

Prepared Statement of Ryan Kelly  
Committee on Education and Labor  
Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities  
U.S. House of Representatives

May 8, 2008

Madame Chairwoman and distinguished members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Ryan Kelly, and I come before you today to speak in support of the National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities. I first became involved with the N.E.A. through its program called *Operation Homecoming*.

The N.E.A. initiative *Operation Homecoming* brought distinguished writers – including Tobias Wolff, Tom Clancy, Jeff Shaara, Marilyn Nelson, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Mark Bowden – to conduct writing workshops at 25 domestic and overseas military installations from April 2004 through July 2005. *Operation Homecoming* also offered an open call for writing submissions to troops who had served since 9/11, along with their spouses and families. That call resulted in more than 10,000 pages of submissions.

I first heard of *Operation Homecoming* while I was serving as a Company Commander and Black Hawk pilot in Iraq in 2005. I was stationed with the 1-150<sup>th</sup> General Support Aviation Battalion near Tikrit, Iraq. In Iraq, the days are incredibly long, the weather unbearably hot and the missions unrelenting and often, unforgiving. There is an undercurrent of fear and tension that runs through every day in Iraq, coursing through the air like an invisible stream, chilling every decision, every act, every thought.

Soldiers do many things to while away the time when they are not working. I used to sit in my office late at night and pound out letters home to my wife Judy, and my mother Lynn. Writing helped me shed the fear of death, the fear of making the wrong decision, of getting my men and women killed, of killing someone else, of getting shot down, or blown up, the fear of ending up in one of the black-rubber body bags we carried in the rear of the helicopters.

Many of my soldiers kept journals, wrote poems, composed stories or essays. Some kept them private, others made them public. But the work they created had one commonality: it captured the essence of war and more importantly, the experiences of the people fighting it – in Iraq and at home. The work generated by this anthology spans the gamut. In my own letters, I wrote about everyday life in Iraq and hero missions:

*...And they are the worst kind. It's the body bag in the back that makes the flight hard. No jovial banter among the crew. No jokes of home. No wisecracks about the origin of the meat served at the chow hall, just the noise of the flight – the scream of the engines, the whir of the blades clawing at the air, the voice crackling over the radio and the echo of*

*your own thoughts about the boy in the bag in the back...if it weren't for the army uniforms and the constant noise of helicopters taking off and landing, and the Russian 747-like jets screaming overhead every hour of the day, and the F-16s screeching around looking for something to kill, and the rockets exploding, and the controlled blasts shaking the windows and the 'thump, thump, thump' sound of the Apache gun ships shooting their 30mm guns in the middle of the night, and the heat and the cold, and the hero missions and the leaking body bags and the stress, and the soldiers fraught with personal problems -- child custody battles fought from 3000 miles away, surgeries on ovaries, hearts, breasts, brains, cancers, transplants, divorces, Dear John letters, births, deaths, miscarriages and miss-marriages -- and the scorpions and the spiders who hide under the toilet seats, and the freakish bee-sized flies humming around like miniature blimps, and the worst: the constant pang of home, the longing for family, the knowledge that life is rolling past you like an unstoppable freight train, an inevitable force, reinforcing the desire for something familiar, the longing for something beautiful, for something safe, to be somewhere safe, with love and laughter and poetry and cold lemonade and clean sheets, if it weren't for all that, Iraq would be just like home. Almost.*

Peter Madsen wrote about the struggles at home. His wife, Specialist Juliet C. Madsen, was an Army Medic stationed in Iraq. After she deployed to war, he was left to care for their three children. The following is an excerpt of his letter.

*I am a single father of three, a sometimes retail and distribution manager, and a husband. When I first thought about my wife going over there, in the desert, I had to smile; even she will admit that she looks a little funny with all her gear on. Juliet is tiny and childlike buried beneath a mound of fatigues and body armor. Blonde wisps of hair escape from under her Kevlar helmet. I could never have imagined this very attractive, blonde waif of a girl going to war, but there she is...I have learned what our soldiers' wives have lived for generations: hope and grief and perseverance. I find humor with my children every day. When you are seven, two wrongs really do make a right. Seventh-graders can be cruel to one another, but fathers can make it better. Why would you wash the minivan with a steel-wool brush? I don't know, but her heart was in the right place. Each morning when I wake up, I kiss my children and hold them close. We talk about Mom and the war, but we leave CNN off. We go to bed each night and all say one prayer: "God, please bring our mommy home safe." She is always in our hearts and in our thoughts and we can hardly wait to have her home with us. I say an extra prayer, too, just for me: 'Thank you, God, for giving me this time with my children.' I don't know where our story will end. I just know that we make it through each day with love and laughter, and that is good enough for now.*

What the National Endowment for the Arts did with *Operation Homecoming* was record the experience of war. Unvarnished. Unfettered. Uncensored by distance and the reflection of time.

