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DEMOCRATIC STEERING AND POLICY COMMITTEE

## Congress of the United States House of Representatives

January 23, 2020

Matthew P. Donovan  
Undersecretary of Defense  
Personnel and Readiness  
4000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, D.C. 20301-4000

Thomas McCaffery  
Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs  
7700 Arlington Boulevard, Suite 5101  
Falls Church, VA 22042-5101

Dear Secretary Donovan and Secretary McCaffery:

This week while discussing the January 8, 2020 Iranian attack on Al-Asad airbase in Iraq, President Trump expressed that he does not consider brain injury and concussion to be a serious combat wound, downplaying brain injury symptoms to “headaches.” As you know, after the January 8 attack, 11 United States servicemembers were evacuated to Kuwait and Germany with evidence of concussion and traumatic brain injury (TBI). Subsequently, additional servicemembers were transported to Germany for medical treatment and evaluation. As the co-chair and founder of the Congressional Brain Injury Task Force, the comments of the Commander-in-Chief are concerning and show a clear lack of understanding of the devastating impacts of brain injury.

According to the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center, “Traumatic brain injury is a significant health issue which affects service members and veterans during times of both peace and war. The high rate of TBI and blast-related concussion events resulting from current combat operations directly impacts the health and safety of individual service members and subsequently the level of unit readiness and troop retention. The impacts of TBI are felt within each branch of the service and throughout both the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs health care systems.”<sup>1</sup>

TBI is recognized as the signature injury of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. According to the Department of Defense, 383,000 men and women deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan sustained a brain injury while in the line of duty between 2000 and 2018.<sup>2</sup> Effects of traumatic brain injury can be short-term or long-term, and include impaired thinking or memory, movement, vision or hearing, or emotional functioning, such as personality changes or depression. Currently, between 3.2 million and 5.3 million people, including civilians, veterans, and servicemembers, live with a TBI-related disability in the United States.

The Department of Defense currently prioritizes concussion and blast injury through multiple avenues including the National Defense Authorization Act, the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center, the Blast Injury Research Coordinating Office, and the National Intrepid Center of Excellence. The commitment to brain injury must remain a major priority for the Department of Defense on the battlefield and in training.

In light of Mr. Trump's comments, I request responses to the questions below:

1. Despite warnings of the attack, many U.S. troops continued to operate exposed positions. One Army Captain said that he was knocked off his feet by the blasts. Why were troops not required to report to bunkers for injury prevention and overall personnel safety?
2. On January 17, a U.S. military official confirmed that 11 servicemembers were injured in the attack on the Al-Asad airbase despite initial reports from the Department of Defense that there were no casualties. Has the Department of Defense ensured that servicemembers present at the Al-Asad airbase in Iraq have been screened for blast injuries and concussions? Of the initial 11 servicemembers transported to Kuwait and Germany for treatment, how many sustained a brain injury?
3. A spokesman for U.S. Central Command confirmed on Tuesday, January 21 that additional U.S. servicemembers were evacuated to Germany for injuries. How many servicemembers were included in the second transport to Germany for treatment and evaluation? Did any of the additional servicemembers seek treatment for blast injury or concussion?
4. In October 2019, the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs announced \$50 million in new funding to research long-term impacts of concussion.<sup>3</sup> Does the Department of Defense, in partnership with the Department of Veterans Affairs, remain committed to understanding the long-term impacts of concussion, despite the comments of Mr. Trump?

Brain injuries are serious and can often be life-altering. Working in concert with the Congress, the Department of Defense has been right to change its policies and make the investments treat concussions and traumatic brain injuries with the gravity warranted. We cannot and must not go backwards. It is critical that the Department of Defense strongly affirm its commitment to prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, and research regarding concussion and brain injury.

Sincerely,



Bill Pascrell, Jr.  
Member of Congress

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<sup>1</sup> Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center. (2020). TBI & the military. Retrieved from <https://dvbic.dcoe.mil/tbi-military>

<sup>2</sup> National Academies of Sciences Engineering and Medicine. (2019). Evaluation of the disability determination process for traumatic brain injury in veterans. doi:10.17226/25317 Retrieved from <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/25317/evaluation-of-the-disability-determination-process-for-traumatic-brain-injury-in-veterans>

<sup>3</sup> Kime, P. (2019). New research may shed light on combat concussion-dementia link. Retrieved from <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2019/10/01/new-research-may-shed-light-on-combat-concussion-dementia-link/>