

## Testimony of Iraq War Veteran to the US Congress

"May God Bless America & the Peoples of Iraq, & may we be forgiven for having participated in such a devastating conflict."

By [Former Army Sergeant Kristofer Shawn Goldsmith](#)

Global Research, May 17, 2008

US Congress 17 May 2008

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [IRAQ REPORT](#)

*The following is testimony presented to Congress by Kristofer Shawn Goldsmith on May 15, 2008. While there were several powerful testimonies by several Iraq veterans, [all worth watching](#), this one in particular provides a taste of what is actually happening in Iraq, and what soldiers of conscience face upon their return home. [Dahr Jamal]*

You can view his previous testimony at Winter Soldier [here](#)

Operation Iraqi Freedom III Veteran Former Army Sergeant Winter Soldier Testifier [Kgoldy1985@gmail.com](mailto:Kgoldy1985@gmail.com)

The claim of Success in Iraq due to the Troop Surge is misleading. The term "Success" has been consistently redefined any time it is applied to the the current state of affairs in Iraq, no matter what they may be. The current Mission is called Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), yet its benchmarks for accomplishment have not yet been assigned, over five years since American Soldiers began leaving their families and putting their lives at risk to serve our great nation. Since Operation Iraqi Freedom began, we, the self proclaimed 'liberators' of the people of Iraq, have put forth only futile efforts at best to try to ensure freedom for the Iraqi populace, the most simple, obvious and obligatory objective of a mission with such a name. The damage caused by failure of the Occupation of Iraq has only been increased by the Troop Surge, to both American Soldiers and the people of Iraq.

My name is Kristofer Shawn Goldsmith, and I am from Bellmore, on Long Island, New York. At the age of eighteen in late 2003, just after graduating High School, I enlisted in the Army as a Forward Observer and knew full well that I would quickly be sent to Iraq. Like many other Americans at the time I was still under the influence of the media and its Terrorism paranoia, and believed that somewhere in the deserts of Iraq were thousands of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). Although the former Dictator of Iraq, Saddam Hussein, had been captured less than two weeks before I signed my contract with the military, I knew that the fight was not over, as there were allegedly Sunni-led-Baathist militias who were attempting to cause failure to the American Mission. My intent in joining the Army as a Forward Observer was to be involved in combat and support the mission from the very front lines.

After graduating One Station Unit Training (OSUT, combining Basic Training and Advanced Individual Training [AIT]) in May 2004 from Fort Sill, Oklahoma and gaining my Military Occupational Specialty of 13-Foxtrot as a Fire Support Specialist, I was assigned to Alpha Company, Third Battalion Fifteenth Infantry Regiment, of the Second Brigade, Third Infantry Division of Fort Stewart Georgia (A Co 3-15 IN, 2 BDE, 3ID of FSGA). I remained in this battalion for over three years, and after it was renamed/re-flagged to First Battalion

Thirtieth Infantry Regiment (1-30 IN) until the end of my military career. Upon my arrival at Fort Stewart I began to hear rumors of free-fire orders which were given to the men of 3-15 IN during the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which undoubtedly resulted in the killings of thousands of innocent civilians and planted the first seeds of Anti-American sentiment among the people of Iraq. These free fire orders were described by the Soldiers who had been deployed during the invasion as coming from their commanders who told them “kill everything that moves” which included all civilians.

Until this point I had believed in the honor of American Generals and the Soldiers whom they commanded, and believed that such an atrocity had not been perpetrated by any American in history. But the stories shared between the Veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom I, and new Soldiers such as myself, were ones of lawless murders, looting and abuse of countless Iraqis during 2003. One event which had been thoroughly investigated by the Army was the looting of an Iraqi bank and the distribution of American cash among members of 3-15 IN as high ranking as First Sergeant. Because this was a crime in which the Army had been actively investigating, there was little talk about who was involved in front of Soldiers who were new to the unit, such as myself. To my knowledge few have been found guilty of these charges. I admit to adding to the confusion of agents of the Army’s Criminal Investigation Division (CID) by telling them I did not know the whereabouts of anyone that they were ever looking for between the years of 2004 and 2007. Initially, while in the Service I justified and dismissed such illegal acts committed by American Soldiers because we were taught that success in Iraq would be achieved partly through instilling fear into the civilian populace, which would ultimately result in compliance and lessen the threat of resistance or rebellion.

Before deploying to Iraq I received no training whatsoever on the history or culture of the civilians whom I would be dealing with on a daily basis once sent overseas. Our Arabic language training was limited to commands which were to be used while searching a vehicle or home for weapons. The short list of commands was printed out and taped to the stocks of our M-4 Carbines and M-16 Rifles because we were not expected to care enough to familiarize ourselves with the language or to memorize anything. The Soldiers of 3-15 were never briefed on the current social or political state of Sadr City, where we were expected to deploy. The very relevant history of Sadr City and Muqtada Al Sadr’s influence over the civilian populace was never explained to us. The concentration of our training exercises were limited strictly to combat operations, which rarely included the presence of innocent civilians. At no point did we train for humanitarian aid based actions, or were we instructed on how to “win the hearts and minds” of the Iraqi people. Presenting ourselves as an overwhelmingly powerful and aggressive unit seemed to be the sole purpose of all training exercises. Soldiers such as myself were told by the Veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom I that the “Iraqis will remember the Third Infantry Division Patch, [the unit patch worn on our uniforms] from the first time and know not to mess with us”. Such statements were common among the Soldiers who had been in my unit during OIF-I because they knew the ruthlessness of their actions had been remembered by the people of Iraq.

