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Accused Killer's Father: The Army 'Broke Him'

Five slayings in Iraq raise questions over deployments, stress

By Paul Wiseman, Andrea Stone and Gregg Zoroya, USA Today

BAGHDAD - Three long tours in Iraq. A stalled military career. Worries about his life back home, including how he was going to pay his mortgage.

The portrait that emerged Tuesday of Sgt. John Russell, the 44-year-old from Sherman, Texas, charged with killing five fellow servicemembers at a Baghdad military base, in many ways personifies the emotionally taxed soldier the Army says has become a growing concern as the Iraq war stretches into its seventh year.

Russell recently had e-mailed his wife to tell her "his life was over," his father, Wilburn Russell, told a Sherman TV station. He told KXII that his son had been ordered by his superiors into stress counseling, where the sergeant feared that officers were trying to drive him out of the Army just a few weeks before he was due to return home.

"They broke him," Wilburn Russell said, wiping away tears as he stood on the front porch of his son's brick home. "They decided they wanted to get rid of him."

The military said in a statement that Sgt. Russell, a communications specialist with the 54th Engineering Battalion based in Bamberg, Germany, will face five counts of murder stemming from Monday's shooting, the worst incident of soldier-on-soldier violence in the Iraq war. Maj. Gen. David Perkins, a military spokesman in Baghdad, said Russell had been receiving counseling for at least a week because "his chain of command had concerns about him."

Commanders in Iraq allege Russell was being escorted from the mental health clinic at Camp Liberty when he overpowered his guard and took away a weapon, according to two Army officials who received written accounts and verbal briefings about the incident. Russell then returned to the clinic and killed two military doctors and three enlisted personnel, according to the allegations. The officials would not speak on the record because the case is ongoing.

"They escorted him out with a guy with a gun," Wilburn Russell said. "That was the worst thing they could have done. They trained him to kill; he had a short fuse when they antagonized him."

The Army said it would launch an investigation into whether there are too few stress clinics and counseling services for troops who are on the battlefield. Gen. Peter Chiarelli, the Army's vice chief of staff and point man on mental health issues, said the military has long been concerned that the unprecedented demands of fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan could lead to severe strains.

"We've never, I don't believe, had a force that we've put through seven years of continuous combat like this, where such a large percentage of the force is going on these multiple deployments," Chiarelli told USA TODAY on Tuesday. "It is definitely uncharted territory for us, given that we have an all-volunteer force that's been fighting for as long as we've been fighting."

Since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, more than 150,000 Army soldiers have deployed more than once to Afghanistan, Iraq and the surrounding region. Of those, about 46,000 have served a third or fourth deployment. Because of the military's manpower shortage in recent years, many of those taxed soldiers have spent only a year at home before being sent back into combat. Chiarelli said he hopes that once U.S. forces start to leave Iraq in significant numbers next year, troops will have two years between combat deployments.

Russell is a member of a group that has faced particular strains: non-commissioned officers, or NCOs. They often are referred to as the "backbone" of the Army, the sergeants and staff sergeants whose mission is to lead soldiers and take care of them. A 2007 Army study showed that more than 27% of NCOs on their third or fourth deployment showed signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety or depression - compared with roughly 20% of the Army as a whole.

"If the backbone of the Army begins to wobble, it's worrisome," says Ward Casscells, until recently the Pentagon's top doctor. He says senior leaders, including Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Adm. Mike Mullen, "are worried sick about it."

The military has tried to improve its mental health care system. Troops receive cards listing warning signs for suicidal tendencies, briefings on how to spot depression in other troops and how to seek additional help through counseling and therapy. The ratio of mental health counselors to soldiers has improved since 2007, when it was one therapist per 734 troops. Today it is one to 627, Army spokeswoman Margaret Tippy says.

Chiarelli noted that Russell had been identified as a risk by his commanders and put into counseling - just as the system is supposed to work. "It seems to me that everybody was attempting to do the right thing given whatever

symptoms this individual had shown," Chiarelli said. "The unit seemed to be doing everything the right way."

