that when he was little, he loved to watch television cooking shows. One night after coming home from work, Mrs. Mays told DeShon and his little brothers Ronald and Domenique that she would cook dinner for them.

But after seeing how easy it looked on TV, little DeShon told his mom that he would cook for the family instead. ''Let DeShon cook!'' cried Ronald and Domenique in agreement. ''Sometimes he'd create his own little dinner,'' says Ronald, who says DeShon was a good cook.

DeShon joined the Marines shortly after high school graduation. He underwent boot camp in Guam, and during a 2-week-long wilderness survival course had to eat crabs, snakes and snails. He told his mother, ''The snails were the nastiest.''

DeShon's passion to excel as a marine was clear to others. ''He was dedicated,'' says Ronald. ''He loved what he did. He wouldn't change it.'' Eventually, DeShon would recruit three of his friends and Ronald to join the Marines.

''He's the reason we signed up,'' confirms Ronald. ''He talked about it all the time. He would call a lot, let us know how it was.''

Ronald looked up to his brother DeShon, who was four years older, and Ronald also played football at North Hardin High School. After enlisting, Ronald entered the school of infantry. DeShon would call his little brother often to encourage him and give him advice.

By that point, DeShon was calling from Ramadi, Iraq, site of some of the toughest fighting against the terrorists. Lieutenant Colonel Paul Kennedy, his battalion commander, has said that ''within the blink of an eye, the situation [in Ramadi] went from relatively calm to a raging storm.''

Lance Corporal Otey joined the 2nd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment, made up of tough, battle-hardened warriors. Their motto is ''Second to None,'' and the battalion patch they wear on their shoulders proudly declares them to be ''The Magnificent Bastards.''

Lance Corporal Otey was a star in this elite unit. And he became well known as a survivor of one of the most brutal battles the 2nd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment would ever see.

On the morning of April 6, 2004, terrorists walked through Ramadi's marketplace, telling shopkeepers to close their stores and warning them, ''Today, we are going to kill Americans.'' That day they ambushed marines in four separate, but coordinated, attacks.

Lance Corporal Otey was part of a squadron sent in to support another group of marines that was under attack. He and seven other marines entered the combat zone in a green humvee.

Suddenly terrorist snipers on the rooftops opened fire. Bullets pierced the humvee, killing driver LCpl Kyle Crowley and sending the vehicle tumbling onto its side.

''I remember when we got to our objective I started to hear 'tink, tink, tink,'" Lance Corporal Otey later told the Marine Corps News. ''I was like, 'Man, we're being shot at. Get out of the vehicle.'''

Lance Corporal Otey leapt out and took cover behind a wall, calling out to his fellow marines to do the same. Bullets whizzed by him—one even went through his pants leg—but none hit him. Amazingly, a hand grenade thrown at his feet did not go off.

Lance Corporal Otey returned fire and eventually more reinforcements came and successfully squelched the terrorists' attack. Otey was the only survivor of all the men who had been in his humvee.

In all, 16 marines were killed in the battle, and 25 wounded. But marines seized several hundred weapons systems from the enemy and killed over 250 anti-American fighters.

Lance Corporal Otey called his mother later to tell her about the epic battle and that he was ok. During their conversation, she could hear several people congratulating her son for a job well done.

One of the screenwriters of the Mel Gibson film ''We Were Soldiers'' even flew to Iraq to hear Lance Corporal Otey's story, telling him it might be used for a movie.

Still, this was little consolation for the loss of his Marine brothers. ''I talk with some of the other guys in the platoon about what happened, but it still hurts,'' Lance Corporal Otey told a newspaper afterwards.

Using the Marine term for a sleeping bunk, he continued, ''Every time I walk into our living space I see the empty racks. Those were guys I used to talk to about my problems. Now I don't hear their voices anymore.''

Tragically, Lance Corporal Otey's rack would go empty less than 3 months later.

Lance Corporal Otey was buried with full military rites in Cave Hill Cemetery in Louisville. Robin Mays points out that DeShon lies next to a World War II veteran and a Korean War veteran, and 10 graves away from his grandmother, Mrs. Mays's mother.

Nothing can turn this sad story into a happy one for Lance Corporal Otey's family. But there is one more chapter to tell. Two years after Lance Corporal Otey's death, marines in Fallujah killed two terrorists, a sniper and a spotter, who were preparing to shoot at marines. The sniper was using an M–40–A–1 rifle that had been taken from Lance Corporal Otey's team that fateful day in June 2004.