Just days after the United States officially declared the search for WMDs over in January 2005, I deployed to Iraq. I rode with 3-15 INs convoy from Kuwait, North into Forward Operations Base (FOB) War-Eagle, Northeast of Sadr City at the end of January 2005. As 3-15 IN replaced the unit at this location the camp was renamed ‘FOB Hope’, because combat operations were considered over and the renaming was symbolic of the humanitarian and rebuilding process which was supposed to begin with my units deployment. The Soldiers of my unit were told that a cease-fire had been declared between

Muqtada Al Sadr's Mahdi Army and American Forces in Sadr City as of October 2004, so violence in our Area of Operation (AO) could be expected to be minimal.

On the day of my arrival in Sadr City I learned that we were not being greeted as 'liberators' by the civilian populace, but as an Oppressive Occupying Force. Adults in the area encouraged children to throw rocks, bricks, trash, and bottles of oil at US Army vehicles and personnel. The reason for this was well known to both the Iraqis and American Forces; if adult males threw a bricks, they may be shot, but the children would not have to fear being fired upon. The state of Sadr City was shockingly repulsive: huge piles of trash and enormous puddles of raw sewage stretched across streets for miles, serving as obvious signs of over population and government neglect. Impoverished children walked with bare feet or sandals through sewage, seemingly unwary of the potential for disease. The state of the city as I witnessed it was perceived by the youth of Sadr City as a state of normalcy, for the children had never known anything better under Saddam Hussein's rule or during the American Occupation. Although the level of violence between American Forces and militias in Sadr City was minimal at the time, the state of unrest and discontent among the civilians was obvious. With only one Battalion (less than eight hundred ready combat troops) worth of Soldiers covering a city with over two million inhabitants, true control of or aid to the city were never possible.

Because of the conditions of the ceasefire, I was not authorized at any time in Sadr City to use indirect fire assets (Mortars, Artillery, Attack Aviation or Close Air Support) as I was trained for, so my principal duty became to photograph and record all significant events which my platoon incurred while on patrol, during raids, and all other missions. I photographed anything considered relevant to the state of Sadr City and worthy of submitting as Intelligence. Political graffiti in both English and Arabic was common around the school walls, stating things such as: [In Arabic] "Welcome America, to the Second Vietnam"; [English] "The US Solders and Alawi is a terarment [The United States Soldiers and Prime Minister Alawi are Terrorists]"; [English] "The us suldurs is a cowards becus the are kelld the enesent [The United States Soldiers are Cowards because they killed the innocent]" [English] "the us army is more enjust than saddam [The United States Army is more unjust than Saddam]" These are just a few of the spray painted tags which I have photos of. Others include drawings of American Abrams Tanks and Bradley Fighting Vehicles destroying property and firing upon and running over civilians. Unfortunately, I have not been able to have the majority of the photographs of graffiti in my possession translated into English.

Friendly civilian contacts were extremely limited throughout Sadr City because we were greatly mistrusted by the locals. Civilians reported to us that the fierce combat between the units (2-5 and 1-12 Cavalry Regiments, First Cavalry Division) who formerly occupied Sadr City and the Mahdi Militia had resulted in high numbers of civilian casualties, usually due to American Aircraft and other Army indirect fire assets.

In addition to the frustration and anger caused by innocent civilian casualties, the locals were growing tired of the continuing failed promises that the electrical power, potable water, sewage, and trash situations in the city would be fixed by US forces. I was personally responsible for providing to my command, daily reports entitled 'Sewage-Water-Electric-Trash (SWET) Reports', so I have expertise in the field of Sadr City's Public Works throughout 2005. Under orders, I personally photographed and reported to my command, hundreds of times between February and August 2005, on the lack of adequate clean water, the never-ending presence of trash and sewage throughout the streets, and the very limited

few hours of electrical power provided to areas within my unit's area of operation within Sadr City. Each platoon within 3-15 IN was responsible for the same daily SWET reports which were submitted to 3-15 IN Headquarters and ostensibly handed up as intelligence information to higher levels within the Army. We, the Soldiers on the ground, representing the good word of America, forwarded promises from our command to the people of Sadr City, saying that as long as peace was maintained with the Mahdi Militia, we would work to improve their daily lives. These promises, were futile at best, as we provided only occasional humanitarian aid.

The platoon which I was assigned to, 3rd Platoon of Alpha Company 3-15, participated in very few humanitarian aid missions, whereas; instead, daily 'presence patrols' took up the majority of our time. The purpose of a presence patrol, as instructed by our Commanders, was to show the Iraq Civilians that there was a constant, strongly armed military presence in their city. The goal of humanitarian aid drops were to "win the hearts and minds of the people". I must make it clear that the emphasis placed on humanitarian aid drops was not to help people, as is the goal of the Red Cross, but that they were military missions used only as a tool aimed at accomplishing the goal of making Iraqis believe that we were there to help them. Throughout my entire time in Sadr City my platoon only brought supplies to a medical facility once, on March 10, 2005. The items we dropped off at the Sadr City Women's Hospital were a truckload of baby diapers. We never provided any real medical supplies, despite the fact that the hospitals and clinics in the area were in dire need of antibiotics and basic surgical equipment.

