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He fought in Afghanistan. Now this Idaho veteran fights to get all U.S. troops home.

By MICHAEL KATZ | The (Boise) Idaho Statesman | Published: April 23, 2019

BOISE, Idaho (Tribune News Service) — Of the hundreds of phone calls he makes per day, starting at 6 a.m. and running through dinner-time, **Dan McKnight** estimates that maybe a third of those actually result in conversations.

But he's willing to talk to anyone who will listen.

McKnight, 43, of Meridian, served in the Marines, the Army, and the Idaho Army National Guard for a total of 13 years, joining the Marine Corps at 19. The Boise native spent more than a year overseas in Afghanistan in the Army, from December 2005 to February 2007.

As a soldier, McKnight never questioned the mission. But since returning home, his mindset about war has changed.

McKnight started BringOurTroopsHome.US in January after the appointment of Sen. Jim Risch, R-Idaho, as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The veteran's goal is to get Congress to bring U.S. troops home from the ongoing war zones in the Middle East. A rally is being held in coordination with the college Democratic and Republican groups at Boise State University at 6 p.m. Wednesday at the BSU Student Union to try to gather support for a resolution McKnight has crafted.

Why does McKnight care so deeply about this? Why does he spend 80% of his 12-hour days making phone calls to politicians and other leaders?

McKnight points to a collection of pictures in front of his fireplace.

"Those guys. Those guys right there," he said, gesturing toward photos of him and his military friends. He pauses and briefly looks down; tears begin to well in his eyes.

"The damage that is done to the guys who are paying the price. We have a value in the military, it's a core value that we leave no one behind. And right now, we've left a lot of people behind. We've left a lot of blood and a lot of treasure there. It's time to stop it."

As of March, there are approximately 14,000 U.S. troops deployed in Afghanistan, according to *The New York Times*. There are about 5,200 troops in Iraq, according to the *Military Times*, and an additional 2,000 in Syria, per *USA Today*.

Since entering Afghanistan in 2001 for Operation Enduring Freedom, there have been 2,424 American troop fatalities, per the Iraq Coalition Casualty Count. Since initially entering Iraq in 2003 for Operation Iraqi Freedom, 4,568 American troops have been killed.

McKnight said he saw Risch's appointment as an opportunity for change, but so far, the senator has not been of much help. He has voted consistently against withdrawing troops from Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria and Iraq. Just last week, President Donald Trump vetoed a bipartisan resolution calling for the immediate withdrawal of troops from Yemen; Risch voted against that resolution.

Risch, along with the rest of Idaho's delegation, is invited to Wednesday's event, McKnight said. Risch will be unable to attend due to another commitment, according to a statement emailed to the Statesman.

"I commend Mr. McKnight for his advocacy of an important issue and commend our men and women who have served, and continue to serve, in harm's way," Risch said in the statement. "Most importantly, we need to end all wars as quickly as possible in a responsible, thoughtful manner that safeguards our national security interests, preserves our hard-fought gains, and protects the homeland from those that wish us harm."

'Forever wars' in the Middle East

While serving in Afghanistan, McKnight said the mission was simple — "to hunt and kill anybody that attacked us on 9/11 ... to hunt, kill and capture anybody who embedded those who attacked us on 9/11. And ... hunt and kill Osama bin Laden," he said.

But McKnight said he saw things that troubled him. The mission shifted from stopping terrorism and became something different: a never-ending mission in morality and nation building.

"We were building roads, we were building schools, we were building water treatment facilities. We were trying to support a government that was corrupt," he said. "We were trying to win the hearts and minds rather than going in and killing and destroying our enemies."

McKnight, who said he holds his service "in a very reverent spot," is not alone in his desire to bring troops home. In a recent poll of 1,031 service members and veterans conducted by *Smithsonian* magazine, 84 percent said the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq have "been going on too long."

McKnight said he believes that the U.S. has an obligation to "spread goodwill." He does not, however, believe it is the U.S.'s job to run other countries and to "build nations."

"It's a very compassionate position to take, to go around the world and fight other people's wars. As a humanitarian, it makes sense. But we live in a world of limited supplies ... There's other organizations that can provide the humanitarian aid," he said.

McKnight said he's seen the toll that tour after tour has taken on fellow soldiers. Post-traumatic stress disorder, an inability to read-just to society, depression — each eventually rears its ugly head, he said.

McKnight also takes issue with the way troops are deployed. The Authorization to Use Military Force, which was passed by Congress on Sept. 14, 2001, allows the president "to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on Sept. 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons."

A second act was passed in 2002, applying similar rules to Iraq. Neither requires the approval of Congress.

Prior to that, the War Powers Resolution "(required) that the President communicate to Congress the committal of troops within 48 hours.

Further, the statute requires the President to remove all troops after 60 days if Congress has not granted an extension," according to the Cornell Legal Information Institute.

McKnight believes that Congress should have a definitive say in waging war — under all circumstances.

"This isn't an issue of not supporting the troops," he said. "This is a mission of questioning our foreign policy: Is it fair and is it done right?"