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November 26, 2019

United States of America  
Phoenix VA Regional Office  
3333 North Central Avenue  
Phoenix, Arizona 85012-2436

To Whom It May Concern,

This letter serves as an addendum to five separate Form 95 Claims submitted by Sarah Hager, surviving wife of Edward Michael Hager, on her own behalf, and separately on behalf of the three Hager children, Amelia, Edward Jr., and Teddy, and on behalf of the Estate of Edward Michael Hager.

Edward Michael “Scrappy” Hager died on June 25, 2019. Ed was a hero to his wife, to his children, and to the soldiers who fought by his side in Iraq. He was a hero to the veterans with demons from the battlefield he tried to help when he returned from overseas.

Tragically, Ed was unable to cope with his own demons. That is because when he sought help, the VA left Ed completely on his own. Ed sought treatment at the Willow mental health walk-in clinic in Gilbert, Arizona, on June 24, 2019. Before that date, Ed had been declared 80% disabled from post-traumatic stress disorder. Ed suffered traumatic brain injuries from four separate improvised explosive devices during the Iraq invasion. Ed had a history of paranoia, and he experienced audio-visual hallucinations. He suffered depression, anxiety, sleep deprivation, and frequent nightmares.

All of that was known to the VA when Ed sought help that day. He told the provider at the VA that “I am feeling anxious and need some counseling. My wife and

kids are gone for two weeks and I don't know what to do with myself.” Ed told the VA provider that “I have hardly slept in days. I hate being alone and in my own head.” He told the VA provider his thoughts were “getting too dark [and] bringing up past memories.” Ed reported had “too much time on [his] hands and is thinking too much.”

And so, a mentally ill and disabled war hero with a history of hallucinations and paranoia told a provider at the VA walk-in clinic that he's all alone and having dark thoughts, and he wants to talk to somebody. What does the provider do, to safeguard this veteran? She tells Ed to go home, give his guns to a family member for safekeeping, and come back to start counseling in 30 days.

All too predictably, Ed left the clinic, and he went home and killed himself that night.

Ed's tale is like so many others, of VA care providers being fully aware of veterans being at great risk of suicide and failing to treat them appropriately, or failing to treat them at all. Ed's suicide would have been prevented had his providers complied with the most basic standard of care by reviewing his records, recognizing his clear and present risk of suicide, and referring Ed to in-patient treatment. A war hero died as a direct result of the VA's failure to offer even basic psychiatric services when he was at significant risk of suicide.

### *The Tip of the Spear*

Ed joined the United States Army in 2002 at the tender age of 19. Ed went to Iraq in 2003 and was assigned to the infantry, where his fellow soldiers gave him the nickname “Scrappy.” It was easy to see why—Ed was small of stature and tough as nails.

Even before Ed arrived in Iraq, he experienced trauma. During a training exercise in Germany, a tank overturned and flooded, and Ed witnessed a fellow soldier drown in front of him.

Ed's unit was one of the first into Baghdad in June of 2003. Ed saw weeks and months of direct combat. The enemy shot at Ed and his unit, and Ed, of course, shot back. On at least four occasions Ed suffered blast injuries from IEDs and mortar fire. Ed witnessed numerous brothers in his platoon die during the invasion.

Ed served with great distinction, earning numerous honors including the Army Commendation Medal; Army Achievement Medal; USA/USAF Presidential Unit Citation; Army Good Conduct Medal; National Defense Service Medal; Iraq Campaign Medal; Global War On Terrorism Service Medal; Army Service Ribbon; Overseas Service Ribbon; Combat Infantry Badge; and Parachutist Badge.



### *The Hager Family*

There was one wonderful event in Iraq, as Ed would meet the love of his life, Sarah. They met at Camp Victory in 2004 and were drawn to each other instantly.



Ed returned home with Sarah and they were married in 2006. Ed did his best to return to civilian life but stayed the same Scrappy, as one unfortunate soul learned. Once a man broke into Ed's apartment and found him and tied him up until the police arrived.

Soon enough, Ed and Sarah started a family. Over time, they would welcome Amelia, Edward Jr. and Teddy into the world. All would have been right in Ed and Sarah's lives for a lifetime, but as the months and years went on, the trauma of the battlefield started to take hold.



## *War Wounds*

The scars of war made life extraordinarily difficult for Ed to handle. He often spoke to Sarah about the effects of what happened “over there,” but he refused to talk about specifics.

Ed started to lose his mind, becoming paranoid. He was staying with his parents and they and Sarah noticed him becoming short tempered, irritable, and he suffered mood swings. Ed couldn't perform simple tasks or concentrate. His mind would wander and Sarah would catch him staring blankly. One day, while Sarah was deployed in Afghanistan, Ed locked himself in his apartment and laid out his guns, and wrote a suicide note. Sarah phoned his family and he was admitted to the hospital on 72 hours of observation.

Again, in 2008, family and friend convinced Ed to check himself into the VA for a mental health evaluation. The VA became acutely aware of Ed's problems. Ed reported suicidal ideation and paranoia. Ed reported he would have flashbacks to combat while driving.