Our next humanitarian aid mission was on March 29, 2005. We distributed approximately eight hundred small uncooked frozen chickens (Cornish game hens) and twenty live goats at a school near the Northwestern corner of Sadr City. We did this knowing full well that no one in the area had power to run a refrigerator to keep meat fresh, and that cooking fuel was hard for civilians to come by. We handed one chicken to each family who waited in line, and at two pounds, each Cornish game hen was obviously not enough to feed a family. Days later, Iraqi civilians told me that because there was no way to keep large quantities of meat fresh, instead of slaughtering and eating the goats, many were forced to sell or trade them for less food than the goats would have yielded themselves. Any goats kept alive in the city for milk production lived off of trash and water contaminated with sewage.

My platoon participated in these types of "Chicken Drops" on average, once a month, between February and August 2005. This was obviously no where near enough to provide for a city whose population was reported at the time to be in excess of 2.3 million people who were mostly living on the edge of starvation. The hopelessness and pointlessness of these types of missions killed morale among the Soldiers in my platoon because we felt we were putting our lives at risk on these missions without the likelihood of positive results. We knew that although the Sadr City residents accepted the food, the people were still angry with us for not fulfilling the promises that America had made to better their economic and social conditions.

Approximately three times per month starting in April, on Sunday mornings, my platoon was assigned the duty of going to Sadr City's municipal station to escort government employees and ensure that they would use sump trucks would remove sewage from the clogged drains and streets of the city. This mission always lasted four to six hours and was the most hated among the Soldiers of my unit. Few things could break down combat soldiers' moral more than assigning them the duty of sewage cleanup. We would sometimes use threats of arrest for dereliction of duty to the municipal employees and force them to work with raw sewage

without any protective clothing. Often without closed toed shoes, and always without gloves or masks, these Iraqis would be forced to expose themselves to an obvious health hazard. My job was to take pictures of the municipal employees being forced to work under these hazardous conditions, to show to my superiors our mission being accomplished. After the sump trucks were filled to capacity, we would escort the employees to the city's edge and have them empty the sewage into the surrounding private farmland. This undoubtedly put the crops at high risk of contamination, along with putting at risk the eventual consumers of any products yielded from the fields.

Again, this humanitarian aid mission was not fueled by the goal of actually helping people, but only the desire to make it appear that Americans were responsible for sewage cleanup. We wanted to create a temporary illusion that American Soldiers were really attempting to fix the problems of the area. Without real reconstruction of Sadr City's septic systems, the puddles we cleaned up each Sunday would quickly resurface with fresh sewage soon after we left each site. On a daily basis, we witnessed barefooted children covered up to their knees in sewage, playing outside in their streets.

Though I was in Sadr City for nearly eight months, I only came upon one site in which construction workers were planting a new septic pipe. Early in my deployment, upon questioning of the engineer on site, I learned that because grants of cash were given to contractors before the completion of the project, it was hard to find a contractor who would not simply take the money and run. This large construction site near the center of Sadr City where the road had been ripped up, never had anything substantial completed before my Company was reassigned to another area of Baghdad.

The tap water that came into the homes in Sadr City was horribly polluted due to the high levels of sewage on the streets. Doctors at the Red Crescent Clinics and Hospitals in the area reported that there were a high levels of infant mortality, illness among children, and birth defects due to the unavailability of purified water. In addition to the problems created by the contamination of the tap water, the water was only available while electric power was on in the homes to run the water pumps.

The problems created by water not being readily available during the summer months in Iraq are obvious. The people of Sadr City knew that this problem is something that the American Government would not allow on it's home soil, and they often expressed anger because they were not being treated with that level of respect while we occupied their land. With power being supplied randomly throughout each day for a maximum of two to four hours, the availability of water was also extremely limited to everyone in Sadr City. At a Red Crescent Clinic in Northwestern Sadr City, a sheik had taken in a shipment of Saline bags that he was rationing to the children in his area who would come to the clinic ill or dehydrated. These bags were not used intravenously; they were cut open and drank from because there was no other source of purified water for those who needed it most. Tap water was so dirty that it was not only colored and cloudy, but also reeked of the powerful stench of feces.

Clean water was not a problem faced only by Iraqis during Operation Iraqi Freedom III. We, the American Soldiers staying on FOB Hope, would often have to ration the water provided to us by Kellogg Brown and Root (KBR), the main source of what was supposed to be our potable water. The water provided to us was so contaminated that Soldiers who brushed their teeth with the tap water in our buildings became horrifically ill, with symptoms



including extreme stomach pain, frequent vomiting and diarrhea. This undoubtedly put American Soldiers' lives at risk not only due to dehydration, but because they had to go on patrol while seriously ill, therefore not allowing them to be fully aware of their surroundings. I estimate that at one time in early February 2005, approximately 80% of the Soldiers in Alpha Company 3-15 were at once experiencing these symptoms. At the time this testimony is being written, May 11 2008, Soldiers from Headquarters Company 1-30 IN deployed at FOB Murray still cannot use the KBR supplied water to brush their teeth, let alone drink it. The only option for water which is not contaminated is KBR supplied bottled water, yet this is never in sufficient enough supply to perform personal hygiene beyond teeth brushing. Bottled water also offers its own problems, as it must be carried and stored by Soldiers since pure water is not readily available from a tap. Carrying large boxes of bottled water in the heat of Iraq only adds to dehydration risks and the overworking of Soldiers whose energy must be dedicated solely to the success of their missions. Adding the heavy workload of transporting potable water to a Soldiers' living quarters further adds the individual frustration and the breakdown of troop morale.

While deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom III, the morale of Soldiers in 3-15 Infantry was very low. This was aggravated by the unit's Command and the tactics they used to attain reenlistment numbers. In the summer of 2005 the Battalion Command Sergeants Major and the Brigade Command Sergeant Major locked Soldiers who refused to reenlist in a room for hours, demanding that we sign up for a meeting with a career counselor. This included Soldiers who were affected by the Stop-Loss policy, who if not for the deployment they were currently on, would have already separated from Active Duty. Most of the Stop-Lossed Soldiers had already been deployed in OIF-I. I personally refused to consider reenlistment, and instead of being allowed to hydrate and prepare my gear for an upcoming patrol, I was kept in this room for over three hours. This reenlistment tactic put my life, and the lives of those I worked with, in real physical danger. During this time my Battalion Command Sergeant Major attempted to make each of us who remained in the room believe that none of us could succeed in life outside of the Army. This is common practice in attempting to gain reenlistment numbers for my former unit. Our command would prey on the Soldiers who because of the stress of deployment felt hopeless about their future. These Soldiers who may have been candidates for therapy, were instead used to meet the Army's required unit reenlistment numbers while they were obviously distressed. Another unethical tactic often used by 3-15 to increase reenlistment numbers was to give the option to Soldiers who tested positive for drug use to reenlist in order to make the test results "disappear". This tactic was well known in my Battalion.

The personal frustration of Soldiers of 3-15 IN was increased when we were met with the volleys of bricks thrown by children on a daily basis as we patrolled the northern Baghdad slum each day. Occasionally we would work with an Iraqi Army unit, to train them how to do the missions the way Americans did. The one clear difference was that while we restrained from using force against the children and teenagers who would pelt us with rocks, we encouraged members of the Iraqi Army to beat them with their rifles. On multiple occasions my platoon would dispatch the Iraqi Army Soldiers into a crowd, so that they could physically assault anyone who had been an annoyance to us. Eventually the people of Sadr City learned to fear the Iraqi Army Soldiers, knowing that if they stood up to us or them, the civilians were going to get hurt. Often after providing assistance to the Iraqi Army while they preformed raids in Sadr City, the innocent civilians who's homes were entered would report to us that Iraqi Soldiers had pillaged money, jewelry and personal weapons. The people of Sadr City blamed us, who they called the "American Watchdogs," for training and

supporting the corrupt Iraqi Army Soldiers when their homes were robbed.

Although we received tips that the Mahdi Militia had active checkpoints throughout Sadr City, for months we went without seeing them. The civilians claimed that the security of Sadr City was ensured by Muqtada Al Sadr's men, and that the American presence only put that security at jeopardy. What was obvious was that the Shiite Mahdi Militia vehicle checkpoints that kept Sunni terrorists out of Sadr City were disbanded any time an American Patrol came close. Because the Mahdi Militia blended in so well with the local populace, it was impossible for us to catch the men who ran these illegal vehicle checkpoints in the act.

The first Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED) that exploded within Sadr City was on May 23, 2005, and targeted not Americans, but a Shiite restaurant which was frequented by college and military aged Iraqi youth. The report was of eight Iraqis killed and another eighty nine wounded. The Sadristes responded by uniforming their men in black pants and yellow shirts and holding their checkpoint positions even when American Patrols approached. The Mahdi Army was comprised of civilians looking to protect their own streets, and cooperated with the Iraqi police. Typically Iraqi Police throughout Sadr City were also active members of the Mahdi Militia, so their coordination with security checkpoints were welcomed to bolster the effectiveness of the ever-struggling Iraqi Police. We were nevertheless instructed to disarm the yellow shirt wearing Mahdi Militia and disband their checkpoints. This was another reason that the people of Sadr City were discontent with American Soldiers occupying their streets. We did not allow them to protect themselves, and insisted that they rely solely on Coalition Forces.

The entire time I was in Baghdad throughout the year 2005, my unit enforced an after-dark curfew. No Iraqi was allowed outside their home after 9:00 pm and before 4:30 am. Any car being driven in violation of curfew was pulled, searched, and its passengers interrogated. Pedestrians were also subject to arrest. We enforced this law regardless of religious holidays which required of Muslims day-time fasting and nightly celebration. The curfew was also adhered to during hot summer months when people avoid leaving their homes during the day due to the unbearable weather. We were essentially keeping the people of Sadr City as prisoners in their own homes, and for that, they hated us. Throughout my eight months in Baghdad, when my platoon patrolled at night, we did not find evidence- not even once- that the cars we pulled over were pulling over contained a terrorist breaking curfew. More often than not we were pulling over one to three people in each car who sometimes had small arms weaponry (AK-47 and pistols) which were most likely for self defense. We were never fired upon or engaged by weapon fire any of these cars because they did not present themselves as a threat in Sadr City. There were specific occurrences where we would pull over men who were driving their wives to the hospital because they were in labor. Because we had received intelligence that a pregnant woman at one time was used as a way to sneak a VBIED into a hospital, these women in labor were pulled from their cars and searched. Despite the fact that they were obviously in urgent need of medical attention, it was our orders to search all pregnant women and their cars as serious potential bomb threats. Again, not once did we ever find any bombs in a pregnant woman's car. Also, we never offered to escort them to the hospital after finding them harmless. Instead we released them from our night time traffic point, and gave no guarantee that another American Convoy would not stop and search them again before the pregnant couple reached the Women's Hospital. This night-time curfew was undoubtedly a reason for lessened security within Sadr City as 3-15 IN did not have the manpower to keep all the streets clear. It is also another reason for the discontent of the citizens affected by the

