

3-minute Testimony – SSG Patricia King

Good afternoon Honorable Chairwoman Speier and members of the Committee,

My name is Staff Sergeant Patricia King. I have served in the Army for 19 years, deployed to Afghanistan three times, the first time in 2001 while participating in Operation ANACONDA. Over these combat deployments, I earned the Combat Infantry Badge – a device that is highly esteemed within the Army – for actions taken in the Shah-i-Kot Valley and the Bronze Star during my third deployment. I have been a recruiter, Counter IED instructor, and a deployed Platoon Sergeant during where I led or planned over 400 missions outside the wire with zero incidents or loss of life.

I began my gender transition in 2015 and came out to my leaders that March. Since transition, I served as a Squad Leader, Platoon Sergeant, Division Plans NCO, and Operations NCO. In June of 2016, I took control of a Stryker squad at Fort Lewis, Washington. When I first arrived to my platoon, there was no issue with me being transgender. Rather, the fact that I was a female was more noticeable. In 2016, I was one of only two women in the Army Infantry. My building, 50 years old and still in the process of asbestos removal, had been built without women's restrooms in mind. Being the creative thinkers that we are, we quickly made a flip sign with a blue "male" on one side and pink "female" on the other. Since I was an "only" the onus was on me to flip the sign when I needed to use the restroom. That pink female sign represented my first few weeks there. Wherever I went, I was "the pink sign in the room." However, it didn't take long before my peers saw past my gender and the only thing that mattered was how well I could do my job.

From the get-go, none of that mattered to the Soldiers in my squad. Most of them are 21 years old or younger. People in Generation Z aren't worried about trans people. Much like their iPhones and Facebook, they grew up with people like me in their lives. Their generation has trans prom queens from Missouri, Florida and Wisconsin to name a few. Laverne Cox is a household name for them, much like we grew up with "Laverne & Shirley."

My squad quickly gave me the nickname of "Squad Mom," definitely a term of endearment. I was given an old Stryker, unfortunately the worst one in my battalion as well as a hodgepodge squad of Soldiers, each from different backgrounds around the world. But, we quickly became a team. I let them know that they were MY Soldiers and that I only work with stars. Within a month, we made our Stryker the best in battalion and our squad the most cohesive. This is because each of us felt able to bring our whole self to work. There were no secrets, no false bravado or hiding. My authenticity inspired theirs and that – along with strong leadership, hard work, and solid training – built unit cohesion in a way I have not seen in almost 20 years of service. That is the value of inclusion. That is the value of open trans service.

From austere conditions in the field, to deployed conditions in combat, to life in the barracks... I have witnessed first-hand that troops want strong leaders. Leaders who care for them. Leaders who can inspire them. They don't care if the leaders are transgender. They don't care if the leaders are gay, bi or straight... male or female. They don't care which bathroom or shower you use. The questions that resound for them are: Can you do your job and accomplish the mission? Can you put rounds on target in the heat of battle? Can you look out for your troops' best interests? If a Soldier-Leader can do those well, everything else doesn't really matter.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide my perspective and I welcome any questions you may have.