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# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 18, 2015

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General Mark A. Welsh, III  
Chief of Staff, United States Air Force  
1670 Air Force Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20330-1670

Dear General Welsh,

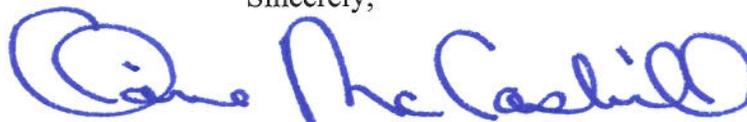
Last month I had the opportunity to visit the remarkable Airmen of the 20<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Squadron at Whiteman Air Force Base. I was impressed with their skill and dedication to such a vital and difficult mission. I am also aware of the challenges you have in fully manning the Remotely Piloted Aircraft (RPA) career field. While the recent decrease in RPA combat air patrols from 65 to 60 will provide some relief for your cadre of RPA pilots, there is still work to be done. I look forward to working with you and Secretary James to continue improving the working conditions for RPA pilots. They are the unsung heroes of our current fight.

I also want to take this opportunity to note my concern about the effect of Airmen being "deployed on station." It is unprecedented in warfare for our men and women to fly combat missions, engage and kill our enemies, and a short while later go home to their families. An RPA pilot could be sitting down to a meal with his or her family less than two hours after killing Islamic State or Taliban fighters on the other side of the world. They could be playing with their children shortly after witnessing up close and in graphic detail the effects of a 500-pound bomb or Hellfire missile on a soft target. I am not sure we fully understand the consequences this has for our men and women in uniform, or on their families.

I understand warriors at times feel the need to "decompress" after a stressful mission. Our uniformed men and women in a combat zone have various resources at hand to assist in this. It seems counter intuitive, but personnel at home may have less access to such resources given the strong desire to be home with family as much as possible. While at Whiteman, I heard that some RPA pilots prefer to work a shift that finishes in the middle of the night because it gives them the opportunity to relax and decompress with their fellow Airmen without feeling pressure to get home for dinner with their spouse and children.

I ask that your office inform me and my staff of the Air Force's plan to deal with this unique form of combat stress. Today's RPA pilots are carrying the weight of the Air Force's armed ISR mission on their backs. We owe them the support they need to stay healthy, even at home.

Sincerely,



Claire McCaskill  
United States Senator

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