curfew. This was another chief complaint of the Iraqis, who said to us frequently, "America promised freedom, but treats us as prisoners".

Throughout my deployment to Sadr City, the main thing I witnessed was rising tensions between the civilians and Coalition Forces. Continued disappointment about the lack of food, medical supplies, clean water, road repair, -and no improvement in municipal activity -gave the people little reason to look at us at their guardians and caretakers. The American Army's inability to prevent violence such as the devastating Sadr City car bombing of May 23, 2005, and failure to provide the civilians with improved living standards since the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003, have led to increased disillusion towards American occupying forces. While I was in Sadr City the Mahdi Militia were viewed as the true protectors of Iraqis. Muqtada Al Sadr, the commander of the Mahdi Militia is looked towards as a religious prophet by the people of the city named after his father, a Shia cleric, the late Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Mohammad Sadeq Al Sadr. Any American bullet, rocket, mortar or bomb which finds itself astray and headed towards Sadr City's residents only increases Muqtada Al Sadr's following. This is obvious when one views my photographs of the graffiti on the walls of the city which depict American vehicles showing aggression towards civilians, next to a poster of Muqtada al Sadr with his late father and an image of other Islamic Prophets and Martyrs.

The ineffectiveness of 3-15 IN's role during OIF-III led to an immediate pitfall in troop morale. Upon returning home to America in December 2005 and January 2006, there was little for we, the Soldiers, to be proud of. Although we were automatically considered as 'heroes' for having served overseas, all that we really did well in Sadr City was do our best to keep each other alive. The tremendous sacrifice of taking more than one thousand Soldiers from 3-15 IN away from their homes and families to spend eight months in Sadr City and having them accomplish nothing of real value, was forever damaging to those who made the sacrifice.

As with any group who have deployed, some came home with serious mental issues, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Severe Chronic Depression. As we were preparing to leave Iraq, we were given a mental screening test, which was supposed to identify possible mental ailments. But we were warned by the medical staff issuing the test that "should you come up positive for mental problems, you could be forced to stay in [Iraq] for three to four more months before you can go home." Most lied while completing the test because they wanted to get home as soon as possible. No one was held in Iraq any longer due to this test, but in hindsight, it is clear that verbal warning was used to prevent the inconvenience to the Army of having Soldiers that needed medical attention.

Alcoholism, drug use and violence plagued the unit upon our return home. Relationships stressed from a year long deployment resulting in dozens of divorces, while many men were arrested for Driving Under the Influence or domestic assault. The eight months in Sadr City, the total year long deployment in Baghdad, has not left the psyche of anyone who served in 3-15 IN during OIF-III. Most Soldiers whose contract was up with the Army after the OIF-III Stop-Loss policy expired, left without ever seeking council for Mental Health problems, because they feared it could possibly extend their time in the Army or make getting out more difficult.

For those who still had time to serve in the Army, getting help for alcoholism or mental issues was viewed as one of the most damaging things they could do to their careers. During weekly safety briefings as per the Army's mandate, commanders would almost jokingly say "if you're thinking about killing yourself, don't be afraid to get some help".



However, it was in the back of everyone's minds that if they were found to be a "broken Soldier" or diagnosed with any mental illness, as with any physical illness, it could prevent them from promotion or favorable action by the unit. Moreover, real instructions were not provided to inform Soldiers of the availability of mental health assistance on Fort Stewart either verbally or in written form by commanders, or by being posted on the information boards in the company areas.

I am one of the Soldiers who was too intimidated to get help when I first realized that I needed it. Suffering from depression and alcoholism in 2006, I came up for promotion to Sergeant (E-5) that May and had to hide my problems to protect my career. With the active duty part of my contract expiring in May 2007, I had every reason to believe I was never going to set foot in Iraq again, and would be going to college in fall of 2007.

Things only got worse for me when President George W. Bush announced his plans for the Troop Surge of 2007 during his State of the Union Address in January 2007. By this time 3-15 IN had been renamed/re-flagged to 1-30 IN, and had already been set to deploy in late summer 2007. The Stop-Loss and Stop-Movement Orders came to my unit soon after the plan for the Surge was announced. Those orders meant that no Soldier, for any reason other than administrative separation, could leave the unit until three months after the unit returned home from its deployment. The Troop Surge meant that my Brigade, 2nd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division, was going to deploy three months earlier- in May 2007. In reaction to the early deployment, my unit immediately scheduled two months of field training exercises from the end of January 2007 until mid March 2007. Faced with so much isolation from family and loved ones and an impending fifteen to eighteen month deployment, over a dozen Soldiers from 1-30 IN went Absent Without Leave (AWOL). Many Soldiers affected by Stop-Loss began to stop caring about training and acted out while on duty, while drug tests increasingly had higher levels of positive testing results. I personally found myself extremely frustrated during field exercises and was verbally reprimanded on a few occasions for not having greater control of myself. On multiple occasions between January and March 2007, I attempted to seek mental counseling but initially had no success in finding help. As recommended by my unit, I asked the Medical Platoon of 1-30 IN and received guidance to find a building close to my company which held the Mental Health team of the Third Infantry Division. I found this building to be abandoned, and received no further instruction on how to find the Mental Health team.

