



Soldiers Say Army Ignores, Punishes Mental Anguish

December 4, 2006 from ALL THINGS CONSIDERED

MELISSA BLOCK, host: From NPR News, this is ALL THINGS CONSIDERED. I'm Melissa Block.

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And I'm Robert Siegel.

For soldiers serving in the war in Iraq, the emotional toll can be very serious. Tens of thousands of those soldiers have symptoms of serious mental health problems, including depression, suicidal tendencies, substance abuse and posttraumatic stress disorder, PTSD. That is according to the military's own studies.

BLOCK: Even before the war started, administration officials said they had in place extensive programs both in Iraq and back home to heal those soldiers, but an NPR investigation at one Army base, Fort Carson in Colorado Springs, Colorado, reveals those programs are not working. Soldiers who feel desperate and have tried to kill themselves have trouble getting the help they need. In fact, evidence suggests that officers at Fort Carson punish soldiers who need help and even kick them out of the Army.

NPR's Daniel Zwerdling has our story.

DANIEL ZWERDLING: One of the first soldiers I met at Fort Carson is a young man named Tyler Jennings. He looks like a football player and he used to be on junior varsity. Jennings says when he came home from Iraq last year, he felt so depressed, so desperate, he decided to kill himself.

Jennings takes me to the second floor of the bungalow that he rents with his wife to show how he almost did it. As we pass the closet, I ask to see his uniform, pinned with medals. He seems embarrassed.

Mr. TYLER JENNINGS: The one on the very top is my most prestigious. That's my purple heart. And then the expert marksman badge.

ZWERDLING: Jennings says it was late at night, the middle of May. His wife was out of town, and he felt more scared than he'd felt in gunfights in Iraq. Jennings opened the window and sat on the ledge and he started a swigging a bottle of vodka to get up the courage. He was 23 years old.

Mr. JENNINGS: I had like one of those big orange extension cords.

ZWERDLING: An electrical cord.

Mr. JENNINGS: Yeah. That was around my neck, like a military-style slipknot. And then the other part was just wrapped like a bunch of times through and around here. So I was just kind of setting here trying to get drunk enough to you know, either slip or just make that decision.

ZWERDLING: Five months before that, Jennings had gone to the medical center at Fort Carson. A staff member typed up his symptoms, quote "crying spells, hopelessness, helplessness, worthlessness," unquote. He was doing drugs to make himself numb. But Jennings says you know what was even worse? When his officers found out he was having a breakdown and taking drugs, they started to haze him and they told him they were kicking him out of the

Army. Jennings says that's when he decided to jump.

Mr. JENNINGS: You know, there were many times that, you know, I've even told my wife that I really wished I just died over there because if you just die over there, everyone writes you off as a hero.

ZWERDLING: Tyler Jennings isn't the only one who's felt desperate. I've talked to 20 soldiers who've come back from the war to Fort Carson, like Jason Harvey, Jonathon Duncan, Jeff Conley, Lawrence Keifer, Ron Backhouse, Adam Caplan, William Morris, Mickey Davis, Michael Lemke, and they say the way officials have treated them and soldiers with problems makes them feel betrayed.

(Soundbite of music, "Reveille")

ZWERDLING: It's 6:00 AM at Fort Carson in Colorado Springs. The jagged tops of the Rockies are glowing pink. Soon soldiers fan out across the lawns and start morning workouts.

(Soundbite of soldiers counting)

ZWERDLING: Top officials at Fort Carson refused to talk with me. So I contacted soldiers on my own. I also obtained Army documents and talked to witnesses. They corroborate everything you're about to hear.

(Soundbite of soldiers working out)

ZWERDLING: Most of the soldiers I spoke with say they wanted to go to Iraq to avenge 9/11. They didn't know what to expect. Here are Alex Orham, Tyler Jennings and Corey Davis.

Mr. ALEX ORHAM: And it really pisses me off when people go around saying, oh man, I saw what you guys went through on TV. No one saw what we went through on TV. They can't show you little four-year-olds screaming because their leg just got blown off.

Mr. JENNINGS: One guy that always sticks out in my head, he had a hole in the back of his head, about six by six, and I kept having to push his brains back up into his head and even after we got it bandaged up, brains are pretty heavy actually, and they were like seeping through, like pushing the bandages off.

Mr. COREY DAVIS: I'll probably never forget that day for the rest of my life. There's just body parts everywhere, you know. People crawling with no legs, no arms. I mean, and there were just screams that you could – I don't know what will go away in my head.

Mr. ORHAM: But the worst smell in the world is something I can't seem to stop smelling is the smell of burning flesh.

ZWERDLING: Still, the soldiers felt proud to fight in Iraq. Many reenlisted. But then they came home to Fort Carson, and over the next few months, their world turned upside down. They talk about constant nightmares. Some say they started getting violent in their sleep. William Morris, Tyler Jennings and Alex Orham.

Mr. WILLIAM MORRIS: I woke up and I was grabbing her neck and I just started to cry. And then she started to cry and she's like, no, no, no. Billy, you need to go get help. This is not you.

