

This focus on rigorous courses has opened the doors to higher education for students of Edinburg North, many of whom are the first in their families to attend college. As a result, Edinburg North graduates have been courted by some of the most selective institutions in the nation, such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Dartmouth College, Columbia University, and Rice University.

The silver medal awarded by U.S. News and World report shows that Edinburg North High School's tradition of excellence is continuing. I would like to congratulate the entire community for this achievement and would like to specially acknowledge the leadership of Principal Ramiro Guerra, Superintendent Gilberto Garza, Jr., and President of the Board of Trustees Carmen Gonzalez. Excellent schools are only possible when there is excellent leadership.

Please join me in applauding the achievements of Edinburg North High School. I urge them to keep up the good work.

MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES AT THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

HON. DONALD A. MANZULLO

OF ILLINOIS

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, December 13, 2007

Mr. MANZULLO. Madam Speaker, I rise to raise awareness about a mental health concern that is afflicting our brave veterans. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is an illness that can have devastating consequences if not treated. For too long, those suffering from PTSD have been unfairly stigmatized. On December 12, 2007, Mike and Kim Bowman traveled from their home in northern Illinois to testify about the immeasurable tragedy their family has suffered as a result of the suicide of their son Specialist Tim Bowman.

Specialist Tim Bowman was 23 years old when he lost his battle with PTSD only eight months after returning from active duty in Iraq. The Department of Veterans Affairs needs to do more to ensure that all members of the armed services receive the care and attention they deserve. Mike and Kim's story is one that is all too often repeated around the country. As Mike Bowman said in his testimony, "we must all remove the stigma that goes with a soldier admitting that he or she has [PTSD]."

I enclose for the RECORD the testimonies of Mike Bowman and author Ilona Meagher. I encourage all Members to read their statements and judge for themselves the level of the mental health challenges that exists. It is time that this country recognizes what is going with PTSD and takes appropriate action now. No one should suffer a day longer.

TESTIMONY OF MIKE BOWMAN

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, my wife and I are honored to be speaking before you today representing just one of the families that lost a veteran to suicide in 2005.

As my family was preparing for our 2005 Thanksgiving meal, our son Timothy was lying on the floor of my shop office, slowly bleeding to death from a self inflicted gun shot wound. His war was now over, his demons were gone. Tim was laid to rest in a combination military, firefighter funeral that was a tribute to the man he was.

Tim was the life of a party, happy go lucky young man that joined the National Guard in 2003 to earn money for college and get a little structure in his life. On March 19th of 2005 when Specialist Bowman got off the bus with the other National Guard soldiers of Foxtrot 202 that were returning from Iraq he was a different man. He had a glaze in his eyes and a 1000 yard stare, always looking for an insurgent.

Family members of F202 were given a 10 minute briefing on PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) 2 months before the soldiers returned and the soldiers were given even less. The commander of F202 had asked the Illinois Guard command to change their demobilization practices to be more like the regular army, only to have his questions rebuffed. He knew that our boys had been shot up, blown up by IED's (Improvised Explosive Device), extinguished fires on soldiers so their parents would have something to bury, and extinguished a fire on their own to save lives. They were hardened combat veterans now, but were being treated like they had been at an extended training mission.

You see our National Guardsman from F202 were not out filling sand bags. They departed in October of 2003 for 6 months of training at Ft's Hood and Polk. On Tim's 22nd birthday, March 4, 2004, Foxtrot left for Iraq where they were stationed at Camp Victory. Their tour took them directly into combat including 4 months on "the most dangerous road in the world", the highway from the airport to the green zone in Baghdad. Tim was a top gunner in a humvee. Tim as well as many other soldiers in F202 earned their Purple Hearts on that stretch of road known as Route Irish. We are STILL waiting for Tim's Purple Heart from various military paperwork shuffles.

When CBS News broke the story about Veterans suicides, the VA took the approach of criticizing the way that the numbers were created instead of embracing it and using it to help increase mental health care within their system. Regardless of how perfectly accurate the numbers are, they obviously show a trend that desperately needs attention. CBS did what NO government agency would do; they tabulated the veteran suicide numbers to shed light on this hidden epidemic and make the American people aware of this situation. The VA should have taken those numbers to Capitol Hill asking for more people, funding, and anything else they need to combat this epidemic. They should embrace this study as it reveals the scope of a huge problem, rather than complaining about its accuracy. If all that is going to be done with the study is argue about how the numbers were compiled, then an average of 120 soldiers will die every week by their own hand until the VA recognizes this fact, and does something about it.

The VA mental health system is broken in function, and understaffed in operation. There are many cases of soldiers coming to the VA for help and being turned away or misdiagnosed for PTSD and then losing their battle with their demons. Those soldiers, as well as our son Timothy, can never be brought back. No one can change that fact. But you can change the system so this trend can be slowed down dramatically or even stopped.

