

April 14th, 2016

**Statement of Cole T. Lyle before the House Oversight and Government Reform
Subcommittee on National Security**

Chairman DeSantis, Ranking Member Cummins, distinguished Representatives of this subcommittee, thank you all for the opportunity to testify. I request that my statement be accepted for the record.

I'd like to begin by saying I'm not here for myself. I'm here strictly for my brothers and sisters still struggling to transition to post-military life while struggling with PTS and no other options besides traditional evidence based treatments. I'm here for those of us in the veteran communities who have been left behind and continue to deal with the pain of suicide, as other veterans see no way out. I'm here for the veterans who have lost faith in the system, lost hope for themselves, and have lost purpose in their lives. I'm here for the men and women that, like myself, have had to go it alone and acquire their service dogs, at extraordinary financial burden to them. For these reasons, I've been fighting for the last year to change VA policy. I believe that allowing veterans to fight PTS without all options available to them is tantamount to sending our military to fight an enemy without a secondary weapon in their arsenal.

While in Afghanistan for the majority of 2011, my unit served in the kinetic Helmand Province. I was based out of Camp Leatherneck, but spent some time with the British and ISAF forces near Marjah, on a Royal air-base in Lashkar-Gah. My physical issues as a result of military service are insignificant relative to that of my fellow Marines and Royal Marines. But like many veterans today who show little signs of physical injury, there are many with scars beneath the surface. During the last few months of my deployment, as our replacements were starting to arrive and take over the operational capabilities of our unit, I felt I wasn't doing enough to help the cause of our warfighters. I started volunteering my time, largely during sleep hours, at the severely understaffed Bastion Trauma Center. It was there, mentally unprepared for the new volunteer role I assumed, that has affected me most in my post-deployment transition.

Upon returning stateside we took a "Post-Deployment Health Assessment", which indicated a need to seek treatment for PTS. I started to utilize the VA system and eventually, I met with a psychologist who confirmed the preliminary results of the Health Assessment, and proceeded to prescribe me sleep aids and antidepressants. Furthermore, I was told to utilize a Veterans Center for counseling. A little less than two years on this path, the symptoms seemed to stagnate or get worse. Upon discharge from the Corps in early 2014, intra-personal relationships were harder to maintain than necessary, along with not having the familiar support system of my fellow Marines and the chain of command. I didn't have a civilian job, wasn't in school yet, and simultaneously was going through a divorce. In the same few months, I would experience what most veterans now are all too familiar with: the loss of military friends to preventable suicide. Many of these veterans had gotten addicted to the slew of pills prescribed to them and lost even a glimmer of hope in life. Some of these men and women had

spouses, children, mothers, fathers, and friends they left behind because the status quo of treatment for PTS failed them. Life as I'd known it had been ripped away, and one night alone, I decided to end it all. It is only for the timing of a friend, a fellow Marine, arriving on my doorstep at that exact moment that I'm here right now. Semper Fidelis, indeed.

The next day I quit medication cold-turkey, not wanting to continue down the dark path of opioid addiction. I sought another way, and found that a trained service dog was an option, but not one provided by the VA. Further inquiry to local non-profits similar to K9's for Warriors resulted in wait-times over a year. A few months after searching myself, I got Kaya, who quite literally pounced into my life. I had her obedience trained, then subsequently trained for PTS symptoms by an Assistance Dogs International-accredited trainer. After roughly ten-thousand dollars all-told of my own money, I received help from my family who saw the need. Yet today, many veterans don't have those resources. I still have bad days, but with Kaya at my side, I'm largely in a different phase. I call it recovery. Retired Marine General James Mattis called it, "Post Traumatic Growth".

The bad days are less frequent than they have ever been, and they mainly come when I get news of another friend lost to suicide. Since starting this quest, more and more of the veteran community have come forward to impart upon me the stories of their brothers and sisters who have committed suicide. Just last week, a close friend of mine lost a Marine he served with to suicide. A month ago, one of my best friends whom I deployed with, and the father of my god-daughter, admitted to me he got close and would have succeeded if not for another Marine intervening. They all come to me pleading, in fact begging me, to use what voice I have in this chamber to give you all this message: service dogs will save lives, and with the current epidemic of veteran suicides, it's unconscionable to keep the status quo and wait any longer to institute this change we all know is a viable solution to reduce the epidemic of veteran suicides.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to answering your questions.

Cole Thomas Lyle - Biographical Information

Cole Thomas Lyle was born September 20th, 1989 in Corsicana, TX. attended Heritage High School in Colleyville, TX and was active in extra-curricular activities, earning his Eagle Scout Award. Cole joined the Marine Corps and reported to MCRD San Diego for basic training a week after graduating, at age 18.

After completing all training and reporting to his unit, Cole started to take distance-learning courses towards a college degree. Cole received deployment orders in October 2010, completing pre-deployment training with 2nd Maintenance Battalion at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. He deployed with his unit to work with ISAF forces, commanded by then-Brigadier General Michael G. Dana, to Helmand Province, Afghanistan in March of 2011. Towards the end of the deployment, as replacement forces took over operational capabilities, Cole volunteered a significant amount of time at an understaffed trauma hospital on Camp Bastion.

Cole returned to Texas in late Fall of 2011 at the age of 22 and joined his reserve unit in Abilene, Texas. Taking the Post-Deployment Health Assessment, which indicated a need to seek treatment for PTS, Cole exhausted the Veteran's Affairs options for treatment, remaining symptomatic after a few years utilizing drugs and counseling in the Dallas/Fort Worth area.

Cole was honorably discharged from the Marine Corps in early 2014. While trying to find solutions for his symptoms of PTS, Cole helplessly watched his marriage fall apart and endured a divorce; just two years after his deployment to Afghanistan. Although not completely caused by his symptoms of PTS, the divorce was symbolic of the overall difficulty Cole had in maintaining close intra-personal relationships post-deployment. Cole bought his service dog Kaya, and had her trained at his own expense. He began to utilize her on a daily basis in Spring of 2015. At the same time, Cole pursued finishing his degree at Texas A&M University in College Station. He is active in student organizations like the Student Conference on National Affairs, works as a resident advisor on campus, and holds a part-time job outside of school. Cole is expected to graduate with a bachelors of science in December of 2016.