April 10th, 2015

Dear Senator McCain and Congressman Gosar,

I am writing to you to because of a very disconcerting situation in the Veteran’s Administration and the way in which they are treating veterans who are attempting to use their GI Bill benefits. Due to some unknown circumstances, the VA has decided to interpret their rules differently this year, resulting in many of us being **denied our benefits** in a degree program that we have already been accepted to.

My story begins in the Air Force. In 2012, I retired from the Air Force after serving for 24 years. During that time I had the privilege of serving as an additional duty First Sergeant and Senior NCO in charge of up to 130 airmen and NCOs. I have also flown over 2500 hours as an enlisted crewmember on the RC-135, including multiple deployments in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, and I was part of the initial ground force landing in Afghanistan in October 2001.

I have always loved flying, which led me to join the Air Force when I was 18, and my time as an enlisted aircrew member only served to reinvigorate that passion. Several of my pilots encouraged me to learn to fly and I began flight lessons shortly after retiring in 2012, paying for them myself. About a year later I learned about the aviation program at Yavapai College where I could use my GI Bill benefits to learn to fly. I immediately began the application process and prepared my family to move to Arizona if I was accepted into the program. At the time I was working as a contractor, making $75,000 a year at Offutt AFB in Omaha, Nebraska.

On March 6th, 2015 I was accepted to Yavapai College to pursue a degree in Aviation Technology. I then submitted my letter of resignation to my employer and put my house up for sale at slightly below market value to ensure that it sold quickly and afforded me enough time to move to Arizona and be ready to start classes on May 11th. My house sold in 3 days and my wife has already moved to Arizona to look for a house and find a job while I wrap up our affairs in Omaha, and I am writing to you as the movers pack our house today.

The problem with the VA stems from a letter dated April 7th in which Mr. Michael Marks (telephone number: (918) 781-4074) informs Yavapai College that enrollments for the Aviation Technology degree have been suspended despite over 40 students being accepted for the summer term. I find the timing of Mr. Marks’ letter to be completely unacceptable. By changing his interpretation of the VA regulations pertaining to Yavapai College’s program he is de facto denying benefits in such a manner as to **cause undue hardship to veterans.**

The decision to leave the military and attend college is not a small decision and not one that can be adjusted for with only one month of notice before our planned start date. I may have quit my job, sold my house, and moved halfway across the country, but I still have a retirement income to help make ends meet while we address this issue. My real concern is for the other soldiers and airmen who were planning to start class with me in May. They may have left a promising military career to pursue their dreams, they will undoubtedly not have a job lined up, nor have a place to live. All of this on account of a last minute and unwarranted decision on the part of the VA, the very organization which is supposed to be here to help them through their transition.

Of further concern is the way I was treated when I called Mr. Marks about this issue. Upon receiving a copy of his letter to Yavapai College, I contacted him directly to plead my case. He was initially very rude and disrespectful and seemed to talk down to me, informing me that he was a First Sergeant when he was in the military. It wasn’t until he learned that I was also a First Sergeant of equivalent rank that he became even partially cordial. He claimed that it was Yavapai College who had changed their rules on the Aviation Technology degree with respect to the 85/15 rule and that he had “had trouble” with them before. He was very biased against Yavapai College and said that I need to take my issue up with them, and not the VA. He claimed that the calculations done for the 85/15 rule have been done the same way every time, which is clearly not true or I would not be writing to you on this matter.

At this point I do not know what else to do, except to petition you for your assistance with my case, and the cases of all of the other veterans affected by the VA’s recent actions. I am concerned that Mr. Marks has been intimidating our younger veterans into not pursuing this issue further and that needs to be addressed in addition to the denial of our benefits under the GI Bill. This entire situation amounts to gross misconduct of the VA and a major disruption of the affected veterans’ lives. If there is anything more that I can do to help bring this situation to a quick and reasonable resolution, please let me know.

Very Respectfully,

MSgt Patrick Needham, USAF (ret)