

Thank You and Recognition Speech to Staff of the Specialized Care Program Walter Reed Army Medical Center

Thursday, June 10, 2004

On Sept 11, 2001, terrorists came to our homeland. They killed thousands of innocent Americans on our own soil. We all felt the anger, sorrow, grief, and pain on that terrible day. I don't think there was one person who didn't think "Is there anything I can do."

Because we signed the dotted line, we were glad to go when our country asked us to, whether we were National Guard, Reserves, or Active Duty. As soldiers, we left our families, friends, spouses, and most of all the freedom of our great country.

We didn't know if we would come back. But if we paid the ultimate price, it would be worth it. In order that others can enjoy the same freedom we have known. Our freedom is an awesome thing. But, that freedom comes at a great cost. Time, money, and lives are spent in that effort to maintain our freedom.

Whether our mission was Iraq, Afghanistan, Cuba, or state-side deployments, we did what we were asked. We took pride in being a soldier and did our jobs well. Then we either had an injury or got sick. Our world suddenly changed. We went from tough as nails, disciplined soldiers with a lot of pride, to being labeled as sick, broke, on profile, medical hold, etc.

Being sick or broke in the military is very hard. Suddenly the attitudes of your peers change. People you had helped, or did their job for them, even saved their lives. Now they are telling you, "You're not really sick", "suck it up", "quit whining", or "earn your paycheck."

If you have medically unexplained symptoms and the doctors can't find a cause, then they think you are malingering or trying to get out of doing your job. So it is easy to start to doubt yourself. You start to think, "Maybe it is all in my head, or "maybe it doesn't really hurt as much as I think", or "maybe I'm getting weak, or losing my toughness."

Eventually you also start to realize the Army may not be able to fix all your medical problems. You might not ever be at the same physical level as you were before the deployment, and how this can affect your career choices. You have to become very self-centered in order to protect yourself and get everything you need from the medical system.

For some, the military has been our career and way of life for many years. Now we are faced with starting over in a new career. This also weighs

heavily on our minds. The military trains us very well on how to do our jobs. They don't train us on how to be in the medical system if you have an injury or sickness. It's a totally new experience that we had hoped to never have to learn, especially if you are involved in a medical board.

All the things add up and seem like a cold, hard, lonely battle. In a way it seems so much harder than being in theater. You start to think, "Man, I'd rather be back in Iraq. At least there I know exactly what to do to survive." All these thoughts and factors are in your head.

Then, BOOM, Day One of the Specialized Care Program! You enter the program with excitement and also apprehension. The first thing you see when you walk into the conference room is a notebook with your name on it. "Holy Cow" "That's impressive." Then you start to skim through the highly organized notebook, which includes a lot of information and resources. Already your mood begins to change. And you can't help but think, "Man, they put a lot of time and work into this. They seem to really care."

Next the whole SCP staff comes in to introduce themselves. Victoria comes bouncing in with a smile. She sits right in the middle of us introducing herself; asking where we are from; telling us how glad she is that we are here. The whole staff introduces themselves and tells us how glad they are that we are here. Your mood begins to get even better.

Then there's Mr. Bullis, a retired Sergeant Major. He not only tells you they understand what your going through, but that they believe you. Your mind does a flip. "Is this really happening? Am I hearing this right? When will I wake up from this dream?"

The appointments with Dr. Roesel are incredible because of his attentiveness and the way he really cares about your medical needs. The way he lives up to the Hippocratic Oath, even if no one else does, makes him admirable. He seeks to really help you, not just prescribe some medicines and get you out of his office. The amazing way he explains medical symptoms in the participatory seminars. In our opinion, he is a very hard-working, caring, genius.

Dr. Clymer and his teaching style are awesome. The way he laughs when things amuse him. The incredible way he teaches you to self-analyze and fix your own thoughts and behaviors. He doesn't criticize or say, "you idiot, you should do this", or, "you are wrong to feel that way." The way he helps you want to get more mentally tough again, because he doesn't criticize you for the hard time you are going through is awesome. And we grew very fond of every day hearing, "Well, time is up. We'll talk more tomorrow."

Karen - Wow! Don't let her size fool you. The life, vibrancy, and determination she has are amazing. At 7:20 in the morning she is wide awake, has a smile, and ready to stretch. When all you want to do is go back to bed,

because you know you are in for pain. What you wouldn't give for just one morning of not seeing that smiling face. But, by Week Two we looked forward to seeing her. If you mentioned something to Karen she took care of it. Anything you mentioned to her, she cared and took the initiative to make it happen. No matter how busy Karen was, she always took the time to talk to you. You couldn't help but think, "Man, she's tough as nails and she pushes me hard but, she also really cares." And that is awesome.

Victoria - At first you think, "I don't even have any kids that could be taken away. Why do I need to see a social worker? What's up with that?" Then when you have your first appointment with her you start thinking, "WOW, I was way off." She has an incredible ability to instantly make you see she is only there to help. She won't betray or misuse your trust in her. She is only there for you. The way she can identify with traumatic experiences you have been through. Letting you know, "Hey, the things your feeling are ok." Her professionalism, compassion, and the caring way she educates you on how to be a better person, regardless of your experiences in life is amazing. She rapidly changes your misconceptions about social workers.

Sophia - Her dedication and knowledge of her profession is refreshing. The dry humor that suddenly pops out and becomes a highlight of your day can be addicting. Relaxation with Sophia becomes another part of your day you look forward to. Man, you feel so good, relaxed, and stress free after those 45 minutes with her. And I'm glad you don't have to walk around the table to see my face this time!

Cheryl- we didn't see much of her. But when we did, she exuded so much enthusiasm and that million dollar smile is priceless.

SPC Harrington - We all wished she would have turned the lights off, but we really enjoyed the field trip. She brightened our days with her pleasant conversations, and her smile.

Mrs. Parker - When she wants to get something done-it gets done-If she wants you to get into the SCP program-you will get in. I don't think the president could stop her. Many thanks to her for all the phone calls, administrative details she took care of for us, and the efficiency in making everything happen in order for us to be able to be in this program.

Many thanks to the awesome staff of the SCP, and all of your individual personalities that came together into making a incredible team, whether you are behind the scenes or more upfront. You all are unsung heroes. Your work for us and improving our lives is as valiant and respectable as what we do as soldiers. You have given us hope, educated us in so many ways, and made us stronger in our individual battles we still have to win. Words can't begin to describe the appreciation and respect we have.

The SCP has become a turning point for us. We will use the knowledge gained here to become better, stronger, people-and in return help others making our awesome country a better place.

The resources, VA Briefing, Gulf War research, and the American Legion, were all appropriate and necessary. We feel so much more prepared for what lies ahead of us as a result of these resources. Knowledge really is power. And we feel a lot more powerful and confident with these resources in our heads.

Thanks again to all the SCP staff. We are forever indebted. We extend our utmost, sincere, best wishes to all of you. We hope life brings you the best it can for all your great efforts to help past or present soldiers.

God bless you all.

Matt Burgess, Amir Abdul-Malik and Aaron Robinson
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