

A Matter of Honor: Why Cal Cunningham has lost the respect, and the vote, of Veterans

“Drop a dime, save a marriage”, it’s a jest repeated over and over throughout the military as units return from field training and deployments, but as the case often is with veterans, the humor is used to mask a much darker reality: infidelity. Recently, I have found myself inundated with questions regarding my opinion regarding the revelations about LTC Cal Cunningham and his admitted affair with the spouse of a fellow combat veteran. Frankly, I find his callousness toward a fellow veteran unconscionable and his actions deplorable (or at the very least – unbecoming of an officer and unfit for a position of public trust).

As a combat veteran, I have experienced the struggle of “re-integrating” after returning from a long arduous deployment. I witnessed as several of my battle-buddies were devastated by the news of an adulterous spouse and returned to broken homes. One of my brothers (a term of endearment reserved for those that have created a bond of trust that can only be forged in times of trial) would later confide in me that, soon after we returned, he attempted to end his own life in large part due to his wife having an affair while we were deployed to Iraq. What made this betrayal even more devastating: the other party in the affair was a LTC in the U.S. Army; a fellow veteran.

While in the military, I was trained to be ever vigilant and analyze for threats. Since my departure from the military and through my interactions with fellow veterans, I have learned that one of the greatest threats to both active and former military personnel is suicide. While we all may not know the statistics beyond the hashtags of #22aDay (reportedly, 22 veterans commit suicide everyday), someone in LTC Cunningham’s position would have had multiple briefings on the dangers and statistics like: active duty troops commit suicide at a rate of 1 per day, rate of mental health diagnosis has increased by 65% since 2000, and suicide rates in the military were highest among people divorced or separated – 24% higher than troops who are single (All findings from a Pentagon funded study at Ft. Carson, Colo.).

With these statistics in mind, it stands to reason that if our goal is to protect our brothers and sister, and lower the rate of suicides, we could start by doing everything in our power to prevent the creation of broken homes (divorce or separation). This is what makes LTC Cunningham’s betrayal so intolerable is the indifference, the callousness shown toward his fellow soldier. LTC Cunningham was promoted to a position of leadership, a position of trust, and he betrayed that trust. LTC Cunningham violated the very oath of honor that he claims qualifies him for another position of public trust, the U.S. Senate. LTC Cunningham has displayed an incredible lack of moral fiber and character. His actions, and wanton disregard for how those actions may affect others, are unbecoming of an officer within the U.S. Army (to include the N.C. National Guard) and should disqualify him from any claim of honor or position of public trust.

My name is Allen Chesser, I am an Operation Iraqi Freedom Combat Veteran and LTC Cal Cunningham does not represent me.