Our son was just one of thousands of veterans that this country has lost to suicide. I see every day the pain and grief that our family and extended family goes through in trying to deal with this loss. Every one of those at risk veterans also has a family that will suffer if that soldier finds the only way to take the battlefield pain away is by taking his or her own life. Their ravished and broken spirits are then passed on to their

families as they try to justify what has happened. I now suffer from the same mental illnesses that claimed my son's life, PTSD, from the images and sounds of finding him and hearing his life fade away, and depression from a loss that I would not wish on anyone.

If the veteran suicide rate is not classified as an epidemic that needs immediate and drastic attention, then the American fighting soldier needs someone in Washington who thinks it is. I challenge you to do for the American soldier, what that soldier did for each of you and for his country. Take care of them and help preserve their American dream as they did yours. To quote President Calvin Coolidge, "The nation which forgets its defenders will be itself forgotten."

I challenge you to make the VA an organization to be proud of instead of the last place that a veteran wants to go. It is the obligation of each and every one of you and all Americans, to channel the energies, resources, and the intelligence and wisdom of this nation's Best and Brightest to create the most effective, efficient and meaningful healthcare system for our men and women who have served. You must find a way to remove the stigma that goes with a soldier admitting that he or she has a mental problem. We have the technology to create the most highly advanced military system, but when these Veterans come home, they find an understaffed, underfunded, and under-equipped VA mental health system that has so many challenges to get through it, that many just give up trying. The result is the current suicide epidemic among our nation's defenders, one of which was Specialist Timothy Noble Bowman, our 23 year old son, soldier, and hero.

Our veterans should and must not be left behind in the ravished, horrific battlefields of their broken spirits and minds. Our veterans deserve better!! Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. Thank you.

TESTIMONY OF ILONA MEAGHER

Chairman Filner, Ranking Member Buyer, and other distinguished members of the Committee, I thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

To open, I'd like to briefly share my thoughts on why it is that I believe I'm here. I am not only someone who's spent the past two years researching and writing about post-traumatic stress in our returning troops, I'm also a veteran's daughter. My father was born in Hungary, served two years in antitank artillery as a Hungarian Army conscript, fought against the Soviet Union on the streets of Budapest during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, and later fled to America where, in 1958, he again became a soldier, this time wearing a United States Army uniform, and serving as a combat engineer stationed in Germany.

My father's unique experience of having served on both sides—East and West—in such differing armies during the Cold War, gave him a unique perspective on military life.

And so, growing up, my sisters and I often heard my father say, "You can always tell how a government feels about its people by looking at how it treats its soldiers."

Looking at our returning soldiers and their widely-reported struggles with the military and VA health care systems they rely on, of being stigmatized from seeking care or of being placed on lengthy VA waiting lists when they need immediate help—some even committing suicide before their appointment dates arrive—have raised this citizen's alarm bells.

We have had a "see no evil, hear no evil" approach to examining post-deployment psychological reintegration issues such as suicide. After all we have learned from the

struggles of the Vietnam War generation—and the ensuing controversy over how many of its veterans did or did not commit suicide in its wake—why is there today no known national registry where Afghanistan and Iraq veteran suicide data is being collected? How can we ascertain reintegration problems—if any exist—if we are not proactive in seeking them out?

As late as May 2007, Department of Veterans Affairs spokeswoman Karen Fedele told the Washington Post that there was no attempt to gather Afghanistan and Iraq veteran suicide incidents. “We don’t keep that data,” she said. “I’m told that somebody here is going to do an analysis, but there just is nothing right now.”

Meanwhile, the Army reported its suicide rate in 2006 rose to 17.3 per 100,000 troops, the highest in 26 years of keeping such records. At long last, the Associated Press revealed that the VA is finally conducting preliminary research. They’ve tracked at least 283 OEF/OIF veteran suicides through the end of 2005, nearly double the rate of the additional 147 suicides reported by the DoD’s Defense Manpower Data Center.

Looking only at these suicide figures from the VA (283) and the DoD (147), there have been at least 430 Afghanistan and Iraq veteran suicides that have occurred either in the combat zone or stateside following combat deployment. Lost in the VA and DoD counts are those veterans who have returned from their deployments, are still in the military and not yet in the VA system. The DoD says they do not track those incidents, and I assume neither does the VA because these veterans are not yet on their radar.

Yet even with this omission, many of these 430 confirmed suicides are a result of our wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and should—but won’t—be listed with the DoD’s official OEF/OIF death toll of 4,351. It bears mentioning: Currently 10 percent of the overall fatal casualty count of these wars is due to suicide.

Dismissing the issue of veteran suicide in the face of this data is negligent and does nothing to honor the service and sacrifice of our veterans and the families and communities that literally are tasked with supporting them once they return.

Yet, prior to last month’s CBS News investigation, which revealed that 120 veterans of all wars committed suicide every week in 2005 and that 20–24 year old Afghanistan and Iraq veterans are two to four times more likely to commit suicide than their civilian counterparts, the scope of the problem has been largely unknown because no one with proper resources and access to do the compiling of data came forward to do so.

In my written testimony, I’ve included 75 suicides that I and other citizen journalist colleagues have been tracking since September 2005 and which today reside in the ePluribus Media PTSD Timeline.

