FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE   CONTACT: Murray Press Office

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MILITARY: Murray Calls on Gates, Shinseki to Ensure Combat Experiences Are Being Documented on Discharge Papers

D.D. 214 FORMS: CRITICAL TO GETTING PROPER CARE AND BENEFITS FOR MANY SUPPORT TROOPS, WOMEN WHO HAVE SEEN COMBAT

(Washington, D.C.) – Today, U.S. Senator Patty Murray (D-WA) sent a letter to Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki calling on them to provide information on how their departments are tracking combat experiences among support troops, and how tracking can be improved to ensure these men and women are getting the care and benefits they deserve. Murray's letter is an effort to get answers for support troops – including many women servicemembers – who have noted that their combat experiences were never included on their military discharge papers – or DD-214s. Because of these omissions, many support troops have had difficulty accessing care and benefits for combat related conditions, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI).

"Without traditional front lines in Iraq and Afghanistan, many of our support troops have found themselves on the front lines," said Senator Murray. "These men and women have fought bravely and they deserve the care and benefits their service has earned them. However, too often these experiences are not noted on critical discharge documents and support troops are denied care by providers who assume they have not seen combat. DoD and VA need to do a better job of tracking combat experiences so that our servicemembers don't have to fight for care when they return home."

Among the servicemembers often affected by the lack of an effective tracking system for combat experiences are the "Lionesses" – women servicemebers who were attached to certain combat units deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Senator Murray met some of these women – who were featured in a documentary titled Lioness – earlier this year –

Details<http://murray.senate.gov/photos/display.cfm?id=311112>.

The full text of Senator Murray's letter follows:

December 10, 2009

The Honorable Robert Gates
Secretary of Defense
U.S. Department of Defense
Office of the Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon Room 3E970
Washington, DC 20301-1000

The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Office of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW Room 1000
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Gates and Secretary Shinseki:

I am writing to you about my concerns regarding servicemembers deployed in support of operations overseas who, as a result of operational requirements on the battlefield, provided mission support outside of the requirements of their military occupation and therefore, saw combat. These individuals volunteered or were often temporarily removed from their regular assignment to serve in these capacities before returning to their regular duties during their deployment.

One example of these individuals are known as the "Lionesses," these women participated in offensive operations by providing culturally-sensitive search and engagement activities for certain combat units deployed in the Operation Iraqi Freedom and the Operation Enduring Freedom. Some of these service women, particularly those who volunteered during the early stages of the Lioness program, have encountered difficulties in gaining proper recognition for their service, both within the services and when they leave active duty and seek assistance from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

The nature of the conflicts our men and our women serve in have changed and the documentation and tracking system has to accommodate these new realities of deployments. I have been particularly concerned about cases where a servicemember's combat experiences are not noted and then he or she is denied care by providers who judging by the military specialty alone presume they have not been in combat situations. Our all volunteer force should never have to fight for care when they return home. For this reason, I want to ensure that all these servicemembers are getting combat recorded and are afforded the appropriate care and benefits due to seeing combat.

How is the Department of Defense (DoD) and the VA collaborating to explore and implement the best ways to improve the processes used to track combat

experience among support troops in both the Reserves and Active Duty? What is the DoD currently doing to track combat experience among servicemembers? How is the Department of Defense improving tracking methods on military forms – primarily on DD–214s or other discharge papers? What are both the DoD and the VA doing to better understand why these records are not being accurately kept and maintained? And, how could the military command structure become more conducive to recognizing combat experience among support troops? Finally, once these service members separate from the military how can the VA better work with them to provide them the care and service connected benefits they deserve?

It is vital that the improvements to the tracking process are implemented quickly so that combat experience for these servicemembers is properly documented from here on out. This is all critically important to ensuring that when these troops become veterans, they are getting the care and benefits they need and deserve for their service to our country.

I look forward to your response and to further discussion as we move forward.

Sincerely,

Patty Murray
United States Senator

Matt McAlvanah
Press Secretary
U.S. Senator Patty Murray
202–224–2834 – press office
202––224-0228 – direct
matt_mcalvanah@murray.senate.gov<mailto:matt_mcalvanah@murray.senate.gov>
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