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## **A Focus on Violence by Returning G.I.'s**

**By [LIZETTE ALVAREZ](#) and DAN FROSCH**

FORT CARSON, Colo. — For the past several years, as this Army installation in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains became a busy way station for soldiers cycling in and out of Iraq, the number of servicemen implicated in violent crimes has raised alarm.

Nine current or former members of Fort Carson's Fourth Brigade Combat Team have killed someone or were charged with killings in the last three years after returning from Iraq. Five of the slayings took place last year alone. In addition, charges of domestic violence, rape and sexual assault have risen sharply.

Prodded by Senator [Ken Salazar](#), Democrat of Colorado, the base commander began an investigation of the soldiers accused of homicide. An Army task force is reviewing their recruitment, medical and service records, as well as their personal histories, to determine if the military could have done something to prevent the violence. The inquiry was recently expanded to include other serious violent crimes.

Now the secretary of the Army, Pete Geren, says he is considering conducting an Army-wide review of all soldiers "involved in violent crimes since returning" from Iraq and Afghanistan, according to a letter sent to Mr. Salazar in December. Mr. Geren wrote that the Fort Carson task force had yet to find a specific factor underlying the killings, but that the inquiry was continuing.

Focusing attention on soldiers charged with killings is a shift for the military, which since the start of the war in Iraq has largely deflected any suggestion that combat could be a factor in violent behavior among some returning service members.

Maj. Gen. Mark Graham, the Fort Carson commander, said, "If they had a good manner of performance before they deployed, then they get back and they get into trouble, instead of saying we will discipline you for trouble, the leadership has to say, Why did that occur, what happened, what is causing this difference in behavior?"

General Graham, whose oldest son, Jeff, was killed by a roadside bomb in Iraq a year after another son, Kevin, committed suicide, has made mental health a focus since taking command of Fort Carson in 2007. "I feel like I have to speak out for the Kevins of the world," he said.

The inquiry, the general added, is "looking for a trend, something that happened through their life cycle that might have contributed to this, something we could have seen coming."

Last January, The New York Times published articles examining the cases of veterans of the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan charged with homicide after their return. At the time, it counted at least 121 such cases. In many of them, combat trauma and the stress of deployment appeared to have set the stage for the crimes.

At Fort Carson, at least four of the accused killers from the Fourth Brigade Combat Team, Fourth Infantry Division were grappling with post-traumatic stress disorder and several had been injured in battle.

One was John Needham, a 25-year-old private from a military family in California, whose downward spiral began when he sustained shrapnel wounds in Iraq and tried to commit suicide. This September, after being treated for stress disorder and receiving a medical discharge from the Army, Mr. Needham was charged with beating his girlfriend to death.

“Where is this aggression coming from?” asked Vivian H. Gembara, a former captain and Army prosecutor at Fort Carson until 2004, who wrote a book about the war crimes she prosecuted in Iraq. “Was it something in Iraq? Were they in a lot of heavy combat? If so, the command needs to pay more attention to that. You can’t just point all of them out as bad apples.”

The Fourth Combat Brigade, previously called the Second Combat Brigade, fought in Iraq’s fiercest cities at some of the toughest moments. Falluja and Ramadi, after insurgents dug into the rubble. Baghdad and its Sadr City district, as body counts soared. By 2007, after two tours, the brigade, which numbers 3,500, had lost 113 soldiers, with hundreds more wounded. It is now preparing for a tour in Afghanistan this spring.

Most Fort Carson soldiers have been to Iraq at least once; others have deployed two, three or four times.

Kaye Baron, a therapist in Colorado Springs who treats Fort Carson soldiers and families, said, “It got to the point I stopped asking if they have deployed, and started asking how many times they have deployed.”

Ms. Baron added, “There are some guys who say, ‘Why do I have to get treatment for P.T.S.D.? I just have to go back.’ ”

While most soldiers returning from war adjust with minor difficulties, military leaders acknowledges that multiple deployments strain soldiers and families, and can increase the likelihood of problems like excessive drinking, marital strife and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Domestic violence among Fort Carson soldiers has become more prevalent since the Iraq war began in 2003. In 2006, Fort Carson soldiers were charged in 57 cases of domestic violence, according to figures released by the base. As of mid-December, the number had grown to 145.

Rape and sexual assault cases against soldiers have also increased, from 10 in 2006 to 38 as of mid-December, the highest tally since the war began. Both domestic violence and rape are crimes that are traditionally underreported.

Fort Carson officials say the increased numbers do not necessarily indicate more violence. Karen Connelly, a Fort Carson spokeswoman, said the base, whose population fluctuates from 11,000 to 14,500 soldiers, is doing a better job of holding soldiers accountable for crimes, encouraging victims to come forward and keeping statistics.

Even so, Col. B. Shannon Davis, the base’s deputy commander, said the task force was examining these trends. “We are looking at crime as a whole,” he said.

The killings allegedly involving the nine current or former Fourth Brigade soldiers have caused the most

consternation. The first occurred in 2005, when Stephen Sherwood, a musician who joined the Army for health benefits, returned from Iraq and fatally shot his wife and then himself.

Last year, three battlefield friends were charged with murder after two soldiers were found shot dead within four months of each other. Two of the accused suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, and all three had been in disciplinary or criminal trouble in the military. One had a juvenile record and been injured in Iraq.

