

STATEMENT OF EDGAR EDMUNDSON, FATHER OF, SGT. ERIC EDMUNDSON
FOR PRESENTATION BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND
GOVERNMENT REFORM.

DECEMBER 13TH, 2007

Mr. Chairman, Committee Members, a heartfelt thank you for allowing me to appear before you and participate in this discussion. This is a matter which touches all of us here today and the loved ones we are so urgently trying to help recover. My name is Edgar Edmundson. I am here today speaking for all of Eric's family in regards to our experiences with our soldier, Sgt. Eric Edmundson, US Army (medically retired) after seven years of service as of July 28th, 2007. Today I will be telling you about my son and his injuries, along with the many issues and obstacles that he and the family have confronted and overcome. I will also share with you the utilization of Non-profit organizations and their role in my son's rehabilitation outcome. It is my hope that by sharing my son's story with you, it will help to show the importance of these issues before us today.

Today's returning wounded need access to all of the valuable services the non-profit organizations have to offer them.

Sgt. Edmundson's Story

My son, Sgt. Eric Edmundson was a Cavalry Scout with the 4th Squadron, 14th Cavalry based out of Fort Wainwright, Fairbanks, AK. He was assigned to be the Company Commander's driver. This is a position that he took very seriously and pushed forward to excel in. He took pride with having the finest running, best driven vehicle in the company.

On October 2nd, 2005 near the Syrian border along the Tigris River in Northern Iraq, my son was driving the command vehicle (a Stryker) along with the Commander, an Iraqi interpreter and two other soldiers. While advancing forward through a dry river bed to support another disabled vehicle, an insurgent detonated an Improvised Explosive Device better known in this war on terror as an (IED). Which detonated directly behind my son's seat. At that instant my son's life and the lives of his family changed forever.

Eric, having suffered severe blast and shrapnel injuries as well as a moderate Traumatic Brain Injury or TBI, was airlifted to Baghdad where he underwent a number of surgeries. He was then moved to Ballad to await exit to Germany. While there the Doctor's were performing a surgical procedure and my son suffered a cardiac arrest. We were told that it took a great deal of time to bring him back and that he now suffers from an Anoxic Brain Injury or ABI. This condition is from a lack of oxygen to the brain. After two days in Germany Eric was transferred to Walter Reed Medical Center in Washington DC.

When we arrived at Walter Reed and saw the condition that our son was in, of course, it was a horrific time. Besides the many urgent medical issues Eric had at that particular moment we also knew at that time that his and our life was taking on a new norm. We knew that Eric would be facing challenges that we would never have dreamt possible. We knew our son and we knew he needed us.

Eric has overcome many of the issues from his initial blast injuries and we could not be more proud of our son. Because of his Anoxic Brain Injury he was left with cognitive and memory issues, suffers from muscle contractures and toning that plague him. After having a Baclofen pump placed in his abdomen in January 2007 to aid him in controlling the contractures, it is only within the last six months Eric has began eating. He is still on thickened liquids and has a feeding tube for hydration. He still remains silent but is working on gaining back his voice He is working on gaining bowel/bladder control and ambulation. With this in mind, it helps you to understand where our life begins its new chapter.

It became apparent early in Eric's recovery that he would need a caregiver/advocate to watch out for his well being. Eric is fortunate to have a wife that was at his side, but because of Eric's needs, help was needed. At that time my wife and I made the decision to resign my position at work in order to be with Eric.

I want to make a statement that the medical care that Eric received at Walter Reed Medical Center was world class. I can't imagine a better facility for Eric to have been in to receive the care he needed for the type of injuries he had.

Our story continues as we delved into the issues of bureaucracy. We have all heard and been made aware of these issues at Walter Reed and other military medical centers. I don't feel it necessary to go into detail all the issues that we were encountering trying to get the best care for Eric.

One memory I will share is that of not being able to get a straight answer to an issue from anyone. There is a saying, "the left hand did not know what the right hand was doing." I think that says it all.

In the meantime, our primary concern was Eric's well being and assuring he received the care he deserved.

As stated earlier, this is where our journey of advocacy and all that entails begins .It became apparent that Eric was going to need someone to be available to not only assist with his personal care but also deal with the bureaucracy that was in place.

