our indoor facility, with the Marine with an artificial leg carrying the Marine with NO legs up to the high ropes course on his back. These two Marines then negotiated a VERY tough and rigorous ropes course in tandem; there was not ONE dry eye in the building. A Senior Staff Non-commissioned Officer, deathly afraid of heights and heretofore declining to undertake the high ropes course, was SO inspired by the experience that he scaled the stairs and negotiated the course. Without exaggeration or any sort of hyperbole, the Marine without legs felt ten-feet tall and bullet proof upon completion of the experience. Everyone (and I mean everyone) saw a stark example of the power of the mind--regardless of the body. This particular event will impact not only those involved last week but many others as well in the days ahead, as it was chronicled by camera in the form of pictures and film.

The final, collective event of the week is the visit to the crash site of Flight 93 that came down in a western Pennsylvania farm field, roughly a 20-minute drive from Outdoor Odyssey. Without question, the emotional release ranks as palpable; Marines, most for the first time, are able to come face-to-face with the reality of 9/11. As the VAST majority of these young folks joined the military in large part due to the events of that fateful day, the experience reinforces key messages shared relative to survivor's guilt and other stressors associated with the trauma of combat.

#### CADRE OF SUPPORTERS:

It would be virtually impossible to accurately chronicle all of the volunteer support that goes into the weeklong Semper Fi Odyssey session. However, it is critical to note that the word volunteer ranks as KEY to any and all success of the sessions held thus far at Outdoor Odyssey. Folks routinely arrive skeptical of the worth of the experience, as many, if not MOST, have listened to many folks offer assistance that has eventually fallen short of advertised pedigree.

Without question, though, the power of the week rests on the two most important words in leadership: genuine concern. The one-on-one sessions and interpersonal dynamics with those who freely give of themselves and their time set the experience aside from all others the participant has encountered. Moreover, and critical from my perspective, the nature of the volunteer, able to convey genuine concern, truly sets the stage for the covenant of trust that is developed; this can NOT be overemphasized!! To provide an illustration of the utility of the volunteer, I will use the most recent Semper Fi Odyssey as an example; this event was conducted last week, concluding this past Saturday, the 21st of April. While not all-inclusive, I'll show certain positions that played integral roles in the weeklong session, coupled with examples of the various backgrounds of those filling the respective roles:

- **TEAM LEADER:** clearly the key to the success of Semper Fi Odyssey; most Team Leaders (TLs) volunteer for the entire week, with a small percentage sharing the responsibility, changing at midweek; eleven teams were used during the recent session, with TLs coming from such locations as Oregon, Wyoming, New York, Virginia and, of course, Pennsylvania. The TLs from Oregon, Wyoming and New York were all Vietnam veterans; the gent from Oregon was an infantry officer in the USMC, followed by a stint as a F-4 pilot in the Corps; he is now CEO of his own company; he has traveled to Outdoor Odyssey six times to serve as a Team Leader; his brother was a company commander killed in Viet Nam in an epic battle experienced by one of our local Team Leaders from Pittsburgh who has now served in that capacity for 20 weeklong sessions. The gent from Wyoming is an Orthopedic Surgeon, who served in Vietnam as a Battalion Surgeon of the same battalion as the brother of the gent from Oregon and the aforementioned TL from Pittsburgh. Several of the Team Leaders hail from Pennsylvania--all former Marine Officers and/or Senior Non-commissioned Officers and serving in leadership positions in various businesses. Additionally, two retired Colonels from the DC area served as TLs during this recent session: both retired Colonels and CEOs of their own companies (one from the Air Force and one female retired from the Army--both having served multiple times as TLs). During this recent session, we were blessed with the support of several active-duty Marines to serve as TL or Assistant TL: two Majors, two Captains and two Gunnery Sergeants--all with multiple combat deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. Previous sessions have seen TLs from Texas (Professor at Texas A&M and former Marine), Alabama (former enlisted squad leader in Viet Nam and successful businessman) and Florida (former Navy SEAL and financial advisor). Team Leaders coming from the Washington D.C. area are simply too numerous to list, with the vast majority being retired Colonels, LtCols and Senior Non-commissioned Officers--most with combat experience.

- **MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL:** During this session, we were supported by a psychiatrist (retired Navy Captain) who had served as the 1st Marine Division Psychiatrist in Iraq and, upon his retirement, played a key role in the development of the Marine Corps' program of record for dealing with mental health injuries known as OSCAR (Operational Stress Control and Readiness). We vigorously follow the tenets of OSCAR, working hard to identify those struggling to overcome stress injuries, while working to support the mental health professional for those clinically diagnosed to be struggling with illnesses. This particular psychiatrist has been with us many times and strongly endorses our work, while providing significant reinforcement to the Team Leader. During this recent session, we were also supported by a psychologist from a prominent university, located in Pittsburgh; this gent had learned of

Semper Fi Odyssey from a fellow mental health professional and actively sought the opportunity to partake and assist. I am confident that we will benefit from his services for many sessions in the days ahead.