The marines returned the rifle to Lance Corporal Otey's battalion, and Lieutenant Colonel Kennedy hopes to make it a memorial to Lance Corporal Otey and all the members of his battalion who were killed in Iraq. And he believes the chances are strong that the terrorists found with this weapon were among the ones who killed Lance Corporal Otey.

Our prayers go out to Mrs. Robin Mays for the loss of her son, and we thank her for sharing her memories of DeShon with us. DeShon's stepfather, Larry Mays; his brothers, Ronald and Domenique; his stepsisters, Mykeba Woods and Shauna Mays; his aunts, Terri Able and Cynthia Williams; his uncles, Ronald Jeffries and Dwayne Able; his grandmother, Betty Williams; and his step-grandmother Gracie Mays are in our thoughts today as well.

DeShon's brother Ronald is now a lance corporal in the Marines, currently stationed in North Carolina. He has a son who's just 19 months old, and born a year to the day after Lance Corporal Otey was buried on July 3, 2004, a day the city of Radcliff dedicated to him. Ronald named his son DeShon after the uncle he will never meet.

No one could ever repay Lance Corporal Otey's family for their loss. But we can honor them today by giving his sacrifice the reverence and respect it deserves. And we can promise that his country will never forget his service.

But I suspect that the greatest tribute to DeShon will be the little boy who will grow up bearing his name. Let's not let that child ever doubt that his uncle was a hero.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Rhode Island is recognized.

IRAQ

Mr. WHITEHOUSE. Mr. President, first let me extend my condolences to the Republican leader and to the people of Kentucky for the loss of their courageous native son.

Mr. President, I rise this morning because in recent days we have learned, to our great dismay, that this administration has let one of our most sacred promises go unfulfilled.

In Rhode Island last week I visited veterans convalescing at our VA hospital in Providence. On Tuesday, members of Rhode Island's branch of the Disabled American Veterans came to talk with me in Washington. They came to appeal for those returning from the war in Iraq.

Of course, there are many brave veterans whom I have met with throughout my State over the past several years at American Legion posts, senior centers, Fourth of July and Memorial Day parades, and at our many community dinners in towns all over Rhode Island. They were men and women, young and old. They served in our Nation's wars from World War II to Vietnam to the conflict in Iraq. Like the DAV members I met yesterday, they wanted us to hear what they had to tell us: the infuriating truth that we are failing to support our troops as they return from Iraq and Afghanistan.

When we ask ordinary men and women to do the extraordinary and stand up and serve in harm's way, we know that we can never fully repay what they and their families have given us. The service of Lance Corporal

Otey, which we just heard about from the Republican leader, certainly emphasizes that point. But we can surely pledge to these men and women that we will give them what they need in the field, and when their service is ended we will care for them adequately. Breaking that promise is a dishonor to them and to their sacrifice, and it is not supporting our troops.

I believe—as do many of my colleagues—that the best way to support our troops would be to deploy them back out of Iraq and define a more sensible and responsible strategy against terror. Some on the other side of the aisle have claimed our calls for a new strategy in Iraq mean we do not support our troops. This argument is truly horrible, thoroughly false, and I hope people watching can understand how it shows the depths to which this debate has plummeted.

To add on that for a moment, I say that not because on this side of the aisle we are too thin-skinned to take a shot in the give-and-take of politics. That is the nature of what we signed up for. That is not what this is about. What this is about is that the battle of slogans we are seeing over this important issue for our country right now displaces the exchange of ideas and a thoughtful and realistic discussion of what our new strategy options are, and in that sense it greatly disserves the American people.

Let's judge the support for our troops within this Chamber and within the administration by real actions, not inflammatory and phony rhetoric. By that measure, it is fair to question whether the Bush administration and those in this Chamber who support the President's Iraq policy truly understand the need of America's veterans—men and women fighting in Iraq—and those who will soon join them there as this President escalates this conflict.

We want our troops now in Iraq to come home safely. They want to send tens of thousands more there. They have sent them without adequate support personnel, equipment, or armor. Indeed, during the course of my campaign to come to this place, I heard from mothers who had to go into their pocketbooks to pay for body armor for sons and daughters headed for Iraq because they could not count on this administration to provide them that basic need.