'He's not a violent person'

Perkins, the military spokesman, said the victims of the shooting include a Navy officer and an Army officer with the 55th Medical Company based in Indianapolis. The other three were enlisted soldiers who were seeking treatment, he said. He did not provide their names, although a Pentagon statement late Tuesday said Charles K. Springle, 52, of Wilmington, N.C., died Monday in a "non-combat incident" at Camp Liberty.

Some other details about the incident remained unclear, including a full accounting of how the shooting happened or what kind of weapon was used.

Reporters in Iraq were banned from visiting Camp Liberty for a second consecutive day because the clinic is "a crime scene," Lt. Col. Amy Hannah, a military spokesman, said by e-mail.

Perkins did not detail what stress symptoms Russell had shown that led his commander to refer him to counseling. He said Russell was on his third tour in Iraq and had shown enough warning signs that his commander had "determined it was best for him not to have a weapon."

Maj. Gen. Daniel Bolger, commander of U.S. troops in Baghdad, said Russell's job as a NCO made it "particularly challenging" for him to seek treatment. "He's in a leadership capacity, and to make that trip (to the clinic) is a tough decision for him or his chain of command to make. But (they) were willing to make it."

Wilburn Russell told KXII his son was dyslexic and had trouble keeping jobs. He joined the Army National Guard in 1988, and then became an active-duty soldier in 1994 after a divorce and a series of minor scrapes with the law, including a conviction for criminal trespassing, according to records in Grayson County, Texas.

At one point, his ex-wife got a temporary restraining order against him and an order withholding earnings for child support, the records show.

Public records show Russell and his current wife, Mandy, took out a mortgage for nearly \$106,000 on their house in Sherman last July. The elder Russell said his son was "deeply in debt," paying a mortgage of \$1,500 a month.

Despite that, Wilburn Russell said his son took tai chi, played chess and was "very stable" before his problems began in the military.

Wilburn Russell said his son had seen "carnage" in Iraq and was frustrated with his superiors. "When you take a guy who's got 16 years (in the Army)

and he's going to lose his career and lose his pension, you've gone too far. ... They sent him off with his tail between his legs thinking he was going to be drummed out of the service."

The soldier's son, John M. Russell II, 20, told KXII that his father, who had lived with his German-born wife in Germany for most of his Army career, had last e-mailed April 25. He said his father seemed normal and planned to be back in Texas to visit in July.

"He's not a violent person," the son said. "For this to happen, it had to be something going on the Army's not telling us about."

'They've got a lot of pressure'

Joe Davis, spokesman for the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, said it's very uncommon for a soldier to spend 15 years in the Army without advancing past the rank of sergeant - as happened with Russell. "You'd think that he would've advanced a little higher," Davis said.

Despite the questions raised by Russell's father about the quality of military counselors, Renee Campos of the Military Officers Association of America says commanders are well aware they must worry about the physical and mental health of troops whose rest periods between deployments are often short.

"For commanders, it's kind of an untenable position," Campos says. "Commanders are in the fight to fight. They've got a lot of pressure to do the mission, but they've also got the other things (troop stress) that are going on."

She wants more emphasis on providing commanders the tools to track, diagnose and treat soldiers with problems.

Matthew Miller, associate director of the Harvard Injury Control Research Center, praised the Army for taking weapons away from soldiers such as Russell who are undergoing crisis counseling. He said suicide or homicide are more likely to occur when a troubled person has easy access to weapons and characterized Monday's shooting as an example of workplace violence.

"If they can figure out how to prevent someone whose guns are taken away from so quickly getting another, lives will be saved, including lives that would otherwise be lost to suicide," Miller said.

"That is the only glimmer of light in this otherwise horribly dark event."

Davis, the veterans' spokesman, agreed that Iraq and Afghanistan posed challenges unlike previous wars.

"One truism is 'All wars end,' " Davis said. "But there's a lot of people in uniform saying, 'When is our war going to end?' "

Contributing: Tom Vanden Brook in Washington; Alan Gomez in McLean, Va.; the Associated Press