

Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen. My name Robbin D. Halcomb, and I'm a Senior Master Sergeant with the Indiana Air National Guard, assigned to the 181st Fighter Wing, Terre Haute, Indiana "Home to the "Racers". I have been in the Air National Guard and the United States Air Force for almost 29 years. During that time, I have been deployed to Italy, Norway, Germany, Macedonia, Bahrain, Guatemala, and most recently to Turkey, participating in Operation Northern Watch, Operation Noble Eagle and Operation Enduring Freedom. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to tell my story and the story of thousands just like me who have had the greatest honor to serve in the armed forces of this great nation as a member of the reserve component.

On March 8th, 2003 I was injured while stationed at Incirlik Air Force Base, Turkey. I had 7 hours of surgery to repair a shattered right elbow. After 3 days in the hospital I was released and continued my duties with the 39th Air Expeditionary Wing. After returning home to the U.S. on the 22nd of April, I made an appointment to see my family physician for follow-up physical therapy, as I had been told to do, as I needed to correct the range of motion in my right arm I had lost because of the injury. Because of the extent of my injury, the Commander of the 181st Medical Group, Colonel John P. McGoff, requested that I remain on active duty. The National Guard Bureau denied that request along with several others from our unit. I was released from active duty on the 15th of June 2003.

On the 16th of June of this year, I applied for Veterans benefits at my local courthouse. The first words spoken to me were "You're in the Guard, what makes you eligible". I promptly showed them my DD 214 and their attitude immediately changed to a more professional one. I was told that the process would take up to 9 months before a final review of my case would be determined. I received notification on or about the 15th of July to report to the Roudebush VA Medical Center in Indianapolis for a medical appointment on 16th of August for testing and evaluation. I am still awaiting word of approval. The medical evaluation at the Veterans Hospital in Indianapolis was the very best treatment I have received in any medical facility.

I have been around for many years and have many good friends who have retired from active duty and they were the ones who advised me about possible benefits to which I may be entitled. The problem is, I never would have had any idea that I could apply for Veterans medical benefits had they not told me. I still have pins and wires in my arm that I need removed. But who is going to pay for my medical follow up treatments now that I am off active duty? Will my own personal Blue Cross Blue Shield pay for it since I was on active duty when injured? Will the VA over the costs if my claim is approved? Or will Tri-care pay for it because of the line of duty determination that was accomplished? These questions remained unanswered until September.

I am personally saddened by the fact that several guardsmen from my unit who have been injured on active duty, have been discharged or are pending discharge from military service, and some have lost their full-time job because they were unable to perform their duties due to the injuries or illnesses that occurred to them while on active duty. Six members of the 181st Fighter Wing requested to stay on active duty pending medical recovery and they were denied that entitlement. This type of action is commonly known

in the Guard as Operation Deny Entitlements. Federal agencies also need to be made aware of “who” or “what” is a Veteran. It shouldn’t matter if the veteran holding the DD 214 is a guardsman or reservist.

I am not here to whine nor complain about the medical treatment I received while on active duty or any other place. The medical care given to us has been second to none. I am here today because there is a disconnect between what happens to active duty personnel when they are injured or retire and what happens to a member of the reserve component when the same thing happens. There is no equity, just ask TSgt James Wilson, MSgt Dave Roberts and TSgt Marty Lathrop all these men have legitimate military related injuries and all have been denied equity.

When a member of the active duty forces retires, they are afforded an opportunity to attend a retirement school. Then 60-90 days prior to his or her discharge he or she is given a physical. VA representatives are there to take their claim and process it if they so desire. The members of the reserve components are not afforded the same opportunity and many go throughout their retirement years without ever knowing about or applying for their Veterans benefits that they have earned. We also do not receive a retirement physical or retirement counseling.

I work side by side with my active duty counterparts every day, and have done so for almost 3 decades. There are thousands more just like me, only they do not know about the benefits they may be entitled to. There needs to be an equitable process so that when you return from defending our nation’s freedom on active duty, you, as a guardsman or women, have the opportunity to seek VA benefits without trying to track down what their entitlements are on your own. I cannot stress enough, the need for equity. If I were on active duty and developed high blood pressure after serving for ten years, I would be given a disability. If I were a guardsman and developed the same high blood pressure problem, my condition would be found to be a pre-existing condition and I would be discharged. We need awareness of our Veteran’s Rights while we serve and when we retire. But most of all we need equity with our Active Duty counterparts.

I have read the budget reports sent to Congress, and the numbers are troubling. Seventy thousand more heroes will be added to the VA roles than anticipated this year alone. I hope 35,000 of them are from the Reserve Forces helping achieve equity with the active duty. Thank you for your time. May I answer any questions for you?