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*Opening Statement Before the House Oversight & Govt. Reform Committee*



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Chairman Waxman, and distinguished members of the Committee: It is an honor to be here with you today and I'm grateful to have this opportunity.

I have been asked here today to address "misinformation from the battlefield." Quite frankly, it is something that I have been doing since I returned home from Iraq. However, I want to note for the record that I am not politically motivated in my appearance here today.

I lived the war in Iraq. And today I still have family and friends fighting in Iraq. My support for our troops is unwavering. I believe this is not a time for finger pointing. It is the time for truth, the whole truth, versus hype and misinformation.

Because of the misinformation, people try to discount the realities of my story, including me as part of the hype. Nothing could be further from the truth. My experiences have caused a personal struggle of all sorts for me. I was given opportunities not extended to my fellow soldiers, and I embraced those opportunities to set the record straight. It is something I have been doing since 2003 and something that I imagine I will have to do for the rest of my life.

I've answered criticisms for being paid to tell my story. Quite frankly, the injuries I have will last a lifetime and I had a story tell, a story that needed to be told so people would know the truth. I want to take a minute to remind the committee of my true story. Now I was a soldier.



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In July of 2001, I enlisted in the Army with my brother, Greg. We had different reasons of why to join but we both knew that we wanted to serve our country. I loved my time in the Army and I'm grateful for the opportunity to have served this country in a time of crisis.

In 2003, I received word that I would be deployed. I was part of a 100-mile long convoy going to Bagdad. I had driven 5-ton water buffalo truck. Our unit had some of the heaviest vehicles and the sand was so thick that our vehicles would just sink. It would take us hours to just travel the shortest distance. We decided to divide our convoy up so the lighter vehicles could reach our destination. But first came the city of An Nasiryah -- and a day that I will never forget.

The truck I was driving broke down. And I was picked up by my roommate and best friend, Lori Piestewa, who was driving our First Sergeant, Robert Dowdy. We also picked up two other soldiers from a different unit to get them out of harms way. As we drove through An Nasiryah, trying to get turned around to try to leave the city, the signs of hostility were increasing, where people with weapons were on roof tops and the street watching our entire move. The vehicle I was riding in was hit by a rocket propelled grenade and slammed into the back of another truck in our unit. Three people in the vehicle were killed upon impact. Lori and I were taken to a hospital where she later died and I was held for nine days. In all, eleven soldiers died that day, six from my unit, and six others from my unit were taken prisoner, plus two others.

Following the ambush, my injuries were extensive. When I awoke in the Iraqi hospital, I was not able to move or feel anything below my waist. I suffered a six inch gash in my head. My fourth and fifth lumbar were overlapping causing pressure on my spine. My right humerus was broken. My right foot was crushed. My left femur was shattered. The Iraqis in the hospital tried to help me by removing the bone and replacing it with a 1940s rod that was made for a man.

Following my rescue, the doctors at Landstuhl, Germany found in a physical exam that I had been sexually assaulted. Today, I still continue to deal with bowel, bladder, and kidney problems as a result from the injuries. My left leg still has no feeling from the knee down, and I am required to wear a brace just to stand and walk. When I awoke, I did not know where I was. I could not move. I could not call for help. I could not fight. The nurses at the hospital tried to soothe me, and they even tried unsuccessfully at one point to return me to Americans.

On April 1st, while various units created diversions around Nasiryah, a group came to the hospital to rescue me. I could hear them speaking in English but I was still very afraid. Then a soldier came into the room. He tore the American flag from his uniform and he handed it to me in my hand and he told me, "We're American soldiers and we're here to take you home." And I looked at him and I said, "Yes, I am an American soldier too."

When I remember those difficult days, I remember the fear. I remember the strength. I remember that hand of that fellow American soldier reassuring me that I was going to be okay.



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At the same time, tales of great heroism were being told. At my parent's home in Wirt County, West Virginia, it was under siege by media all repeating the story of the little girl Rambo from the hills of West Virginia who went down fighting.

It was not true.

I have repeatedly said, when asked, that if the stories about me helped inspire our troops and rally a nation, then perhaps there was some good. However, I'm still confused as to why they chose to lie and tried to make me a legend when the real heroics of my fellow soldiers that day were legendary: people like Lori Piestewa and First Sergeant Dowdy who picked up fellow soldiers in harms way; or people like Patrick Miller or Sergeant Donald Walters who actually did fight until the very end.

The bottom line is the American people are capable of determining their ideals for heroes, and they don't need to be told elaborate lies. My hero is my brother Greg who continues to serve his country today. My hero is my friend, Lori Piestewa, who died in Iraq but set an example for a generation of Hopi and Native American women and little girls everywhere about the contributions that just one soldier can make. My hero is every American who says, "My country needs me" -- and answers that call to fight.

I had the good fortune and opportunity to come home and to tell the truth. Many soldiers, like Pat Tillman, they do not have that opportunity.

The truth of war is not always easy.

The truth is always more heroic than the hype.

Thank you.