

Mental health cases prompt GAO investigation at Carson

Colorado base under scrutiny after soldiers claim mistreatment

By Kelly Kennedy

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After several soldiers came forward claiming they were discharged for personality disorders but diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injuries, officials at Fort Carson, Colo., say statistics show 56 of the 276 soldiers discharged with personality disorders in fact had PTSD.

But officials say those PTSD cases were mild to moderate and the soldiers were discharged because of personality disorder issues.

Fort Carson soldiers have accused Army officials of everything from deploying them to Iraq with brain injuries to punishing them for behavior related to their combat injuries.

The soldiers also say that after Veterans for America asked for an investigation by the Army inspec-

tor general, no one from the IG's office talked to them before submitting a report that essentially said no problems had been found.

Steve Robinson, director of veterans' affairs for Veterans for America, said he then contacted members of Congress, six of whom asked the Government Accountability Office to investigate whether mental health cases are being properly handled in the Army. Robinson talked with reporters April 30.

Post officials said they welcome the scrutiny.

"Fort Carson hosts Senate and House delegations frequently," said Karen Linne, Fort Carson spokeswoman. "This will be our fourth visit this year, and we are proud to show the staff delegates our post."

One visit displayed Fort Carson's system of monitoring every soldier for traumatic brain injuries.

"However, we don't know the entire scope" of the GAO's upcoming

visit yet, Linne said. "We've received a draft itinerary that included the names of only nine soldiers."

Veterans for America said it has investigated situations involving 35 soldiers, and has 18 open cases.

"We keep hearing from soldiers that there are problems, and the cases just don't stop," Robinson said.

Linne sent Army Times a presentation on soldier readiness and mental health care given in April by Col. Steve Knorr, chief of behavioral health at the post.

It states that each soldier is screened for behavioral health issues, and that, since 2003, 1,703 soldiers have been diagnosed with PTSD at Fort Carson. Of those, 282 soldiers were sent to the military disability retirement system.

Another 276 soldiers were out-processed for "personality disorders" — and this is where Robinson sees a problem. Of those soldiers, according to the document, about 20 percent had been diagnosed with PTSD "with or without" a traumatic brain injury.

Under Army regulations, for

combat soldiers to be diagnosed with a personality disorder, they must have — somewhere in their medical records — evidence of having been diagnosed or treated for a mental health issue at some point before going to war.

The document said Knorr reviewed the medical charts of 52 of the soldiers — without talking with any of them — and of the 48 diagnosed with PTSD, 25 had mild PTSD and 23 had moderate PTSD.

"None of the soldiers chaptered for personality disorder had severe PTSD," the document states. "A diagnosis of severe PTSD is a requisite to undergo initiation of a PTSD-related medical evaluation board. Col. Knorr surmises that the diagnosis was made within primary care and was not severe enough to warrant consultation to behavioral health."

In other words, the problems stemmed from personality disorders that hadn't been picked up in the years before the soldiers went to combat — not the PTSD they acquired in war.

In each case, the document states, "providers made a clinical determination that the primary dysfunction was the personality disorder, and a medical board was not warranted."

Soldiers chaptered out for pre-existing personality disorders receive no medical benefits and no

disability retirement pay. Those chaptered out for PTSD get medical benefits and severance or disability retirement pay.

Of 120 soldiers at Carson sent to mental health services by their commanders because they were receiving bad-conduct discharges, five were not approved and were chaptered out through the military disability retirement system, the document states.

'Falling through the cracks'

Army Times talked with two soldiers who accuse the Army of ill treatment. Spc. Paul Thurman said he was shipped to Southwest Asia with a traumatic brain injury, even though his profile said he could not deploy.

In Kuwait, he injured his head again when a mock explosive device went off near him. When he returned, his rear detachment commander gave him an Article 15 for refusing to follow an order. But the write-up doesn't say Thurman felt a seizure — a symptom of his brain injury — coming on, had asked to get his medication, was told no, and then left formation to get it anyway. He has requested a court-martial.

Spc. Jon Town was diagnosed with a traumatic brain injury after a rocket blew up 2½ feet above his head, but the Army diagnosed him with a pre-existing



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