• **REPRESENTATIVES FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH AND PENN STATE:**

One of the most popular, and I would state most successful, presentations of the week has routinely been one oriented on dealing with stress management. Clearly, the sessions at Semper Fi Odyssey have identified that day-to-day stressors significantly exacerbate the incidence of operational stress or post-traumatic stress that many, if not most, service members face after a combat deployment. We have been blessed for approximately twenty (20) sessions with a representative from the University of Pittsburgh who provides a striking and most stimulating presentation that includes tools that can be immediately implemented to address stress levels and improve sleep habits. Many participants have offered compelling testimony relative to the power of this two-hour block of instruction. Additionally, during this most recent weeklong session, we had seven representatives from Penn State and the University of Pittsburgh form a panel to address any and all questions posed by the participants, focusing on post-secondary education, veteran benefits, Vocational Rehab and any area related to education and training sought and/or required following departure from the military. This group consisted of college professors, specialists in veterans programs and benefits, department heads and overseers of various programs associated with the matriculation to higher learning. As many of the participants face some level of physical challenge upon departure from the military, this session has proved to be MOST beneficial, providing insights into learning aids available to the veteran. The session takes approximately two hours, with panel members but rarely unable to answer the specific questions proffered by the participants; however, for those queries that stymie the group, an answer is invariably provided by one of the representatives later in the week.

• **YOGA INSTRUCTION:** Semper Fi Odyssey has been supported by the nonprofit Exalted Warrior for approximately the last twenty (20) sessions. The key instructor hails from Tampa, Florida, and routinely spends the entire week at Outdoor Odyssey. Sessions are incorporated into the daily routine during at least four days of the weeklong schedule, with voluntary sessions held each evening after completion of scheduled events. This recent session was supported by two instructors, one of whom a Navy Admiral (retired career SEAL) who was instrumental in the founding of the Exalted Warrior nonprofit organization. Instruction is modulated according to the physical capabilities of the participants, and MANY extol the virtues of these sessions to assist in relaxation and meditation, while helping to address problems with sleep.

• **FITNESS INSTRUCTION:** For the last three plus years, we have been supported by the Fitness Anywhere Corporation via the involvement of a former Navy SEAL who is an exercise physiologist, chiropractor and bona fide fitness expert of the first order. Instruction orients on the use of a device known as the TRX, and, simply put, it can be used by virtually anyone regardless of physical challenge. The addition of several periods of this instruction into the weeklong syllabus has been HUGELY popular, with every session having one or more participant opining that use of the TRX was the first time the participant felt like a warrior since being wounded. The Fitness Anywhere Corporation, founded by a retired Navy SEAL, offers a TRX free to every participant, based on the recommendation of those overseeing the Semper Fi Odyssey.

- **PROFESSIONAL ASSESSMENT:** A company owned by the father of a wounded Marine Captain offers his company's service during each session of Semper Fi Odyssey to conduct a computerized assessment of each participant in the manner of the Meyers Briggs personality assessment. The evaluation provides the participant insight into his/her personal makeup, principally focused on elements of the individual's personality, strengths and orientation relative to occupational fields. Fortunately, during this recent session, the Marine Corps' Captain, an above-the-knee amputee from combat in Iraq and a recent returnee from Afghanistan where he served as a company commander, represented his father for the presentation of the assessment results.

- **NUMEROUS INSTRUCTORS:** Quite a variety of other professionals, too numerous to list, visit Semper Fi Odyssey during the weeklong session to provide various periods of instruction. Many of these individuals are former military; however, we work hard to recruit, train and incorporate talent without military experience, as it serves to better educate the populace of the staggering sacrifices borne by today's service member. Moreover, involvement by those without military experience provides the participant the opportunity to learn more from those he/she will likely encounter after departure from the military. Many of the instructors utilized for the weeklong sessions, be they former military or not, have been responsible for the creation of actual job opportunities for a number of the participants. An example of the periods of instruction provided by these instructors are as follows: goal setting; operational planning skills; resume building; interview skills and techniques; opportunities in the Federal Government; business 101 perspectives; STAR techniques for articulating accomplishments, etc. Of additional note, EVERY weeklong session has included presentations oriented on bona fide job opportunities; several sessions have had participants linked to his/her future employer.

