

**Testimony of Captain John Paluska, U.S. Army (Retired)**  
**on H.R. 4300, the Veterans in Parks (VIP) Act**  
**Before the House Committee on Natural Resources**  
**Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands**  
**July 13, 2021**

Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher, and members of the Subcommittee, I am honored to come before you today to provide this testimony and thank you for allowing me to participate in today's hearing on the Veterans in Parks Act sponsored by Representative Miller-Meeks.

By way of background - I grew up in Southeastern Iowa where I uprooted to attend Fordham University in New York City just days before the 9/11 attacks. On September 11<sup>th</sup>, I made my way down to Ground Zero where I aided in the Search & Rescue process. This was just my 6<sup>th</sup> day of my freshman year of college and at just 18 years old, I was one of the youngest first responders. As you can imagine, this was a transformative experience and I immediately began the enlistment process into the Army and served nearly 15 years across both reserve and active duty units. I served in both Iraq and Afghanistan theaters across numerous combat deployments, in addition to deploying Asia with my Special Forces unit.

My story is one of many. In fact, each veterans' story is unique, but what we share is a common love for this country.

Neither my family nor I are strangers to the sacrifices it takes to serve this great nation and protect this land. I have been in battle with the finest men and women from the United States of America and each of these patriots have given the oath which may require making the unimaginable sacrifice of giving their life for freedom. Thankfully, I survived each combat trip, including a roadside bomb attack where I was able to receive my Purple Heart medal (alive and in person) after nearly 160 pieces of shrapnel was projected into my body. Many others did not survive.

My service came at a cost - surgeries, physical therapy, speech therapy, and the biggest challenge, overcoming Post Traumatic Stress and dealing with the images of war and loss.

I was ultimately medically retired in 2017 due to continued issues as it directly related to the shrapnel injuries in both knees and my left hand.

I have my relative health, a wonderful and supportive family, and my first child, Finn Mathew, was born just days ago.

I love America, and I loved serving next to Americans who love everything about this country just as much as my family and me.

I mentioned the word "freedom" earlier – is it a concept, is it place, is the result of an action? What does it mean for each of you on this committee? For me, it is all of those – and I find this each and every time I am so very fortunate to visit the outdoors in our national parks.

In between deployments, I would drive to Yellowstone National Park, and find my freedom all throughout the park. There's something about connecting to nature at these parks that helps with the healing. I will always carry the wounds of war with me wherever I go, but when I go to these beautiful places, I am able to connect with one of the reasons I decided to serve – this incredible, beautiful, country.

I feel a connection to this country when I visit these national parks. I could reach out to any of my fellow soldiers, or Gold Star Families and I think would not find one that did not have a similar feeling when visiting these parks.

My soldier that was next to me in the roadside bomb attack, Staff Sergeant Retired Travis Strong, lost both of his legs that fateful day. Travis now finds strength in challenging himself, physically at national parks. He has summited various peaks throughout the US with only his hands. For him, his park is Yosemite.

While I was recovering from my injuries, I was assigned as an assistant casualty officer where I had the privilege of serving the Pursel Family. Ashleigh Pursel lost her brother, Michael, and became a Gold Star family member. In her own words Ashleigh describes hiking in national parks as “a relief of endorphins, but also a release of weight. Once you summit, you take the heavy pack off. This could be a physical pack, but it is also an emotional pack. Even if just for a moment, the weight goes to the clouds.” Gold Star family members carry the “pack” of grief every single day – she describes our parks as a way to connect to stories and memories. For Ashleigh, her park is Olympic National Park where she carries the same American flag and Gold Star family flag.

I look forward to the days when Finn is just a bit bigger, and I can share our national parks with him. I imagine him staring in awe at the glaciers in Glacier National Park – telling him how they date back to the Ice Age. I imagine hiking with him in Zion National Park trekking through the rust-colored canyons. And I cannot wait to share my favorite park with him – Yellowstone. We will gaze at the hot springs and the canyons and see how many of the incredible animals we can spot.

I urge you to support the Veterans in Parks Act. For the veterans that have served and for the families of the veterans that have made the ultimate sacrifice.