The latest killing was in October, when the police say Robert H. Marko, an infantryman, raped and killed Judilianna Lawrence, a developmentally disabled teenager he had met online. Specialist Marko believed that on his 21st birthday he would become the "Black Raptor" — half-man, half-dinosaur, a confidential Army document shows. The Army evaluated him three times for mental health problems but cleared him for combat each time.

Senator Salazar, President-elect [Barack Obama](#)'s choice to be secretary of the interior, called for the Fort Carson inquiry, saying the killings raised questions about what role, if any, combat stress played.

"It's a hard issue, but it's a realistic issue," he said.

Since arriving at Fort Carson, General Graham has spoken openly about mental health, particularly post-traumatic stress disorder, calling it an act of courage, not frailty, to ask for help.

His 21-year-old son, a top R.O.T.C. cadet, hanged himself in 2003 after battling depression. He had stopped taking his antidepressants because he did not want to disclose his illness, fearing such an admission would harm his chances for a career as an Army doctor, General Graham said.

"He was embarrassed," the general said.

He added: "I feel it every day. We didn't give him all the care we should have. He got some care, but not enough. I'll never be convinced I did enough for my son."

At Fort Carson, in cases of dishonorable discharge, General Graham asks whether the soldier might be struggling with combat stress disorder.

He has sometimes opted instead to grant medical discharges, which entitle veterans to benefits. All Fort Carson soldiers who seek medical attention are now asked about their mental health and, if necessary, referred for treatment.

Still, some sergeants view stress disorder skeptically and actively discourage treatment, some therapists and soldiers say.

Billie Gray, 71, who until recently worked at a base clinic helping soldiers with emotional problems, said "that was the biggest problem at Fort Carson today: harassment" and "the very fact they are harassed made their mental status worse."

Ms. Gray said she believed she was fired in October for being an outspoken advocate for mental health treatment. Base officials declined to comment, citing privacy reasons.

Colonel Davis, the deputy commander, acknowledged that sergeants had been reprimanded for discouraging treatment. "We have had to take corrective action," he said, "but fewer and fewer times."

John Wylie Needham, one of the accused killers whose case is now being examined by the task force, was "cracking up" in Iraq, he told his father in an e-mail message. Yet, he felt he had to fight to get help, his father said in an interview.

In October 2006, during his first week in Iraq, Private Needham, a California surfer, watched a good friend die from a sniper bullet. Months later, he was blasted in the back by shrapnel from a grenade. To cope with his growing anxiety, he stole Valium and drank liquor. Caught twice, he was punished with a reduction in rank, a fine and extra work, a confidential Army document shows. Eventually, he was prescribed medication, but he wrote to his father, Mike Needham, that it did not help.

Private Needham became angry at the way other soldiers reacted to the fighting, and he did not hide it. "They seemed to revel in how many people they had killed," said a friend in his unit who spoke on condition of anonymity.

In September 2007, Private Needham tried to kill himself with a gun, the Army document states, but another soldier intervened. Mike Needham, a veteran, said that rather than treating his son, the Army disciplined him for discharging a weapon and confined him to barracks. The Army declined to comment.

"I'm stressed to the point of completely losing it," Private Needham wrote to his father in October 2007. "The squad leader brushed me off and said suck it up."

He added, "They keep me locked up in this room and if I need food or water I have to have 2 guards with me."

The Army evacuated Private Needham to [Walter Reed Army Medical Center](#) to treat his back and his post-traumatic stress disorder. But a month later, he was back at Fort Carson.

"The first words out of the Mental Health Authority was, 'we are severely understaffed,'" Mr. Needham said in an e-mail message to an officer at Walter Reed. "If you're suicidal we can see you twice a week, otherwise once a week."

Fort Carson assured Mike Needham that his son was receiving proper care. But during his son's visit home during the Thanksgiving break, Mr. Needham found him smearing camouflage-colored makeup on his face and frantically sharpening a stick with a kitchen knife.

"He was a total mess," Mr. Needham said.

He was treated at a California naval hospital until last July when he received a medical discharge from the Army. While Private Needham was in the early stages of getting help from a Veterans Administration clinic, he spent his days depressed and often drinking at his father's condominium.

Then last summer, Private Needham met Jacquelyn Villagomez, a bubbly 19-year-old aspiring model who saw him as a kindred spirit, said Jennifer Johnson, who had helped raise her. Her mother had died of AIDS when she was 6 and her father had left the family. Ms. Villagomez, "who saw the good in everyone," had

recently kicked a heroin habit, Ms. Johnson said.

“She thought she could save him,” Ms. Johnson said. But a month later, the police say, Private Needham beat Ms. Villagomez to death in his father’s condominium.

Mr. Needham said the Army handled his son’s case poorly, but Ms. Johnson finds it hard to muster sympathy for him.

“I’m sure what happened to him was awful,” she said. “I’m sure he saw some horrible things that altered him. But this is a 200-pound guy who beat up this 95-pound little girl. It’s disgusting.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: January 3, 2009

Because of an editing error, an article on Friday about violent crimes committed by soldiers who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan referred incorrectly to the secretary of the Army. He goes by Pete Geren, not Peter. (His birth name is Preston.) The same error was made in articles on Nov. 9 and Oct. 30, 2008.

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