

1st District's Ryan Solen Reflects on Army, Veteran Experiences

Written by Solen for Congress, Lauren Young
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Democratic candidate for Congress looks back on his Army experiences, how that service helped prepare him, and gave him perspective.

MOUNT PLEASANT, WI - Less than 1% of citizens serve in the armed forces, and that makes veterans a kind of novelty wherever they are. My status as a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) tends to generate a lot of questions. Once I became a candidate for Congress, the questions increased. There was a lot of interest to know my story. I was asked if I would share my experiences with all of you. I have put it off for a while because when I think about it all, a flood of emotions of all sorts hits very hard. I look back on my days with my fellow soldiers with a sense of nostalgia while at the same time, contemplating all that comes with war also sticks out in my mind.

I had wanted to serve since my childhood. I enjoyed history, and I looked up to those who had proudly served to defend the country. My father served during Vietnam. He has not said much about it. I've never really tried to get more information. I grew up with a strong sense of responsibility that one takes care of those less fortunate, protects the innocent, and respects others.

I enlisted in the Army as a medic, and I left for basic training at Fort Benning, GA on 2 June 2004. I completed my medic training at Fort Sam Houston, TX, graduating in the top 10 of my class. I was then stationed at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC for a short time. While there, I was given the opportunity to apply for a commission as an officer. Shortly after being transferred to Wiesbaden, Germany, I was notified that I had been selected for commissioning. On 22 June 2006, I was a Specialist (E-4), and the next day, I was a 2nd Lieutenant (O-1). I was promptly transferred back to the United States for officer training. My first officer assignment was as an Executive Officer. The unit I would deploy with, was the 98th

Medical Detachment (Combat Stress Control), with the 62nd

Medical Brigade in Fort Lewis, WA (now Joint Base Lewis-McChord).

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I remember my thoughts before deploying. At the time, my wife and I had two children. I ran the outcome scenarios of their lives should the worst happen. I was nervous and worried. But, I was also very determined to do my best for my soldiers. We had worked and trained together for many months to prepare for our mission. We were a great team. We served with distinction, and received a Meritorious Unit Commendation for it.

The Army experience gave me a great deal of pride knowing that I was serving my country. But it also provided some additional perspective. While serving at Walter Reed, I was witness to the human cost of war. Every morning, as I walked across campus, I saw injured service members arriving for their appointments. The injuries were as varied as the people who had them. I remember one morning, as I was walking to my building, I saw a soldier in a wheelchair being pushed by a person that I assume was his wife. He was missing both legs above the knee. I remember that single moment in time not because of his wounds, but because of the look on their faces. I could tell they had been through a lot. Neither one smiled. They simply kept moving, as if all emotion had been forcibly removed from their lives. They were clearly exhausted. I walked by to continue my day. But, that moment will stick with me forever. When I was in Iraq, our clinic had constant activity. I was there almost daily. Many soldiers came for counseling, or just because they needed a mental rest. Some had looks similar to that couple. I never was in combat while I was there. I had a different job. I was taking care of those who took care of the other soldiers. I'm proud of our unit and what we accomplished. We helped a lot of people.

I look back now on those experiences, and I understand that there is a price of military conflict that exceeds just money. It exceeds physical injury. It doesn't end after the conflict is over. Those who were there understand. Many don't talk about their experiences because of the pain, or because they don't believe that anyone could really understand their experiences. Many of them are still seeking to fill the void left behind by the piece of their soul that they sacrificed in the countries where they fought. It is absolutely imperative that we take care of our veterans. They have given so much for this country.

All service members depart a war zone knowing that their lives are changed forever regardless of their job. For me, it was a life lesson that freedom comes at a cost – a cost that is willingly paid by the small percentage who proudly serve. We should never take for granted the sacrifices made by our military members. Violent conflict is not a decision to be made lightly. We must ensure that if we are going to use the incredible power of our military, we must use that power for the right reasons. I honor our military, often in my own quiet ways. Despite some of the tough times, there were also a lot of great times. Serving made me a better person. I wish I still maintained contact with all of the friends I served with. To all of my fellow service members past and present, thank you. For those friends that I have managed to keep up with, thank you for impacting my life in so many ways, and helping to shape me into the person I am today.

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Ryan Solen is an Army veteran of the war in Iraq and is seeking to represent Wisconsin's 1st Congressional District. He is a Digital Forensic Specialist and Computer Security Analyst. He is a married father of four and enjoys reading, writing, doing karate with his family, and relieves stress with his vintage Lego collection.

He is the Wisconsin Democratic Party's Nominee to run for the U.S. House of Representatives to replace Paul Ryan. For more information, please visit www.solenforcongress.com.