On March 27 2007, I admitted myself to the emergency room at Winn Army Community Hospital on Fort Stewart complaining of what I believed to be a heart attack. After various cardiac screenings, I tested negative for any physical problem and after confiding in the doctor that I had been feeling depressed and under extreme stress, I was finally given accurate instructions on how to find the Mental Health Division at Winn Army Community Hospital. I was told to sign in as an emergency patient as a possible suicide risk at the front desk. After anxiously waiting nearly six hours in a waiting room I was finally seen by a therapist, who diagnosed me with Adjustment Disorder with Disturbance of Emotions and Conduct. Although I showed the obvious symptoms of PTSD, I was not diagnosed with it at this time. Months later, after separating from Active Duty, I was finally diagnosed with PTSD by the Veterans' Affairs Hospital at Northport, New York.

I was then recommended by the therapist to attend group therapy sessions run by Colonel Ana Parodi twice weekly because one-on-one counseling was mostly unavailable due to the Third Infantry Division Mental Health team having been overwhelmed by Soldiers and the families of Soldiers who needed assistance. I attended as many sessions as I could, but

found few positive results. Each session held for approximately 90 minutes contained only one Psychologist, Colonel Ana Parodi, and up to two dozen patients. Unlike typical group therapy, the patients attending varied in age, social status, rank in the military, and civilian relation to members of the military. No two patients seemed to have the same problem, so the therapeutic experience was minimal for all attending. I frequently witnessed people leaving in frustration because the sessions seemed more harmful to them than helpful. There were many times when patients were asked to leave due to overcrowding in the room. Most everyone seemed disappointed with the care that we were receiving, however, this was the best treatment available to the Soldiers of Fort Stewart, so we kept coming just hoping for things to get better.

After a three week wait, in April 2007, I finally got an appointment with a Psychiatrist in a one-on-one setting. I was then diagnosed with Chronic Depression, another symptom of PTSD. Despite these diagnoses, and telling Colonel Parodi I had been contemplating hurting myself, my deployable status remained. This was the same for other Soldiers I met while attending therapy sessions. It seemed regardless of how distraught a Soldier was, or in what horrific emotional state, everyone was deployable because the Army was falling short on numbers and could not afford to lose anyone due to mental illnesses. My fear of my unit finding out I had been diagnosed with any illness was reinforced time after time as Command Sergeant Major (CSM) Altman, the Sergeant Major in charge of my Battalion, would say to my unit in weekly briefing formations, "If any of you go try to say you're depressed and thinking about killing yourself, you're going to get deployed anyway, and when we get there, you'll get to be my personal I.E.D. (improvised explosive device) kicker!" Although I did not believe this in a literal sense of actually kicking I.E.D.s, CSM Altman of 1-30 IN made it clear that there was no sympathy among the higher ranking in my Battalion for what were considered to be "Broken Soldiers."

After my deployment was set back three weeks for a vital sinus surgery, I took two weeks medical leave. I began to feel more and more hopeless, knowing that there was no way for me to find the help that I needed while in the Army. I stopped taking my pain medication, Percocet, and began to plan my suicide to coincide with Memorial Day. After much therapy since leaving the Army, with the help of a Psychiatrist, I've come to the conclusion that attempting to kill myself was what I viewed as the last bit of control I had in my life after having been Stop-Lossed. On May 28, 2007, I ingested approximately one dozen Percocet pills with a heavy dose of vodka. I wrote with permanent marker on my arms "Stop-Loss killed me" and "End Stop-Loss Now" as an attempt to make it clear why I had chosen to take my own life.

I was then found unconscious by Military Police on Fort Stewart, and rushed to the hospital. I awoke handcuffed to a gurney in the Emergency Room, and was then admitted to Ward 3-A, the Winn Army Community Hospital Mental Ward. My Company Rear-Detachment Commander, Staff Sergeant (SSG) David W. Bentley came onto the Ward to discuss with myself and with my attending Psychologist, Doctor Randolph M. Capocasale, my release from the Army. It was determined and agreed upon that my service had been without a doubt deserving of an Honorable Discharge, and that I had been through enough stress and should be released from the Army as soon as possible. According to a verbal agreement, I was going to be Honorably Discharged from the Army as soon as two weeks from release from Ward 3-A. After a week of observation I was released with a reconfirmed diagnosis of Adjustment Disorder, Depressive Disorder and Overdose.