This is truly a historical initiative. The N.E.A.'s *Operation Homecoming* informs into the American consciousness the individual experience of war in a way that has never been done before. When a letter from a soldier at war arrives in the mailbox, it is passed from

hand to hand, from one family member to the next, read by friends and associates and co-workers, and ultimately, saved in an album, put in a shoe box or placed in the family Bible. It is saved because there is a truth in it – a painful, tearful, joyful, soulful, heart-breaking, humorous, truth. And that truth makes the writing more than a living record of separation and sacrifice of honor and death. It elevates the writing to art.

*Operation Homecoming* brings the voices and experiences of soldiers and their families into the living rooms and dining rooms of ordinary Americans; it serves up the soldiers' experiences at the family dinner table and in the classroom. *Operation Homecoming* allows us, as a people, as a nation, to understand – or at least come closer to understanding – what war is and what it is not. It lets us see war's terrible costs, paid in bone and blood and tears. It shows us the unimaginable sacrifices of war and its impact, not only on our families and our soldiers, but on our communities, our states and our nation. It illuminates the humor and insanity of war. But above all, it reveals the humanity of the people fighting in it. And this is its most powerful revelation.

*I never heard the boom-CRUNCH, only imagined it later. There was strong braking, followed by a great deal of shouting...somebody was wailing in Arabic, hypnotically, repetitiously. He was an older man with a silver beard, a monumental, red-veined nose, and a big, thick wool overcoat. He was hopping like a dervish, bowing rapidly from the waist and throwing his arms to the sky, then to his knees, over and over again in a kind of elaborate dance of grief. I walked to the car with an Air Force sergeant and moved the older man aside as gently as possible. It's hard to describe what we found in the car. It had been a young man, only moments earlier that night. I put my arm around him and guided the old man to the road.*

*'Why can't he shut up?'*

*'You ever lose a kid?' This is a pointless question to ask a soldier who's practically a kid himself.*

*They had been on their way back to Sinjar, just a few miles away. The younger man had been taking his father back from shopping. They were minutes from home. We didn't find any weapons in the car – either piece of it. There was no propaganda, nor were there false IDs. If we had stopped these people at a checkpoint, we would have thanked them and let them go on. The young man had been a student. Engineering. With honors. Pride of the family. What we like to think of as Iraq's future. Finally, I had to ask: 'What does he keep saying?'*

*The terp looked at me, disgusted, resigned, or maybe just plain tired. "He says to kill him now" – excerpted from Sergeant Jack Lewis' *Operation Homecoming* narrative.*

Personally, *Operation Homecoming* gave – and still gives – me a sense as a soldier, as a writer, as a man, and as an American, that what I did mattered. That, regardless of politics or feelings about the war, people back home cared about me, and about my soldiers. It reinforced the message that America wanted to hear from us, hear our voices, share our experiences and *remember* them.

*For what is the value sacrifice if it is forgotten or ignored.*

Throughout history, soldiers have written about their experiences in war and combat. Some of the world's greatest works of fiction have been created by veterans. From Miguel de Cervantes to Leo Tolstoy, from Ambrose Bierce to Ernest Hemmingway, from Joseph Heller to Tobias Wolf. *Operation Homecoming* includes nearly 100 personal letters, private journals, poems, stories, and memoirs of service and sacrifice on the front lines and at home. A whole new crop of writers will emerge from this war.

I urge you to continue and increase your funding of the National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities. It is imperative that programs such as *Operation Homecoming* survive and flourish because 'a great nation deserves great art'.

I leave you with a poem from the *Operation Homecoming* by Captain Michael Lang, titled Reflections.

*In the desert, there is sand  
and space, filled up by wind  
and heat. It's black at night,  
lightless, aside from the stars.  
When the storms came one night,  
I smoked out in the sand  
And glowed within the world  
the lighting revealed.*

Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

Ryan Kelly