Discharged for personality disorders — or for PTSD?

Senators want answers to Fort Carson allegations

By Kelly Kennedy
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Six senators have requested an investigation into what they call "upsetting allegations" that the Army gave personality-disorder discharges to 18 Fort Carson, Colo., soldiers diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injuries.

"There are allegations of commanders at Fort Carson, Colo., denying soldiers access to mental health care and instead ordering them redeployed for additional tours in Iraq," states a letter to the Government Accountability Office. "We have also heard of cases in which service members with PTSD are diagnosed as having 'personality disorders' that the Army considers 'pre-existing,' thus depriving otherwise eligible combat veterans of disability benefits and much-needed mental health care."

The letter, dated April 19, is signed by Sens. Barack Obama, D-Ill.; Barbara Boxer, D-Calif.; Christopher Bond, R-Mo.; Joe Lieberman, I-Conn; Tom Harkin, D-Iowa; and Claire McCaskill, D-Mo. It was also sent to Deputy Defense Secretary Gordon England and Acting Army Secretary Pete Geren.

"I'm especially troubled by reports of some DoD commanders downplaying the serious mental health conditions confronting service members returning home from Iraq, and then redeploying those troops without proper treatment," Obama said in a statement. "It's time for a full accounting of how many of our troops are affected by post-traumatic stress disorder, other service-connected mental health conditions and traumatic brain injuries."

The letter requests that the following items be investigated:

- Known cases of improper discharges or misdiagnoses.
- The growing number of discharges for personality disorders.
- The overall number of misdiagnosed cases for PTSD, mental health conditions and traumatic brain injuries.
- Defense Department progress in mandatory screening and treatment.
- What help is available to soldiers if they believe they have been misdiagnosed.
- The number of service members reporting mental health concerns because of sexual assault during deployment.

"We seek to ensure that the DoD has the resources necessary to diagnose and treat service-connected injuries that impact the mental health of U.S. service personnel," the letter states. "It is vital that the U.S. military ensures it is treating the mental health needs of our forces with the same priority and resource investments it is devoting to physical injuries."

The quest for information began after The Nation reported that 22,000 soldiers have been diagnosed and discharged from the Army for pre-existing personality disorders since the war began, and documented cases of soldiers who believe their combat-related mental health issues were buried for the sake of saving money or quickly filling a slot with a deployable soldier.

Veterans for America then requested an Army surgeon general investigation into the cases of 18 soldiers discharged for personality disorders. Steve Robinson, director of veterans' affairs at Veterans for America, said the Army surgeon general wrote the group a letter stating that the soldiers' cases had been investigated, and that no improprieties took place.

However, Robinson said no one talked to any of the 18 soldiers during the investigation, thus sparking the Congressional inquiry.

"Four months later, we got a letter saying, 'We thoroughly and thoughtfully reviewed these cases,'" Robinson said. "But how can that be if they didn't do follow-up exams and didn't talk to the soldiers?"

Spc. Jon Town is one of those soldiers. "Nobody talked to me," Town said. "It's unbelievable that their investigation didn't involve talking to the soldiers."

Town was diagnosed with a traumatic brain injury when a rocket blew up two-and-a-half feet above his head in Iraq in 2005. "It was like I was kind of flying and then there was a fireball behind me," he said of the explosion that caused his injury. He bled from his ears and passed out for about three minutes. He rested for 24 hours, then went to work the next day.

"As soon as I got back, it was in my medical records," Town said. "But it took me two months to get my first appointment."

He can't hear in his left ear, lost 50 percent of his hearing in his right ear, and has short-term memory loss and headaches that never go away. Town also has PTSD — common for soldiers with traumatic brain injuries.

"It's rather scary," he said. "Yesterday, me and my wife were going to my mom and dad's house and someone blew a tire out. It scared the bejesus out of me."

Town said he has flashbacks two or three times a day and only gets three hours of sleep a night.

Soon after he returned to Fort Carson, Town sat in a bathtub full of water. He plugged in a hair dryer and then tugged it into the water.

"It was a really bad day, bad time," Town said. "Fortunately, it short-circuited."

Though he checked into a hospital the next day, his command wasn't as helpful. He received a bad write-up when he overslept one day because of his medication. He was written up again after one of his sergeants said something offensive about a friend who died in Iraq.

"I just yelled at the person," he said. "He was a staff sergeant, and I was disrespectful. But he had no right to say what he said."

Soon, his mental health diagnosis changed.

"I had obvious symptoms of PTSD, and I was going to do the medical evaluation board," he said. "But they sent me to psychiatrists who said I had a personality disorder."

Though he had no history of mental health issues, Army physicians diagnosed Town with a personality disorder, then discharged him with no benefits because they determined the supposed disorder was a pre-existing condition.

"My commander told me it wouldn't affect my benefits, and if I signed the paperwork, he could get someone to take my place," Town said. "But I lost everything, and had to pay the Army $3,000 back because I re-enlisted and got a bonus. That's what I got for seven years of service."

He was chaptered out and has been waiting for six months for an appointment with the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Andrew Pogany, a former soldier who investigates cases for Veterans for America, said Town's case is typical, and then listed several others:

- One American Indian soldier served two full tours in Iraq and has not been able to get treatment for his PTSD. Instead, the soldier said, his chain of command disciplined him for alcoholism and harassed him by calling him a "drunk Indian." Other soldiers signed statements saying the American Indian soldier was mistreated, and that they were ordered not to cooperate with investigators.
- Another soldier served in Afghanistan for a year, then sought help for PTSD. He received none, then was redeployed to Iraq. While returning to Iraq after leave, he had a panic attack at the airport and said he could not get on the plane. He immediately called his unit, then sought mental health treatment. He was diagnosed with acute stress disorder, and then chronic PTSD. And then he was found guilty of "missing movement by design," reduced in rank from specialist to private and given 45 days of extra duty.
- A 550-pound log fell on a specialist's head, causing lesions to the frontal lobe of his brain. His profile said he was undeployable and that he needed an urgent MRI, but he was cleared to go to Iraq. One month after arriving, he suffered another traumatic brain injury in an explosion and was medevaced back to Fort Carson. He faces an Article 15 for disobeying an order, even after a doctor said his brain injury was so severe he can't comprehend orders.
- A soldier was given an other-than-honorable discharge even with signs of a traumatic brain injury. One day before he was kicked out, the soldier was diagnosed with the injury. He was discharged anyway.

"It's just totally ridiculous," Pogany said. "It flies in the face of what they say publicly."

> **'I tell these stories to people who have nothing to do with the military, and they think I'm making this up.'**
>
> ANDREW POGANY
> FORMER STAFF SERGEANT, VETERANS FOR AMERICA INVESTIGATOR

Publicly, Army mental health experts have been fighting the stigma surrounding mental health issues, as well as the idea that service members will be punished for seeking help.

"I tell these stories to people who have nothing to do with the military, and they think I'm making this up," Pogany said.

In Iraq, Pogany, a former staff sergeant and Army interrogator serving out of Fort Carson, had what appeared to be a nervous breakdown. Instead of providing him with medical treatment when Pogany said he needed help, the Army sent him home and charged him with cowardly conduct.

But he continued to have the symptoms he had in Iraq: panic, anxiety, nightmares, confusion and depression. Then his lawyer said other soldiers who had taken anti-malarial medication were having the same symptoms.

Pogany was medically retired in 2005 after his doctors said the medication caused brain damage.

"The drugs did damage to my brain stem. But I'm done with that. It just gets me worked up that these guys are falling through the cracks today." □

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