

Testimony of Christopher McGurk

Christopher McGurk is a highly decorated veteran who spent more than 10 years on active duty with the Army. He grew up in New Windsor, NY, and lost close friends in the New York City police and fire departments in the 9/11 attacks.

During his tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, McGurk received the Combat Infantryman's Badge and two Bronze Stars, with Vs. The first of the Bronze stars was awarded to him after a 12-hour battle along the Afghan-Pakistan border in which a 19-year-old soldier in McGurk's squad was killed by an Al Qaeda sniper.

In a separate incident, McGurk received a Purple Heart after a rocket-propelled grenade hit his position, sending shrapnel into his back and head.

He left the Army in 2006 and began working with the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, a nonpartisan group that lobbies Congress for more money for PTSD and traumatic brain injuries.

He currently works in the insurance industry in New York City.

I want to thank Chairman Kerry, (Senator Lugar) and the members of the committee for inviting me here today to testify on behalf of my fellow Veterans; I am both honored and humbled. I would like to say first and foremost that I believe beyond a shadow of a doubt that the United States should renew its commitment to Afghanistan and its people. I believed in my mission then and I firmly believe in it as I sit here today. Some pundits will argue that we may no longer be able to achieve any real measure of success in

Afghanistan. I say to those critics that we must try and help stabilize a country that has been, for the most part, ignored ever since combat operations began in Iraq in 2003. Our continued inattention to Afghanistan, our drifting foreign policy in the region and the fact that we have done little to stop the reemergence of the Taliban may very well solidify the resentment that the Afghan people have for the United States and the central government of Afghanistan. We have one chance to get this right or face the real possibility of more terrorist attacks that rival those of 9/11 on US soil.

I realize that many of the goals that we set for ourselves at the onset of the war may no longer be fully achievable, but we must try to stabilize and secure Afghanistan before it slips further into violence. My experience in these matter does not come from writing foreign policy; rather the firsthand experience I gained while leading men in combat in two different countries and the interactions I had on a daily basis with the people of those countries.

I would like to illustrate through personal experience the two main reasons I believe that we should continue the mission in Afghanistan. These reasons are very different, but serve to capture the complexity of issues taking place on the ground.

The first interaction took place while my platoon was conducting security operations for a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). The PRT operated out of a fire-base in Gardez, Paktia, province and had helped to build several schools in the area. They were encouraging as many of the local villagers to attend the opening ceremonies of the different schools. On one particular mission my squad was in charge of manning a checkpoint on the main road leading up to a school. The morning went by without incident and we were in the process of getting ready to return to the fire base when a

village elder came up to me with a serious expression on his face. I prepared myself for a potentially antagonistic conversation, but was surprised when he began speaking softly in English.

The conversation I had with him was short but it was one that I will never forget. The man was commander in the Mujahadeen and was wounded several times fighting the Russians; he lost both of his brothers to Soviet helicopter gun ship raids and walked with a severe limp. He told me that he was worried at first when the Americans came to Afghanistan, but soon realized that we were here to help the Afghan people, not exploit them. He hoped that we would not abandon Afghanistan again. He shook my hand and touched his heart out of respect and was turning to leave when he stopped, gave me a thumbs up, and said that “America was good and just” He then turned and slowly walked away. I found myself at a loss for words as I stared at him. Here was man hardened by fighting the Soviet Army, who seemed to have lost everything in life and yet he had faith in a country and a people he did not know. He believed in the mission of the United States and the hope it gave to the Afghan people.

This experience also served to compound the anger I felt when the mission in Afghanistan was neglected in favor of the mission in Iraq. Schools like the one built by the PRT stood empty and idle through what seemed to be a lack of funding for teachers, books and other supplies. I felt as though the true objective of the mission was forgotten, and that the half-completed school was one giant photo op. The commitment to men like the village elder was forgotten; the promise only half fulfilled.

The second and most personal experience took place on September 29th, 2003, while my company was stationed at a fire-base at Shkin in Paktika Province, right on the

Pakistani border. One mission my platoon had been sent to reinforce another platoon currently under enemy RPG and mortar fire. Upon reaching the platoon in contact, my squad dismounted to locate & destroy the enemy mortar tube. As my squad swept through the area, my lead team triggered a violent ambush that turned into a sustained fire fight of more than ten hours in duration. During the fire fight, 19 year old PFC Evan O’Neill of Haverhill, Massachusetts, was mortally wounded by an enemy sniper while protecting the squad’s exposed flank. As a trained EMT, I moved to assist the medic while continuing to direct the fire of my squad. Upon reaching PFC O’Neill, he said to me, “Sergeant, is the squad OK?” and “I’m sorry for letting you down.” I told him that the squad was hanging in and I told him not to worry, that I was going to get him out of there; those were the last words he ever spoke – “I am sorry for letting you down.” He was only 19, yet he understood that the mission was larger than himself. His last words were entirely selfless. I held his hand and said the “Our Father” as he died. As I think back to that day, I understand that the memory and courage of men like PFC O’Neill must be honored with a clear and coherent strategy to help the people of Afghanistan. We must defend the original mission – the one that was abandoned in favor of a misled strategy in Iraq – to protect the American people from terrorist threats & to ensure that O’Neill and others like him did not die in vain.

I strongly believe that the mission in Afghanistan was and is the true front in the war on terror, something I did not believe while fighting in Iraq. Senator Kerry – to this very committee in 1971, you spoke of “men who have returned with a sense of anger and a sense of betrayal which no-one has yet grasped.” My own anger & sense of betrayal comes from the possibility that we may not come to a resolution in Afghanistan, and that

the blood that has been shed by the victims of 9/11, the Afghan people, and men like PFC O'Neill would be in vain.