- **INTERVIEWERS:** Our most seasoned Team Leader, a former Marine Corps Infantry Officer with considerable combat experience, hails from Pittsburgh. This gent trains the new Team Leaders and plays an integral role in virtually anything and everything that goes on at Semper Fi Odyssey. He owned his own computer company for over three decades in Pittsburgh and knows virtually everyone in the city. He has built an inventory of over seventy potential interviewers, and personally coordinates the involvement for approximately 15-20 interviewers for the final day of instruction for each session of Semper Fi Odyssey. Each interviewer ranks as a leader in his/her field, and the variety of fields represented covers virtually any occupation one could pursue. The interview session provides each participant the opportunity to undergo at least three or more mock interviews by folks they have never met, instilling a level of stress and offering an opportunity to evaluate the participant's ability to talk about his/her skills, experiences and passion to serve. A number of the interviewers are military veterans; many, if not most, routinely hold interviews for actual positions within their respective organizations. Without question, those interviewers recruited for this experience are passionate about the unique opportunity that they themselves have in helping the participant transition into the civilian sector. It is NOT uncommon for an interviewer to become a mentor for one of the participants he/she has the privilege of interviewing. This particular session ranks as one of the most, if not the most, popular of the week, greatly instilling confidence in virtually every participant. The following is a snapshot of the interviewers from the most recent session: former Vietnam Army Officer and former CEO of largest Electrical Construction Company in US; President of manufacturing firm; Human Resource Manager of major bank; Senior Franklin Coverly

Facilitator; West Point Grad and Vietnam Infantry Officer and President and CEO of major construction company; President of Performance Consulting; President of company that provides host of services to small businesses; Director of Systems Engineering of KEYW Corporation; lawyer and owner of Law Office; former Marine Sergeant in Vietnam and owner of nine restaurants in Pittsburgh; President and CEO of prominent technology company in Pittsburgh; Superintendent of one of Pittsburgh's School Districts; former Marine enlisted infantryman in Vietnam and high level labor negotiator; Director of three assisted living homes; former infantry Sergeant with experience in Iraq who owns a major construction company; former Army Engineer with service in Vietnam who is now a TV and radio talk show host in Pittsburgh; Orthopedic Surgeon in Pittsburgh who served as a battalion surgeon supporting Marines in Vietnam; Assistant VP of Federal Reserve Bank in Cleveland; Manager of Recruitment at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center/

**SALIENT OUTCOMES, LESSONS LEARNED AND OPINIONS:** As I pen this written testimony, we have now been privileged to engage approximately 30-35 participants for 30 weeklong sessions. Without any exaggeration, trust, cohesion and team building represent the major by-products of the Semper Fi Odyssey experience, helping the participant share, learn and grow during the week while setting the stage for future success. Participants build relationships that are lasting and depart with the assurance that they are armed with connecting files to people who will indeed follow up with them in the days ahead. Obviously, those who choose to break contact can; however, those who elect to remain connected and gain follow-on support have a vehicle to do so. FORTUNATELY, the vast majority of past participants remain connected. I offer the following insights from the Semper Fi Odyssey experiences:

• **SALIENT OUTCOMES:**

- Conduct self assessment and built definitive plan for improvement
- Gain bona fide skills in application of life-planning tools
- Identify and connect to people in their lives that they can count on and trust
- Build a honest network of support among fellow participants and volunteer support
- Make commitments that lead to accountability and likelihood of noble pursuits
- Experience trust and cohesion, inspiring participants to share "demons"
- Made significant breakthroughs relative to mental health issues that pave the way to improve follow-on care
- Develop SMART (specific; measurable; attainable; realistic; time bound) Goals
- Hone interview skills and STAR techniques that reinforce a TRUE resume
- Build a tentative network of support in the eventual geographical location of residence
- Enjoy being treated as a warrior and inspired by useful, workable skills

- Learn that others with similar experiences have grown and prospered greatly
- LESSONS LEARNED:
- Vast majority of wounded warriors require some level of assistance in preparation for transition
- A growing % of wounded warriors struggle with operational stress issues, and a growing number are being diagnosed with PTSD and/or TBI
- Trust, team building and cohesion pay REMARKABLE dividends in preparing Marines for eventual departure
- Many, many programs, based on sound concepts and procedures, simply DO NOT connect to the individual warrior, lacking one-on-one, eye-ball level leadership and understanding
- Many diagnosed and under a clinician's care do NOT disclose stressor at root of the problem
- Team building and cohesion led to significant number of breakthroughs among those diagnosed with PTSD but heretofore unable to disclose nature of stressor
- Experiences at Semper Fi Odyssey paid huge dividends in project sponsored by OSD designed to identify best practices; OSCAR is truly a winner if presented correctly
- Individuals who care and possess genuine concern for the wounded warrior are essential
- Key personnel within OSD are working to provide a grant that would enable support to be provided to members of any branch of the service

#### OPINIONS:

- Any cohort of combat veterans who have served in Iraq and/or Afghaistan would provide indications of stress levels roughly equivalent to those observed in wounded Marines
- A very large percentage of mental health professionals DO NOT remotely connect to combat vets and are presently unable to establish the necessary covenant of trust
- Semper Fi Odyssey could easily serve as a prototype for programs within the active-duty services
- Many, many veterans will be identified to be struggling with combat stress issues in the near future--and for many, many months to follow
- There exist too many disparate programs that DO NOT connect to the individual service member
- The Semper Fi Odyssey model stands to greatly assist mental health professionals engage veterans with mental health issues

- We need to build a mechanism of support that would permit the inclusion of members from any branch of the service

Very Warm Regards and Semper Fi

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