I, along with the rest of Eric's family began to educate ourselves on "the system". We began to ask questions on how to get him what he needed. We did not feel that we were asking for more than any soldier deserved. One thing we would not do is take "no" for an answer if we had found in our research that there was a way to accomplish what we were seeking for Eric.

Nonprofits organizations became an answer to our prayers. As I stated earlier I resigned my position to be available for Eric and his needs. That resignation came at a cost of my income, retirement, insurance and our previous way of life. It was a decision that we made as a family and we do not regret it. Non-profit organizations helped fill the gap in what we had lost financially. They also relieved extreme stressors. We needed to devote so much of our time to Eric's needs, dealing with how to get our financial obligations met was difficult and an additional stress.

I must say, we never knew that Non-profit organizations were available to help when a soldier's family needs assistance. Our first experience was just by a chance meeting. I am forever grateful for the assistance we did receive because as I said earlier, it helped us to meet our monthly obligations and relieved so much stress for us at that particular instance.

We feel very strongly that Eric's recovery and rehabilitative outcomes would have been different had it not been for the support we received from Non-profit organizations. Eric needed his family close by. He needed that reassurance of someone in his family was going to be there for him and aid him in going through this journey of recovery.

Per our conversations with Non-profit organizations, we have found they have been created for a multitude of reasons. An underlying theme is that they want to help. They recognize a need; they see themselves as being able to meet needs. Most have had some connection with the military and understand how slow the government takes to address issues but in the meantime "real life" continues to tick along. It is our experience that they can act quickly and efficiently.

Our experience shows that Non-profits were able to not only help with financial grants but also had the ability to get plane tickets for travel. For example, when Eric was receiving therapy at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago for seven months family members came once a month to see Eric and myself. That was a bright spot in our stay while there. Now some may argue "is that important?" I would have to say wholeheartedly "yes". It provided much needed moral support that is so imperative to healing body and soul. It offered Eric something to look forward to. It offered me the support I needed to help Eric.

The need for medical equipment that is unable to be covered under the government guidelines is also being addressed by Non-profit organizations. These needs have ranged from mat tables for a soldier with significant physical needs to specialized wheelchairs.

It may not seem like much but even simple things like meals, lodging for extended family, laptop computers to cell phones are critical when dealing with the recovery of a wounded soldier. These little incidentals are so imperative to a soldier and his family's recovery because they allow them to stay connected to the world.

I have listed only a few ways in which Non-profits have come to our aid. I am certain there are many more. Salute, Inc out of Chicago Illinois, Wounded Warrior Project out of Florida, Hope for the Warriors out of Jacksonville, North Carolina and the Semper Fi Fund are just a few examples of fine organizations that have kept true to their mission.

What is important at this time is that Non-profits be utilized to their full potential.

I would hate to think what Eric and this family would have experienced throughout this last two years without the Non-profits by our side. We made the commitment to be there for our son and that commitment would have been met no matter what.

I want to take this opportunity to make a very important point. Eric's immediate family, by government standards meaning his wife and three year old daughter are having their financial needs met. I would like to report that through our educating ourselves and advocating for Eric, he did obtain the highest rating allowable. This gives us great comfort in knowing that Eric and his family's financial future needs will be met.

But, this does not address his personal care or issues of advocacy. This is where my wife and I have made a choice. We are committed to Eric and know that for him return to the highest quality of life I must remain steadfast by his side as an advocate/caregiver. This is another issue that we feel must be addressed. Compensation for family caregiver that includes insurance is needed. Presently, the system is set up to have non-family members take care of soldiers. We feel that families should have options made available to them. This may be the perfect fit for some families but if a family makes a decision to provide this care; this should be an option also.

With the help of Non-profits we have been able to be there for Eric.

Eric was a good soldier; he honored himself, his family, his community and his country. We owe it the him and the thousands of other soldiers that honored themselves and us all, To provide the best available care to enable them to return to the life they fought so hard to defend.

I am concerned. The negative affect that the few self serving non-profits will have on the ability of the legitimate non-profits to obtain funding from the general public. It would be an unfortunate turn of events if the service they provide is not available. As I have shared, the service they provide is immediate and personalized to the needs of the soldiers and their families. I believe that measures need to be implemented to ensure the availability of Non-profits and their services.

It is my sincere hope that by sharing our story you will have a glimpse into why we need to continue to support the Non-profit agencies and the service they provide.

Thank you for allowing me to share our story with you today.

I am open to any questions.