

Congressional Testimony

Laura Ramsey
Wife of John A. Ramsey SPC.
Florida Army National Guard

Submitted Before the Subcommittee on National Security,
Emerging Threat, and International Relations

“Does the ‘Total Force’ Add Up? – The Impact of Health Protection
Programs on Guard and Reserve Units

March 30, 2004

I would like to thank the committee, and I am honored for the privilege to testify on a wife's perspective regarding reserve military family life. My husband, Specialist John A. Ramsey, is a member of the 32nd Army Air Missile Defense Command. He comes from a family with a proud history of serving in the United States Military. His grandfather, Charles J. Bondley, Jr., a graduate of West Point, was a two star general in the Air Force who served during WWII alongside General McCarthy and General Lamay. His father, Thomas W. Ramsey, Sr., served two tours of duty during the Vietnam War in the army. His brother and half sister are currently in the military.

John enlisted in the United States Marine Corp in 1989 serving two years before being honorably discharged on a family hardship due to his grandmother's, for whom he was the guardian, deteriorating health. After acquiring her much-needed medical treatment and establishing a safe home environment, he wished to continue serving his country. In 1995, he reenlisted in the military through the Florida Army National Guard as a reservist. Since then he has been called to active duty, to support the firefighters during the wildfires in Central and West Florida (1998 & 2000), Operation Noble Eagle and Operation Enduring Freedom (2001-2002), and Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003).

During his deployment of Operation Iraqi Freedom, John was injured while loading heavy equipment overhead. He reported his injury to his First Sergeant and was sent to the Troop Medical Clinic in Kuwait for treatment. He informed me of his injury by email stating that he was being treated for a strained or pulled muscle in the right shoulder but was in enormous pain. Though I was concerned for his well being, my mind was put at ease because he assured me he was receiving medical care and treatment.

Meanwhile, the war with Iraq had begun and John stayed with his unit to help

support the efforts of the war. During the war, my contact with him was lost. At no time was I notified of his injury, medical treatment, or progress of recovery either by the United States Military or his Army National Guard Unit. The only news I received via the military came from a non-deployed, close friend serving in the same Army National Guard Unit. The Family Readiness Program did email me a couple of times but with nothing “news worthy” concerning John. I received no phone calls nor personal visits from any military personnel. On the other hand, the Orange County Sheriff’s office, John’s civilian employer, called me monthly. The following individuals from the Sheriff’s office called to check on how the children and I were coping and to inquire if we needed any assistance: (1) the Human Resources Department, (2) the secretary for Director Ford, (3) John’s Sergeant, and (4) a couple of fellow deputies.

John was deployed for five months in Kuwait and Iraq. This period was very stressful on our two children Chris, age seven, and Sarah, age 2, (turned three while John was deployed). Chris received counseling at his school, Shenandoah Elementary along with several other children whom had parents deployed to Iraq. He is not an openly emotional child, but I could tell he was having problems dealing with his father’s absence, especially as to the reason his father was in Iraq. I did my best to explain what was happening in Iraq and why the United States and its allies were attempting to help free the Iraqi people. At first, we watched the news coverage of the War together, but it did not take long to see that this increased his anxiety and furthered his lack of understanding of the war. Soon, if I had the news on, he would leave the room in tears, so I stopped watching the news while he was around.

Sarah was also having a difficult time with John's absence. She is very close to her father and did not understand why he was not coming home at night. Upon arriving home after I picked her and Chris up from my parents, who regularly pick them up from daycare and school, she would often search the house for John all the while calling out "Daddy we're home." I attempted to explain that her daddy was not home and why he was not home. I continually reminded her that he had left on the bus, reassuring her that he would return home soon. She related to his being on a bus, since the last time she had seen him was the night he left on the bus for Ft. Stewart, Georgia.

Even though our family was struggling with our emotions due to John's absence, we supported and continue to support the efforts in Iraq. However, if I had not had mine and John's families, as well as, the Orange County Sheriff's Department's support during his deployment, things probably would have been emotionally and physically devastating, especially since I felt completely isolated from the military.

Upon John's return to the Ft. Stewart, Georgia in June 2003 he was given an MRI ordered by the doctors in Kuwait since the physical therapy and Cortisone shots given him there had not relieved his pain. He was diagnosed with a torn rotator cuff of both shoulders. He contacted me to inform me he would be staying in Georgia to receive medical treatment. He was given an LOD and a referral for medical treatment. But the United States Military released him to the Florida Army National Guard to have his medical care administered through them.

When John returned home, he was instructed by his Army National Guard Unit to make his own doctors' appointments with civilian doctors updating them of the medical findings. Approximately two weeks after returning home John was discharged from

active United States Military duty, even though he was still receiving medical treatment for his injuries that occurred in Kuwait while on active duty. His Army National Guard Unit assured him that the deactivation was a mistake and that they were taking action to have him reactivated. John continued to seek medical treatment as instructed. In the meantime, the United States Military stopped his pay.

For eight months John's Army National Guard Unit and the Florida National Guard have fought with the Florida National Guard Bureau and United States Army to have him placed back on active duty. In that eight months John had two military authorized surgeries, the right shoulder on 9-26-03 and the left shoulder on 11-14-03, and was going through physical therapy. His civilian doctor discontinued medical treatment and physical therapy in February due to non-payment of his medical bills by the military. As of today, the military still has not paid all of his medical bills resulting in our receiving collection calls and notices on a regular basis.

These eight months, from the time John returned home at the end of June 2003 through March 2004, have been extremely stressful, emotionally exhausting, and financially devastating. Since it took the military six months to issue John's pay for June to December, we completely depleted our saving account and had to borrow money from my parents and the children's savings accounts to help pay our monthly expenses. This payment took place only with the help of Florida Congressman, Rick Keller, and WFTV Channel 9, Josh Einiger becoming involved with the negotiations. Upon receiving the December check we thought we had cleared the hurdle since we were able to pay back most of the money we had borrowed and pay off most of the debt we had accumulated during John's surgeries and partial rehabilitation. However, it took the military three

months to issue John's check for December to March, which has started the debt cycle over again. It is extremely difficult to budget for monthly payment when the military is only paying every three to six months, if at all.

The utilities and phone companies have threatened to discontinue service and the mortgage company has threatened to foreclose on our home due to late payments. Creditors have placed collection notices on our credit reports. The military has demanded copies of our 2002 and 2003 tax returns with no explanation as to why they need them. I have lost time at work, resulting in loss of pay, to take John to and from his doctors' appointments and surgeries. John has started smoking due to all the stress the military has caused him. Sarah does not understand why her daddy cannot pick her up and play with her as he had done before leaving for Kuwait.

Now, the military has decided to send John back to Ft. Stewart, Georgia the first of April to have his medical treatment continued by military doctors rather than the civilian doctors who initiated his treatment. However, they seem to want him to report on a voluntary basis since they are unwilling to reinstate him to active duty. Thus the children and I would not be entitled to any benefits that we would have received if he were placed back on active duty.

In his absence, I would have to resume all of the household responsibilities alone again, with no projected date of his return, while comforting two children that, for the third time in their short life, the military will have taken their father away. Considering my past experience with the military I have serious doubts as to John receiving proper medical treatment and am skeptical as to whether he would be paid. Also, I have massive

concerns as to the treatment he would receive from the active military personnel to whom he would be reporting.