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The Army denies that combat stress causes homicide

An Army report seems to confirm a Salon investigation linking battle stress to murder. But the Army begs to differ

By Michael de Yoanna and Mark Benjamin

Editor's note: Read excerpts from the Army's report on homicides at Fort Carson [here](#) or download the full study [here](#). Read Salon's Coming Home series about preventable deaths at Fort Carson [here](#).

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The harsh combat in Iraq, including potential war crimes that were witnessed by soldiers, contributed to a series of brutal murders by soldiers based at this Army post near Colorado Springs after they returned home, according to a [hard-hitting Army study](#) released Wednesday. Many of the findings in the study, which was announced by senior Army brass at a press conference on the post, mirror those in Salon's [Coming Home series](#), which identified a pattern of preventable homicides and suicides at Fort Carson among soldiers who served in Iraq with combat stress and failed to receive proper medical treatment.

According to the report, "Survey data from this investigation suggest a possible association between increasing levels of combat exposure and risk for negative behavioral outcomes." The study also says that "combat intensity/exposure . . . may have increased the risk for violent behaviors" and that its "findings are consistent with recent research on combat exposure and subsequent behavior outcomes among Soldiers."

Salon's Coming Home series showed that soldiers who returned from combat duty with symptoms of stress were often ridiculed or otherwise discouraged from seeking help, were overmedicated or misdiagnosed, or chose to self-medicate with drugs and alcohol. Many had been deployed even though they were already displaying signs of combat stress. Additionally, some of the soldiers involved in violence against themselves or others had preexisting conditions that should have disqualified them from service, but were allowed into a military hard-pressed for new recruits via waivers.

The 126-page report issued by the Army Wednesday -- an epidemiological study, or EPICON in military lingo -- focused largely on 14 of the Army post's soldiers allegedly involved in murders since 2005. Ordered by Fort Carson commander Maj. Gen. Mark Graham in the wake of the slayings, it is studded with statistical evidence that buttresses Salon's investigation. The numbers point to a link between violent behavior and substance abuse, repeated deployments, exposure to combat and enlistment waivers. In addition, many of the 14 soldiers allegedly involved in murders witnessed incidents described in the report as War Crimes. Five either heard of or witnessed the "murdering/killing" of non-combatants; three, "detainee abuse;" and, two, "fabricating evidence to justify attacks or criminal acts."

Yet the Army officials presenting the report denied that it established any cause-and-effect relationships. Eric Schoomaker, the Army's surgeon general, waved his hands across his chest under clear blue skies during the outdoor press conference, dismissing the notion that the report proved a tie between soldier-involved killings and the horrors those soldiers experienced in the war.

"While this is probably the most intensive and in-depth investigation on the clustering of violent-on-violent crimes in the Army that we've ever seen or are aware of," said Schoomaker, "it is still in many respects preliminary."

Without causation, there is no way to establish how the murders could've been prevented. "We would all like to look back at the cluster of misconduct and criminal activities," said Schoomaker, "that resulted in devastating human tragedies here in Colorado and be able to say, 'This is the reason they happened and we know exactly what could have been done to prevent them,' but that's rarely the way things work when dealing with human behavior."

Without causation, there is also limited accountability. While commanders were blamed for standing in the way of soldiers receiving mental health and substance-abuse care, Lt. Gen. Michael Rochelle, the Army's director of personnel, said the report "was not a tool that was intended to be used to either fix accountability or to be used for any sort of disciplinary action that may follow."

Schoomaker, Rochelle and Maj. Gen. Graham, who was also on the podium Wednesday, were able to deny cause-and-effect because of caveats in the study. The authors of the report, a 24-member team assembled the Army's Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine, issued recommendations to stop the belittling of soldiers who seek mental health care and to identify units with high exposure to combat. They stopped short, however, of positing causation, saying that ""the cross-sectional nature of the study does not allow for making causal inferences."

Thus Schoomaker could say, truthfully, "It's pointing the finger to levels of causation, but we don't know direct causation yet. ... I'm very reluctant to put cause and effect there. In fact, the authors [of the report] are very careful to say these are correlations ... not necessarily one causing the other."

Yet Schoomaker also seemed to place some blame on the soldiers themselves for failing to seek help. He suggested that units where the soldiers were more willing to get help were less likely to be plagued with violence. The study, he noted, analyzed two brigades at Fort Carson, the 4th and the 3rd. "What did seem to differ between the two was the willingness and ability of those soldiers within the unit where crimes were committed to seek and get effective care for emerging behavioral health problems -- alcohol and drug problems -- and prompt attention to misconduct."

But Schoomaker also claimed that the experiences of the 4th and 3rd Brigades in combat were "similar." That's not what's indicated in the report -- the 4th Brigade, where the murder suspects were clustered, had eight times more combat deaths than the 3rd. Moreover, the report indicated that the Army itself played a role in denying care to the soldiers -- half, some with suicide issues, were sent back to Iraq "early," according to the report.

U.S. Senator Mark Udall, a Colorado Democrat, who met on Tuesday with Schoomaker, issued a statement following the release of the report, noting it raises "serious questions about whether the military is doing enough to help service members transition from battle back into civilian life."

"This is a matter of life and death, for our service members -- and civilians," Udall stated. "We must do everything in our power to ensure that the military is providing all necessary treatment and support to protect our service members, their families, and our communities."

That could be a long road. The report indicated that "overall staffing" for behavioral health at Fort Carson's Evans Army Community Hospital between 2006 and 2008 was just 65 percent of authorized positions.

-- By Michael de Yoanna and Mark Benjamin

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