Ed reported the following specific indicators of PTSD as “very severe”:

- Light sensitivity
- Noise sensitivity
- Hearing difficulty
- Sleeping difficulty
- Anxiousness
- Tension
- Irritability
- Frustration tolerance
- Constant tinnitus

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Ed reported these indicators of PTSD as “severe”:

- Poor concentration
- Can’t pay attention
- Frequent nightmares
- Hypervigilance

The providers there reported that Ed would sometimes downplay symptoms that just previously he reported to be significant, so he was noted with “underestimation of current symptoms.”

After that discharge Ed did his best to cope, but he received very little treatment. PTSD soon took over and he started to suffer psychotic episodes. Ed played video games and he started to suspect that a videogame console was bugged, so he took it apart, piece by piece, to inspect it. Ed put holes in walls to check for people watching him.

One day, when Sarah was 7 months pregnant, Ed believed that a helicopter was following him. He ran out of the house and across a field, and friends tried to subdue him. Sarah and others convinced Ed again to go to the VA.

While at the VA, Sarah asked to speak with VA personnel about what was happening at home, but the VA providers refused to speak with her. Ed was taken back to be examined, and he reported suicidal ideation, nightmares, and an inability to sleep. Ed reported that the authorities were watching him, that things were planted on his, and that his baby’s gender was changed in the womb.

The VA offered no real services for Ed during that admission, merely hearing of his psychosis and prescribing medication that did no good, and sending him on his way. And so Ed decided to form his own mental health support group to assist soldiers suffering from battlefield mental health issues. From this, *Them Grunts* was born.

### *Them Grunts*

*Them Grunts* was a Facebook support group that Ed ran, specifically to support suicidal veterans. It started as the remaining members of Ed's platoon and others he knew in Iraq, but it soon grew. *Them Grunts* would occupy the last several years of Ed's life. *Them Grunts* was a godsend for some. Ed took phone calls at all hours from veterans who were thinking about suicide, and Ed did his best to talk these brothers down.

Eventually, *Them Grunts* proved to be difficult for Ed to handle. Ed would take calls from suicidal veterans at all hours, and for somebody experiencing his own suicidal ideation and periods of psychosis and sleeplessness, it proved too much to handle. Near the end of his life, Ed would start to move away from *Them Grunts* and he devoted his energy to addressing his own demons.

### *Turned Away*

Ed's life ended in June of 2019. He had been disabled now for a decade. The VA had diagnosed him with a mental illness and debilitating PTSD. Those conditions along with paranoia, incessant nightmares, suicidal ideation, chronic sleeplessness, audio-visual hallucinations and the rest all were known to the VA, in Ed's VA medical records.

That June, Sarah and the kids went to Florida to spend time with Sarah's mother, who was diagnosed with cancer. Ed was home alone and obviously not feeling well.

So when Ed walked into the VA Clinic on June 24, 2019, he carried with him that entire disturbing mental health history. He reported the following to the VA provider:

- "I am feeling anxious and need some counseling. My wife and kids are gone for two weeks and I don't know what to do with myself."
- "I have hardly slept in days. I hate being alone and in my own head."
- "[My thoughts are] "getting too dark [and] bringing up past memories."

- “[I have] “too much time on [my] hands and [am] thinking too much.”

These reports, coming from a man with such a concerning mental health history, indicate a significant present risk of suicide to any reasonable mental health practitioner. That risk was magnified by Ed reporting firearms at his now empty house.

Despite that significant risk, the VA provider refused to provide the counseling Ed asked for. She told him to give his guns to a family member, and then to come back in thirty days for a counseling session. She also suggested that if he feels like killing himself, he should call the suicide hotline.

So Ed went back to his mental illness and his empty house and his dark thoughts, and he promptly shot himself in the head.

### *History Repeats Itself*

On average, 22 veterans commit suicide every day, yet the VA treats those who seek help as if there were no epidemic. Ed’s story is like many others, and it is like many others already known to the Phoenix VA. Ed had multiple risk factors for suicide when he sought treatment and was discharged without any.

Reasonable, prudent mental health providers would have diagnosed Ed at elevated risk of suicide and directed him to immediate counseling and treatment with a qualified and competent practitioner, a 72 hour hold, or in-patient treatment, where Ed’s underlying PTSD and traumatic brain injuries could and should have been treated. The failures of VA mental health providers to recognize his risk for suicide and to treat his mental health problems directly caused Ed’s suicide.

Ed was a valiant and dedicated soldier who deserved far better than the VA offered him, when he needed help the most. Despite his struggles with PTSD, Ed was a loving father and a devoted husband, an ideal patriarch to the Hager family. The Hager family’s suffering as a directly result of the VA’s inaction will endure for their entire lives.



On her own behalf, and on behalf of her children, Amelia, Teddy and Edward Jr., Sarah Hager hereby demands \$8,000,000 each, as four separate and individual claims, as reasonable compensation for the loss of the Hager family patriarch. Sarah also demands \$3,000,000 on behalf of the Estate of Edward Michael Hager. The sum total of these individual claims is \$35,000,000.

I look forward to speaking with you.

Very Truly Yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Richard D. Lyons", is written over a horizontal line.

Richard D. Lyons