I continued daily treatment through group therapy and one-on-one meetings with a

psychiatrist as often as I could possibly schedule them (a maximum of once per three weeks) after my suicide attempt. While undergoing treatment I met a Soldier from First Battalion Sixty-fourth Armor Regiment (1-64 AR, another unit which was part of Second Brigade, Third Infantry Division) who had also attempted to take his own life. After deployments with 1-64 AR in both OIF-I and OIF-III, he too was Stop-Lossed, and shot himself near his femoral artery just days before his scheduled deployment to OIF-V. He was told by his unit, 1-64 AR that if he did not get on the plane with his company, he would be put in jail. So just after receiving stitches and being released from the Winn Army Community Hospital in May 2007, he was intimidated into going on the plane before healing. While at a rifle range in Kuwait, an Medical Officer of a unit other than his company in 1-64 AR noticed the Soldier limping with blood staining the inner thigh of his Army Combat Uniform. After the Soldier explained to the Officer what had happened, he was immediately medically evacuated back to Fort Stewart. Despite this ordeal, instead of simply being treated for his injury and obvious mental illness, he was charged with malingering, with his Commander pushing for jail time. I lost contact with this Soldier and do not have the means of finding out what his unit did to him after I was separated from the Army.

I began treatment for Alcohol Abuse/Disorders through enrollment in the Army Substance Abuse Program (ASAP) in June 2007 as required by the Army for anyone hospitalized for alcohol related reasons. On the fifth of July 2007, without warning, I was read an Article-15 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), a Non-judicial Punishment by my Brigade Rear Detachment Commander, Major Douglas R. Wesner. The charge listed in the Article-15 was malingering, stating that "on or about 28 May 2007, for the purpose of avoid[ing] hazardous duty, to wit: Operation Iraqi Freedom V. feign[ed] a mental lapse. This is in violation of Article 115, UCMJ." Despite the fact that I had been diagnosed with mental illnesses months prior to my suicide attempt, my unit wanted to punish me to make an example of me to anyone else in the unit who was considering hurting themselves. After being read the Article-15, I consulted with legal counsel, Captain Gannan and Captain Nagaraj of Fort Stewart Legal Defense but was told that I must plead guilty to the charge, or face a "trial by Court Martial where [I would] be brought up on additional charges and possibly face jail time." So my legal advice in this matter was quite literally, "you're guilty regardless of the facts." When I requested defense of my Doctors, Capocasale and Parodi, I was told that they would not stand in my defense in fear of their careers being put at risk, regardless of the fact that they felt what my unit was attempting was morally and professionally wrong.

After my parents petitioned, on my behalf, my Local Congresspeople, Representative Peter King, and Senator Hillary Clinton from New York- to begin a Congressional investigation regarding my situation, the Article-15 was dropped. However, I was then issued a General (under honorable conditions) Discharge, with the narrative reason for separation being Misconduct, Serious Offense. Without six years on Active Duty, I did not meet the requirements to apply for a board of appeals before being separated from the Army on August 16, 2007. The General Discharge came at the cost of my qualification to receive Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB) benefits, a cash value of about forty thousand dollars. I had personally invested eighteen hundred dollars into the MGIB fund, which is non-refundable. I had always made it clear to those that I worked with and to my command that I had intended to go to college after leaving the Army. I in fact felt that the idea of going to school was what help me motivated, and even alive while I was in the Service.

So, because my unit did not find me guilty of malingering under the Article-15, I left the Army as a Combat-Veteran, with a General Discharge and a narrative of separation of

Misconduct, Serious Offense. My unit did however renew my Secret Security Clearance just before my discharge and inform me that I could find a recruiter and reenlist to get my college benefits back. The legal counsel made it clear to me that General Discharges were being used as a temporary punishment and ultimately a reenlistment tool. The lack of college aid and negative influence on potential civilian careers resulting from the stigma of a General Discharge forces many to reenlist in hopes of gaining back job and financial security.

The issue of my own personal financial insecurity has been one which has aggravated the symptoms of my Chronic Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Recurrent Major Depression. Since leaving the Army I have been diagnosed by the VA Hospital with ailments such as bilateral plantar fasciitis and arthritis of the knees (which makes it painful for me to stand or walk), in addition to the mental disorders listed above. I have found it impossible to maintain satisfying employment while enduring all of the problems I currently face as a result of my time in service. After receiving little instruction from the Army on how to work with the VA or to file compensation/disability claims, between August 16th and October of 2007, I was left abandoned and at the mercy of alcoholism and my own medical issues. After filing online for compensation through the VA website in October 2007, I began the necessary treatment to try to overcome my PTSD. Although, as of May 11, 2008 I am yet receive confirmation from the VA that my claim for compensation has been processed and rated. I have been waiting for seven months since filing my claim and still do not know if monetary compensation from the VA is in my future. After having been unemployed for nearly all of the nine months since leaving the Army, I am experiencing exactly what benefits the Army- a total lack of security. The Army's powerful reenlistment tool, the General Discharge, with the loss of college benefits, combined with a backup of VA Compensation claims, has had an immensely detrimental effect towards my life. But I know that due to the Army's ever-decreasing enlistment standards- despite my medical ailments, and my Discharge Narrative of "Misconduct, Serious Offense", that today I could find financial security in the office of the nearest Army Recruiter. I have recently met many Veterans in a situation very similar to mine who have reenlisted with the military, only out of feeling hopeless and unable to survive as civilians.

