

Statement by Mr. Peter Vienna – May 3, 2021

Statement to the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Readiness, **“The AAV Mishap Investigation: How to Build a Culture of Safety to Avoid Preventable Training Accidents”**

Good morning esteemed members of the House Subcommittee as well as those here representing Marine Corps and Navy leadership. Thank you for the opportunity to be heard. I wish you could also see and hear from my wife today. She has chosen to allow me to speak on her behalf because she would be unable to do so without breaking down. I can tell you that her testimony and its effect on this panel would be visceral. I believe all 9 Mothers should be heard because today we are not only mourning our Son, but we also mourn for eight other families that are navigating this pain.

Nancy became a single Mother when Bobby was still an infant. She struggled to give him and his 2 sisters, the best possible life she could. I came into their lives when Bobby was 14 years old. What I witnessed was the most incredible of Mother-Son relationships. The 2 of them literally lived for each other.

Bobby was a natural athlete, excelling in Judo and Jujitsu, never once losing a match. As a Highschool student athlete, he played football and basketball...voted Team Captain as well as most inspirational on his varsity basketball team. In both basketball and Jujitsu, he volunteered his free time to mentor the younger kids. He was truly a sensei and coach's dream.

He was the best of us. The favorite of his Grandparents, Aunts, Uncles and all his cousins who looked up to him as a role model. I can say without prejudice that Bobby touched more lives positively in his 22 years than most people do in a lifetime.

Bobby along with 8 others are dead now and here is just a short list of the reasons given in the investigation:

- AAV's that came off the "Dead-Line" ...end of life...deemed "not sea-worthy", should never have been put back in the water.
- No real safety boat put in the water, (SOP states "2 safety boats for every 6 AAV's in the water")
- 8 of the 9 killed had no emergency egress training. Found with full body armor still on, some with their rifle still strapped on.
- No radio contact or eyes on the AAV's, Bobby's boat was sinking for 45 min while chasing the Somerset that was traveling away and conducting helicopter exercises.
- All 23 gallons of transmission fluid was lost on the trip to the island, only 6 gallons were available to replace yet that AAV was sent back into the water to try and reach the Somerset.
- AAV crew that did not follow its own emergency SOP's. Had they done so, the AAV would have still sunk, but not with our boys in it. I point that back at leadership. Just another result of a terrible lack in training readiness.

His Mother, his surviving sisters, Jasmine and Jade, and his Fiancé Savannah, who received her surprise engagement ring in a box 7 months after he was killed, have not been able to accept his loss. Especially

now, knowing how incredibly preventable it was. Losing her only Son has broken my wife. She is suffering both mentally and physically. For me, well frankly for the last 9 months I have been on suicide watch. I had no control over losing my Son, but I refuse to lose my wife!

I also refuse to call what happened on July 30<sup>th</sup> a “mishap”. Definition of which is, “an unlucky accident”. We have all seen that nightmare of an investigation, and so we know that what actually occurred was a predictable outcome resulting from the reckless disregard for human life by a command that ignored its own safety standards and operational procedures, putting mission above the young lives they were supposed to protect. Not a combat mission...this was just training. And if I hear one more time, “We have to train like we fight”, I think my head will explode. Because for decades now it’s been true that every year the military loses more lives in training than they do in combat.

Before I go any further, I wish to say for the record that even after all the recklessness and ineptitude that took our only Son, my wife and I are not anti-military. On the contrary, we feel we owe it to our Son to do what we can to effect the change that leads to a better stronger but safer military. We actually want to help.

I repeat, what happened July 30<sup>th</sup> was no “mishap”. It was yet another example of what should be expected under any institution that is allowed to self-police and self-punish, without strong checks and balances...AND, is allowed to hide behind by an antiquated law that protects it from the accountability of answering legally to those it recklessly harms. No possibility for a day in court, resulting in our troops becoming 2<sup>nd</sup> class citizens the moment they swear in. Yes, I am speaking of the Feres Doctrine. And I would argue that its existence, is what will continue to foster this culture across all military branches where medical malpractice, sexual assault, and training deaths, that far outpace combat deaths, will continue to plague our precious troops and the civilian families that love them.

Our Son will never come home, but how do we keep other families from suffering this unbearable pain. Please don’t allow our 9 Sons to die in vain!