Offering only a small and incomplete sliver of insight into how some of our returning troops are faring on the home front—especially in light of the fact that at least another 355 incidents could be added among them according to the VA and DoD—I believe that they collectively tell an even greater tale about the failure of us as individuals and as a society to ensure that our returning warriors are cleansed completely from the psychological wounds of war.

They also reflect the failure of our government institutions to protect those who protect us.

While I realize that these distressing stories are the exception and not the rule, to our exceptional military families having to deal with the deterioration of a loved one they thought had safely returned from combat, they are the rule. In 1956, the same year

that my parents fled to this incredible country, the 84th Congress—in the very House that we sit in today—had this to say in a presidential commission report on veterans’ benefits:

“The Government’s obligation is to help veterans overcome special, significant handicaps incurred as a consequence of their military service. The objective should be to return veterans as nearly as possible to the status they would have achieved had they not been in military service . . . and maintaining them and their survivors in circumstances as favorable as those of the rest of the people. . . . War sacrifices should be distributed as equally as possible within our society. This is the basic function of our veterans programs.”

I am not a pedigreed expert or a government official seasoned in testifying before you, but those who are from the GAO and the Congressional Research Department and even the Veterans Administration itself, have sat in this very seat over the years and told you we are falling far short in providing the resources and programs our returning troops and military families need to successfully return to their personal lives following their service to the nation.

To those who resist hearing the cold hard truth of where we are today, I’d like to say: The time is here to stop fighting the data, and to start fighting for our troops.

This is America. We can do better. We must do better.

HONORING RETIRING TOWN OF BOSTON COUNCILMAN BRIEN HOPKINS

HON. BRIAN HIGGINS

OF NEW YORK

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, December 13, 2007

Mr. HIGGINS. Madam Speaker, I am pleased today to honor the accomplishments of Boston Town Councilman Brien Hopkins.

Throughout Brien’s service on the Town Board, he exemplified the term “public servant.” Brien’s commitment to Boston was manifest, and his desire to see his town reach the very highest level possible served his constituents admirably.

Our community owes Brien a debt of gratitude for his tireless dedication to make Boston a better place to live, work and raise a family. While his work on the town board will conclude on January 1 of next year, the legacy he leaves behind will endure for a long time to come.

Madam Speaker, I want to thank you for this opportunity to honor Brien’s service, and please join me in wishing Brien and his family the very best in the months and years to come.

THE INTRODUCTION OF A HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION TO RECOGNIZE THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE U.S. ARMY RESERVE

HON. STEVE BUYER

OF INDIANA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, December 13, 2007

Mr. BUYER. Madam Speaker, I am honored today to join with over 230 of my colleagues from both sides of the aisle to introduce this

joint resolution that recognizes the sizable impact and contribution that the members of the Army Reserve have had on this great Nation throughout its 100-year history.

This organization has a rich history of dedicated service and sacrifice. From its inception as a corps of medical officers on April 23, 1908, to its initial call-up, charged with running down the bandit “Pancho” Villa, to the challenges that the doughboys faced in World War I, to the bloody battles fought during World War II on the beaches of the Pacific to those of Normandy, to the hills of the war in Korea, and to the sands of the Persian Gulf, the Army Reserve has always rode to the sound of the guns and answered the Nation’s call in its times of need, around the world, without hesitation, living their creed: Duty, Honor, Country.

Today, these soldiers and their loved ones shoulder a greater share of the burden than at anytime in our Nation’s history. Since September 11, 2001, more than 177,000 Army Reserve Soldiers have been mobilized or deployed in support of the Global War on Terrorism. At any given time, more than 20,000 Army Reserve Soldiers are deployed to no fewer than 18 countries around the world. Their efforts will ensure that America’s vital national security interests will continue to be fulfilled and that our homeland remains protected. I am proud to be counted among their ranks.

This resolution represents an opportunity for Congress to recognize the incredible history of service, sacrifice, and accomplishment of those soldiers who have served in the Army Reserve since its inception. Through war and peace citizen soldiers have contributed so much to answer the Nation’s call to ensure that liberty endures. Please join me in celebrating that heritage and recognizing their proud history by supporting this resolution.

RECOGNIZING PHILIPPE CRAS OF KINGWOOD, TEXAS

HON. TED POE

OF TEXAS

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, December 13, 2007

Mr. POE. Madam Speaker, few people symbolize the American Dream more than Philippe Cras of Kingwood, Texas. From foreign exchange student to proud American citizen, his life is an inspirational tale of making the most of the vast opportunities available in the United States and giving back to local communities after achieving great success.

Philippe is originally from Belgium and arrived in the United States in 1977 as an exchange student sponsored by a Rotary Club. After attending community college in Oregon, he returned to his home country and later accepted a position with a company in the United States. He and his wife, Mieke, eventually settled in Kingwood, Texas. Philippe and Mieke love the United States and wanted nothing more than to become citizens of our great country. They did achieve this goal.

Later, Philippe purchased property in Kingwood and began building his hotel, Homewood Suites. In June of 2000, the hotel opened its doors combining European style with Southern hospitality for a unique lodging experience.

Philippe is known in the community for many things such as his breakfast which features Belgian waffles that are made in the