

**Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing**  
**“Contractor Misconduct and the Electrocution Deaths  
of American Soldiers in Iraq”**

**Cheryl Harris**  
Mother of Staff Sgt. Ryan Maseth

July 11, 2008

I would like to thank the Committee for this opportunity to testify and share my concern for the safety of our troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. My name is Cheryl Harris. I'm the mother of Staff Sergeant Ryan Maseth, who died from electrocution while taking a shower at the Radwaniyah Palace Complex in Baghdad on January 2, 2008. Ryan was a decorated special forces Army Ranger and Green Beret and is one of several service members to have unnecessarily died by accidental electrocution during mundane daily activities in Iraq.

My son died while serving his country. His death was unnecessary; his death was preventable. His death makes me wonder who is looking out for our troops. His death leads me to ask who can the troops in Iraq count on to ensure that this same fate doesn't await them. I stand before you today to demand accountability, to implore that preventative measures be adopted, and to ask for your commitment that no military family will have to endure the paralyzing pain of this type of senseless tragedy.

My personal ordeal began the night of January 2, 2008 when an Army Chaplain and two Army Non-Commissioned Officers came to my door at 9:45 p.m. Both my twin sons, Ryan and Brandon, were serving tours of duty in Iraq. Ryan was on his second tour and Brandon was on his third. I knew when I came to the door that night that something very serious had happened to one of my sons. I was hoping it was simply an injury and not death. I asked who it was and I was told Ryan had been killed. I asked how it happened and they could not answer me. At that time, I was left with unanswered questions about Ryan's death, not to mention incredible grief.

Since the time my twins and their younger brother, Adam, entered the army, I always lived with the fear that I may face the news that one of my sons had been killed in the line of duty. On January 2, 2008, that fear was realized. What I did not expect to hear, though, was the manner of death that my son, Ryan, a decorated Army Ranger and Green Beret, experienced. While I had always been prepared to hear that one of my sons died by way of a firefight or a roadside bomb, I was dumbstruck to hear in the days following the news of my son's death that he was electrocuted while taking a shower in his living quarters on his Army base at the Radwaniyah Palace Complex in Baghdad.

Since January, I have taken a decided approach to find out what actually happened to my son and why he was electrocuted in his shower at the age of 24. I have learned that my son's electrocution was the result of the failure to correct a known

electrical hazard in a building replete with electrical hazards. Moreover, because of those uncorrected electrical hazards, my son lay in electrified water until he was discovered by a fellow soldier who kicked the door down. There, lying on the ground, was my son's body, burnt and smoldering. One of the soldiers who attempted to rescue Ryan was himself shocked because the electrical current was still running through the water and pipes in Ryan's bathroom.

I have also learned that Kellogg Brown & Root knew of this very hazard since at least February 10, 2007 – 11 months before Ryan's death – when they conducted an inspection of the facilities where Ryan lived. The deficiencies KBR noted on that date included, among others, the fact that the building's main circuit panel, the secondary feeder panel, and the water tank were not grounded. The wiring leading into the secondary electrical panel was not sized properly for the main breakers, did not have proper thermal coating, and did not meet either U.S. or British electrical standards. Additionally, the circuit breaker was rendered inoperable because the tar that had been used to seal the breaker box had melted in the summer into the panel itself.

Let me repeat, these hazards were documented eleven months prior to my son being electrocuted in January 2008. It is my understanding that the prior occupant of Ryan's room was shocked four to five times between June and October 2007 in the exact shower where Ryan was killed. According to his sworn affidavit, each time this soldier was shocked, he submitted a work order to KBR, and each time KBR showed up and attempted to fix the problem. On at least one of these service calls, KBR went to the roof and inspected the water pump, which means that KBR would have known before Ryan's death that the water pump was not grounded.

I have also come to learn that in October 2004, another soldier in Iraq died in almost the exact same way and that the U.S. Army Safety Center had warned that electrical hazards in Iraq were the "unexpected killer" of our troops stationed in Iraq. I have learned that many soldiers have been electrocuted and scores more shocked due to known electrical hazards, including the lack of electrical grounding.

Ryan's death was preventable. I am compelled to ask, who is looking out for our troops. Who can the troops in Iraq count on to ensure that this same fate doesn't await them. Our soldiers have enough concerns for their safety on the battlefield that they should not have to be worried about simple things, such as taking a shower.

It will come as no surprise to the Committee that a parent who loses a child at far too young an age is grief-stricken. It should also come as no surprise that, as a military family, we spend everyday prepared to face the stark reality of the phone call that comes in the middle of the night alerting us that our son or daughter are no longer with us. Ryan was an Army Ranger and a Green Beret. He could have survived weeks in isolation behind enemy lines. He was trained to handle adversity that few of us can fathom. It is unacceptable that extreme recklessness and a total disregard for public safety has deprived the Army of this exemplary young soldier and deprived my family of our son and brother.

I remain hopeful that the Committee's efforts to investigate both the electrical hazards our troops face and the government's response to those hazards will ensure that senseless deaths by electrocution and injuries from electrical shock can be avoided and even eliminated in the future. I am pleading with you to take the necessary steps to hold those responsible accountable and to support our troops by making these necessary changes.

My son's young life was dedicated to the service of his country. He had a deep sense of obligation to his fellow soldiers, and an unbreakable bond with his brothers, Brandon and Adam. We can never undo what was done, but we can make certain that Ryan's death was not in vain. My son was my hero. With your actions today you will enable him to continue on in the heroic spirit for country and brotherhood. Thank you.