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Congress of the United States  
House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

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May 25, 2022

The Honorable Christine Wormuth  
Secretary of the Army  
Office of the Secretary of the Army  
101 Army Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20310-0101

Dear Secretary Wormuth,

I am writing to express my concern that the Army is not appropriately recognizing the operational experiences and sacrifices of service members who have participated in full-spectrum combat operations outside of a declared combat zone. Specifically, in places like the Sahel region of Africa, many soldiers have experienced direct combat, with some even making the ultimate sacrifice while fighting against Al Qaeda or ISIS affiliates. However, current Army policy prevents these veterans from receiving combat tour service credit, which discounts their experiences and could hinder their eligibility for combat-related claims stemming from these deployments. As we prepare to observe another Memorial Day, it is both timely and necessary to amend the Army's policy on combat tour credit, including the wear of the Shoulder Sleeve Insignia – Military Operations in Hostile Conditions.

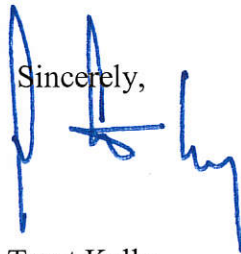
Soldiers have been executing operations against violent extremist organizations in Africa since at least 2004 under the Authorization to Use Military Force. These soldiers have conducted many of the same activities as those conducted within the declared combat zone. The tragic loss of four soldiers in Tongo Tongo, Niger in 2017 is just one example of the parity. Violent extremism has increased at an alarming rate across West Africa, and the standing threat to U.S. forces will continue to increase as well. In January 2022, a U.S. servicemember was injured from an indirect fire attack while deployed to a base in Mali. Soldiers deployed to this region have been awarded Purple Hearts and combat badges from their exposure and experiences, but they are technically not receiving combat tour credit or able to wear a deployment patch because of current Army policy.

I understand that expanding the current combat zone is not a feasible solution for recognizing these servicemembers. However, soldiers who meet the award criteria for the Global War on Terrorism – Expeditionary Medal (GWOT-EM), while simultaneously serving in HF/IDP status, should also be eligible for combat tour service and the corresponding patches, service bars, and awards. This policy should also be amended to retroactively apply to soldiers who earned the GWOT-EM and received HF/IDP.

As the Army continues to focus on quality over quantity of personnel, it is important for service records to accurately reflect soldiers' experiences, so we retain our most talented personnel, and they remain competitive for advancement. Furthermore, providing combat tour credit to soldiers who have earned the GWOT-EM and simultaneously received HF/IDP will assist in future eligibility for Department of Veterans Affairs claims and care for any medical conditions stemming from deployments to these often-austere locations. Overall, amending the current policy will be impactful on soldier morale, retention, and will streamline eligibility for well-earned VA benefits.

I am a firm believer that the Army's people are its greatest asset, and I know that the Army's number one priority of "People First" means that both you and General McConville share this sentiment. As such, I urge you to amend the current policy to grant combat tour service credit, including authorization of shoulder sleeve insignia, to soldiers who supported the global war on terror outside of the now-antiquated declared combat zone.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Trent Kelly', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Trent Kelly  
Member of Congress

TK/le