After I left the Army another Soldier from Alpha Company 1-30 attempted suicide after coming home from OIF-V on mid-tour leave. Specialist Rogelo Acevedo was an immigrant from Mexico who joined the Army in hopes of gaining citizenship. He enlisted as a Veterinary Technician, but was re-classed as Infantry and deployed to Iraq and assigned to the same platoon as I in 2005, for the last six months of OIF-III. After returning from Iraq, in garrison at Fort Stewart he never received help in obtaining citizenship, as he was promised not only by the Recruiters who brought him into the Army, but by 1-30 INs Command. As someone who joined the Army for a position which did not involve combat, he repeatedly filed for conscientious objector status, but was constantly denied. He was then deployed a second time as an Infantryman with A Co 1-30 IN in May 2007. While visiting family in Texas he attempted to take his own life despite having a new wife and newborn child. After being released from a civilian hospital near his home in Texas, he returned to Fort Stewart and was court-martialed as a malingerer, and sentenced to a three months in prison. As a combat veteran and recipient of an Army Commendation Medal, he then received an Other Than Honorable Discharge, which cost him most of his Army Benefits. He still received no help to become an American Citizen before his removal from the Army in the fall of 2007. He is currently struggling to gain American Citizenship and to get back his military benefits, with no help from the Veterans' Affairs Bureaucracy.

While returning veterans of the Iraq Conflict like myself are being improperly cared for, the occupation of Iraq grows more and more unsettling each day. This is especially true within the borders of the new American walls which surround and imprison Sadr City, cutting its people off from the rest of Baghdad. Clean water, medical supplies, and food are becoming more severe; yet the floods of sewage and mountains of trash that fill the streets and spread disease to the city's inhabitants are expanding. The continued daily curfews, restrictions, and fighting affecting people of Sadr City every day since early 2003 is currently resulting in massive levels of displacement among civilians.

Hellfire Missile strikes since early 2008, aimed at Muqtada Al-Sadr's Mahdi Militia have claimed the lives of nearly one thousand innocent civilians, according to Iraq's Ministry of Health. Each innocent civilian killed by American weapons within Sadr City raises the potential for an entire family to rise up in support of the Mahdi Militia. The Mahdi Militia blends in too well with the local populace, so positive identification of all targets for American Helicopters wielding Hellfire Missiles is near impossible. The only way to avoid further loss of innocent civilian lives and American Soldiers is to withdraw all Coalition Forces from the streets of Sadr City and focus on diplomacy with all groups within Iraq.

American Soldiers who are dying in vain while fighting for an impossible task of "winning the hearts and minds" of the same civilians that American rockets are killing. This is a disgrace to not only our nation but to humanity as a whole. American Troops have occupied Sadr City since 2003, and are yet to be responsible for an increase in the daily living standards of the population there. This endless circle of perpetual violence strengthened by the Troop Surge of 2007 has done nothing but result in taking a city where in 2005, I, as an American Soldier walked around with little fear of the Mahdi Militia; now dozens of Americans have recently been killed or horrifically wounded on those same streets. We cannot rationally expect the people of Sadr City to choose to support the side of the the foreign force which invaded their country, collapsed their way of life, and spent years failing to fulfill promises to increase the state of security, strengthen the economy, and protect the welfare of the Iraqi people. Sadr City is lost to George Bush's cause, and cannot be fixed by any amount of American bullets and explosives. Diplomacy, non-militarized Humanitarian Aid and repair to the infrastructure of Sadr City is our only hope towards peace and success of the mission: Operation Iraqi Freedom.

In my testimony, I have specifically mentioned just three of the victims of the Troop Surge and the Stop-Loss Policy. Thirty thousand American Soldiers were directly affected by George Bush's Troop Surge. Thousands of those Soldiers were like me, Stop-Lossed, forced to serve on active duty beyond the date they signed on their contract. Most are still currently overseas. Those who are not overseas have either been administratively separated from the Army and lost their benefits as I have, or have been injured and possibly lost a limb or an eye and medically evacuated from combat, or have lost their lives. Most Soldiers are eligible for upwards of forty thousand dollar, tax-free reenlistment bonuses while overseas; but many are choosing instead not to reenlist, and to simply wait until the Army releases them from their involuntarily extended contracts. This is happening while suicide rates among Veterans are at the highest rate since they began keeping such records in 1980. Last year, about 2,100 soldiers injured themselves or attempted suicide, compared with about 350 in 2002, according to the U.S. Army Medical Command Suicide Prevention Action Plan. Reports from the Veterans Affairs (VA) state that approximately 20% of Veterans are returning from Iraq with symptoms of PTSD and Depression, 70% of which do not seek help through the Army Medical system or VA. Each deployment reportedly makes a



Soldier 60% more likely to have contract a mental illness. Some of the best, most qualified, and patriotic Americans of my generation have grown tired of repeat deployments in support of a mission with unclear or impossible objectives, and refuse to fight any longer. Stop-Lossed Soldiers should be seen as not as part of “an all volunteer force” but as silent protesters, who refuse large sums of money and have chosen to just wait out their time rather than continue serving Our Nation. In reality, Stop-Lossed Soldiers, a huge part of the Troop Surge, are simply prisoners of the contracts which bind them into a war they no longer wish to fight. For the good of the souls of the American Military, and the millions of Iraqi civilians who also suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, this fight must come to an end.

May God Bless America and the Peoples of Iraq, and may we be forgiven for having participated in such a devastating conflict.

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