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Troops still may be misdiagnosed with personality disorder

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Anne Flaherty, The Associated Press

WASHINGTON – At the height of the [Iraq](#) war, the Army routinely fired hundreds of soldiers for having a personality disorder when they were more likely to be suffering from the traumatic stresses of war, discharge data suggests.

Under pressure from [Congress](#) and the public, the Army later acknowledged the problem and drastically cut the number of soldiers given the designation. But advocates for veterans say an unknown number of troops still unfairly bear the stigma of a personality disorder, making them ineligible for military health care and other benefits.

"We really have an obligation to go back and make sure troops weren't misdiagnosed," said Dr. Barbara Van Dahlen, a clinical psychologist whose nonprofit "Give an Hour" connects troops with volunteer mental health professionals.

The Army denies that any soldier was misdiagnosed before 2008, when it drastically cut the number of discharges because of personality disorders, and diagnoses of post-traumatic stress disorders skyrocketed.

Unlike PTSD, which the Army regards as a treatable mental disability caused by the acute stresses of war, the military designation of a personality disorder can have devastating consequences for soldiers.

Defined as a "deeply ingrained maladaptive pattern of behavior," a personality disorder is considered a "pre-existing condition" that relieves the military of its duty to pay for the person's health care or combat-related disability pay.

Among the soldiers discharged before the change in policy was Chuck Luther, who decided to rejoin the Army after the Sept. 11 attacks. He had previously served eight years before being honorably discharged.

"I knew what combat was going to take," he said.

Luther, who lives near Fort Hood, Texas, said throughout his time in the Army, he received eight mental health evaluations from the Army, each clearing him as "fit for duty."

Luther was seven months into his deployment as a reconnaissance scout in Iraq's violent Sunni Triangle in 2007 when he says a mortar shell slammed him to the ground. He later complained of stabbing eye pain and crippling migraines, but was told by a military doctor that he was faking his symptoms to avoid combat duty.

Luther said that he was confined for a month in a 6-by-8 foot room without treatment. At one point, Luther



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Chuck Luther, with his 2-year-old daughter, Marlee, was discharged before the Army changed its policy on PTSD diagnoses in 2008. Later, the Department of Veterans Affairs decided he suffers from PTSD, not a personality disorder.

acknowledges, he snapped – biting a guard and spitting in the face of a military chaplain.

After that episode, Luther said, the Army told him he could return home and keep his benefits if he signed papers admitting he had a personality disorder. If he didn't sign, he said, he was told he would be kicked out eventually anyway.

Luther signed the papers.

His case highlights the irony in many personality discharges. A person is screened mentally and physically before joining the military. But upon returning from combat, that same person is told he or she had a serious mental disorder that predated military service.

Luther got lucky. After about a year, he says the Department of Veterans Affairs agreed to re-evaluate him and decided that he suffers from post-traumatic stress syndrome coupled by traumatic [brain injury](#). The ruling gives him access to a psychologist and psychiatrist every two weeks, despite his discharge status, he said.

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