Also, we have sent them without adequate assurance that should they be injured in the line of duty, they would be properly cared for when they return. That is not supporting the troops. In America, we have the best doctors, nurses, facilities, and medical equipment. From combat medics to VA hospitals, the military can and does provide our Active-Duty military personnel and veterans with medical care that is second to none. But despite all this, our military and veterans health care system has a crushing, all-encompassing problem; that is, access to that care.

When service men and women enter the VA system, too often they begin a long, uphill battle for access to the care and benefits they need to get well and rebuild their lives. The war in Iraq has triggered a flood of new veterans that risks overwhelming the VA system. Mr. President, 700,000 veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan are expected to enter the military and VA health care systems in coming years at a projected cost of as much as $600 billion.

According to the Army Times, the number of service members being approved for permanent disability retirement has ''plunged''—to use their word, ''plunged''—by more than two-thirds since 2001. The Army's physical disability caseload has increased by 80 percent since 2001. As it attempts to process new benefits claims in fiscal year 2006, the VA is experiencing a 400,000-case backlog. Veterans frequently wait 6 months to 2 years before they begin to receive monthly benefits.

These problems are especially acute in the area of mental health. More than 73,000 veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan treated by the VA since 2002 have been diagnosed with a potential mental disorder. More than 39,000 have been tentatively diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, and 35 percent of Iraq veterans have sought psychological counseling within a year of returning home. But where the VA spent over $3,500 per veteran on mental health care back in 1995, it spends just over $2,500 today—a drop of close to $1,000 per veteran.

These are troubling statistics, but they fail utterly to capture our dismay at the reports published over the past several days in the Washington Post and Newsweek magazine of the unacceptable living conditions for outpatients at Walter Reed Medical Center and the stifling bureaucracy that blockades many veterans' access to care.

The Washington Post wrote of soldiers living in Walter Reed facilities infested with mold and mice, unable to get new uniforms to replace those cut from their bodies by military doctors in the field, forced to bring photos and even their own Purple Hearts to prove to file clerks that they, indeed, served in Iraq. Waiting months, as the VA processes benefit claims in what Marine Sgt Ryan Groves called ''a nonstop process of stalling,'' these soldiers and their families move from appointment to appointment and submit form after form, often to replace earlier forms already lost by the system. Many suffer, as we saw on television the other night on ABC, from brain injuries, from post-traumatic stress disorder, or from other mental health conditions, but Walter Reed's outpatient facilities lack sufficient mental health counselors and social workers to help them navigate the system.

The Post tells us many Walter Reed outpatients now face ''teams of Army doctors scrutinizing their injuries for signs of preexisting conditions, lessening their chance for disability benefits.'' Veterans often must navigate this convoluted system alone, carrying stacks of medical records from appointment to appointment. The Post quoted Vera Heron, who lived on the post for over a year helping care for her son. Here is what she said:

> You are talking about guys and girls whose lives are disrupted for the rest of their lives, and they don't put any priority on it.

The care of our veterans returning home from Iraq should be among our Nation's highest priorities. For these soldiers and their families to feel as forgotten and abandoned as they do means simply that this administration is not serving them as it should. It is not serving them as they served us. It is not supporting our troops.

The Air Force Times just reported that soldiers at Walter Reed have now been told not to speak to the media and that the Pentagon has—and this is a quote—''clamped down on media coverage of any and all Defense Department medical facilities . . . saying in an e-mail to spokespeople: 'It will be in most cases not appropriate to engage the media while this review takes place,' referring to an investigation of problems at Walter Reed.''

This administration cannot and must not just bury its failure to support our troops behind a muzzled spokesperson cadre. I commend our Armed Services Committee, including my senior Senator, Rhode Island's JACK REED, for that committee's announced hearing on conditions at Walter Reed Hospital. I hope they will be relentless in their investigation.

My colleagues and the constituents we represent wholeheartedly support our troops and our veterans. Anything else one hears is a lie. We believe it is time for our soldiers to redeploy out of Iraq because we believe that is our Nation's best strategy forward in the Middle East and to combat terror. But we also believe that as they serve and when they get home, we must make good on our promises—our promise to train and equip them in their service and our promise to care for them in their injury and illness. It is our obligation to do this. In the face of all we have heard and seen, that obligation, like so many others, has been failed by this administration. I thank the Chair, and I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. LIEBERMAN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Morning business is closed.