

# House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

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### Testimony By Mike and Kim Bowman

**Forreston, Illinois**  
**(Parents of Specialist Tim Bowman, U.S. Army**  
**Illinois National Guard, Bravo Troop, 106th Calvary)**

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, my wife and I are honored to be speaking before you today representing just one of the families that lost a veteran to suicide in 2005.

As my family was preparing for our 2005 Thanksgiving meal, our son Timothy was lying on the floor of my shop office, slowly bleeding to death from a self inflicted gun shot wound. His war was now over, his demons were gone. Tim was laid to rest in a combination military, firefighter funeral that was a tribute to the man he was.

Tim was the life of a party, happy go lucky young man that joined the National Guard in 2003 to earn money for college and get a little structure in his life. On March 19<sup>th</sup> of 2005 when Specialist Timothy Noble Bowman got off the bus with the other National Guard soldiers of Foxtrot 202 that were returning from Iraq he was a different man. He had a glaze in his eyes and a 1000 yard stare, always looking for an insurgent.

Family members of F202 were given a 10 minute briefing on PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) before the soldiers returned and the soldiers were given even less. The commander of F202 had asked the Illinois Guard command to change their demobilization practices to be more like the regular army, only to have his questions rebuffed. He knew that our boys had been shot up, blown up by IED's (Improvised Explosive Device), extinguished fires on soldiers so their parents would have something to bury, and extinguished fires on their own to save lives. They were hardened combat veterans now, but were being treated like they had been at an extended training mission.

You see our National Guardsman from F202 were not out filling sand bags. They departed in October of 2003 for 6 months of training at Ft's Hood and Polk. On Tim's 22nd birthday, March 4, 2004, Foxtrot left for Iraq where they were stationed at Camp Victory. Their tour took them directly into combat including 4 months on "the most dangerous road in the world", the highway from the airport to the green zone in Baghdad where Tim was a top gunner in a humvee. Tim as well as many other soldiers in F202 earned their Purple Hearts on that stretch of road known as Route Irish. We are STILL waiting for Tim's Purple Heart from various military paperwork shuffles. My wife and I are not here today as anti-war protestors. Our son truly believed that what his unit did in Iraq helped that country and helped many people that they dealt with on a daily basis. Because of his beliefs, I have to believe in the cause that he fought and died for. That doesn't mean that I don't feel that we lost track of the overall mission in Iraq.

When CBS News broke the story about Veterans suicides, the VA took the approach of criticizing the way that the numbers were created instead of embracing it and using it to help increase mental health care within their system. Regardless of how perfectly accurate the numbers are, they obviously show a trend that desperately needs attention. CBS did what NO government agency would do; they tabulated the veteran suicide numbers to shed light on this hidden epidemic and make the American people aware of this situation. The VA should have taken those numbers to Capitol Hill asking for more people, funding, and anything else they need to combat this epidemic. They should embrace this study as it reveals the scope of a huge problem, rather than complaining about its accuracy. If all that is going to be done with the study is argue about how the numbers were compiled, then an average of 120 veterans will die every week by their own hand until the VA recognizes this fact, and does something about it.

The VA mental health system is broken in function, and understaffed in operation. There are many cases of soldiers coming to the VA for help and being turned away or misdiagnosed for PTSD and then losing their battle with their demons. Those soldiers, as well as our son Timothy, can never be brought back. No one can change that fact. But you can change the system so this trend can be slowed down dramatically or even stopped.

Our son was just one of thousands of veterans that this country has lost to suicide. I see every day the pain and grief that our family and extended family goes through in trying to deal with this loss. Every one of those at risk veterans also has a family that will suffer if that soldier finds the only way to take the battlefield pain away is by taking his or her own life. Their ravished and broken spirits are then passed on to their families as they try to justify what has happened. I now suffer from the same mental illnesses that claimed my son's life, PTSD, from the images and sounds of finding him and hearing his life fade away, and depression from a loss that I would not wish on anyone.

If the veteran suicide rate is not classified as an epidemic that needs immediate and drastic attention, then the American fighting soldier needs someone in Washington who thinks it is. I challenge you to do for the American soldier, what that soldier did for each of you and for his country. Take care of them and help preserve their American dream as they did yours. To quote President Calvin Coolidge, "The nation which forgets its defenders will be itself forgotten."

Today you are going to hear a lot of statistical information about suicide, Veterans, and the VA. But keep one thing in mind, our son, Specialist Timothy Noble Bowman, was not counted in any VA statistics of any kind. He had not made it into the VA system because of the stigma of reporting mental problems, he was National Guard, and he was not on a drill weekend when he took his life. The only statistical study that he was counted in was the CBS study. And there are many more just like him. We call them KBA's, killed because of action. The unknown fallen.

I challenge you to make the VA an organization to be proud of instead of the last place that a veteran wants to go. It is the obligation of each and every one of you and all Americans, to channel the energies, resources, and the intelligence and wisdom of this nation's Best and Brightest to create the most effective, efficient and meaningful healthcare system for our men and women who have served. We must all remove the stigma that goes with a soldier admitting that he or she has a mental issue. Let those soldiers know that admitting they have a problem with doing the most unnatural thing that a human being can do is alright. Mental health issues from combat are a natural part of the process of war and have been around for thousands of years but we categorize that as a problem. Take that soldier that admits a mental health injury from combat and embrace him as a model for others to look up to. Let the rank and file know by example that it's OK to work through your issues instead of burying them until it's too late. Grab that soldier and thank him for saying, "I'm not ok" and promote him. A soldier that admits a mental injury should be the first guy you want to have in your unit because he may be the only one that really has a grasp on reality. But instead he is punished and shunned and by that example, he has become the model for PTSD and suicide. And while we are at it, why do we call it a disorder. That title in itself implies ramifications that last forever. It is an injury, a combat injury, just like getting shot. With proper care and treatment soldiers can heal from this injury and be as productive and healthy as before.

We as a country have the technology to create the most highly advanced military system in the world, but when these Veterans come home, they find an understaffed, underfunded, and underequipped VA mental health system that has so many challenges to get through it, that many just give up trying. The result is the current suicide epidemic among our nation's defenders, one of which was Specialist Timothy Noble Bowman, our 23 year old son, a soldier, and our hero.

**Our veterans should and must not be left behind in the ravished, horrific battlefields of their broken spirits and minds. Our veterans deserve better!!**

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. Thank you.

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