Mr. JENNINGS: There had been a couple of times where I'd kind of like rolled over and put my hands around her throat and started to squeeze and then she woke me up.

Mr. ORHAM: My wife would start, you know, slapping my face or whatever, waking me up in the middle of the night, because I'm over there screaming and rolling around with my hands around her neck.

ZWERDLING: Soldiers gave me copies of their official Army files and they show that before they went to Iraq, they were soldiers in good standing. After Iraq, they started spinning out of control.

Listen to William Morris's medical charts last year. Getting flashbacks. Fidgety. Taking watch on and off. Laughing. Has recurring nightmares of seeing a guy's head get blown off.

Here are some entries on Alex Orham early this year. Nervousness. Depressed. Manic. Look at the records on Jason Harvey this summer: Has not been able to eat or sleep. Hopeless. Trapped. No desire to live.

Harvey ended up slashing his arms and went to the hospital. William Morris didn't show up at the base for weeks. Tyler Jennings and Corey Davis got caught snorting cocaine, and Alex Orham's wife, Donna, says he started knocking her to the ground.

Ms. DONNA ORHAM: He was the most loving, caring guy that you could know, and now the first little thing I say to him or look at him wrong, he wants to hit me. I lost my husband. I lost the man that I fell in love with.

ZWERDLING: Ever since the war in Vietnam, military leaders have said that soldiers who are wounded emotionally need help, just like soldiers missing limbs. William Winkenwerder is assistant secretary of defense in charge of health.

Mr. WILLIAM WINKENWERDER (Assistant Secretary of Defense): The goal, first and foremost, is to identify who's having a problem. Secondly, it's to provide immediate support. And then finally, our goal is to restore good mental health.

ZWERDLING: For instance, the Pentagon has sent therapists to Iraq to work with soldiers in the battlefield. Winkenwerder says he wants every soldier to know that –

Mr. WINKENWERDER: We're trying to do our level best to ensure that your mental health concerns, if they are there, are taken care of. Your care and your well-being is our top priority.

ZWERDLING: And on paper, it looks like the Army has great programs to care for them. Soldiers can get private therapy and group therapy. They can get counseling for substance abuse. But soldiers say in practice, the mental health programs at Fort Carson are lame. For instance, when you come back from Iraq, you have to fill out questionnaires. They are supposed to warn the staff if they might be getting depressed or abusing drugs or getting PTSD, that's posttraumatic stress disorder. But some soldiers told me that officials at Fort Carson never folloed up. Ask Alex Orham.

Did any of the officers come up to you and say you have potential warning signs of PTSD?

Mr. ORHAM: No.

ZWERDLING: Ever?

Mr. ORHAM: No.

ZWERDLING: The investigative arm of Congress, GAO, did a national study on the screening program and it found that most of the soldiers who showed potential signs of PTSD were not referred to mental health specialists. The Pentagon disagrees with the GAO's findings. But soldiers at Fort Carson say even when they ask for support, the mental health unit is so overwhelmed that they can't get the help they need. Consider Corey Davis. Davis was a machine gunner last year in Iraq. He calls the other soldiers kids. He's 27. One afternoon, Davis was reading the annual swimsuit issue of Sports Illustrated when he saw his buddy right next to him stick a rifle in his mouth and pull the trigger.

Davis got covered with his friend's brains. He says after he came back to Fort Carson, he started freaking out. He did drugs. But he finally got up the courage to go to the Army hospital. He took the elevator to the fourth floor. He walked into the mental health center and Davis says he begged for help.

Mr. DAVIS: They said I had to wait a month and a half before I'd be seen. And I mean, I'm like, I need to talk to the counselors today. You know like, who knows where my head's at, you know, with all the incidents going on. I could go kill somebody. You know, I need help today. I almost started crying right there. I mean, I'm like –

ZWERDLING: Did you say to them, folks, this is urgent. I really need help soon?

Mr. DAVIS: Oh I'm not lying. Four times trying to understand why I couldn't be seen today. I kept getting back in line, getting frustrated with me. You know, like, I already told you, you know, here is your date. And I'm like you guys, I mean I got in line circling four times. No joke

ZWERDLING: And what did she say?

Mr. DAVIS: Next.

ZWERDLING: Soldiers say that backlog is smaller now – they've had to get three weeks to get help. But almost all of them say here's the worst problem that's tearing them apart. When supervisors learn that they're having an emotional crisis, their supervisors punished them.

William Morris and Alex Orham.

Mr. MORRIS: You really don't want to be that guy going up to mental health when trying to be a career soldier. You don't want to be that guy cause as soon as you are you're done.

Mr. ORHAM: And I will continue to encourage any soldier who isn't sleeping, who is having nightmares, who is having PTSD not to go seek help because as soon as they go and seek help, their life is going to get ten times worse.

ZWERDLING: Because soldiers who admit they have emotional problems say their supervisors embattled by these turn them into pariahs. Remember Tyler Jennings who almost killed himself? Corey Davis says you should see what they've done to him.

Mr. DAVIS: Tyler, this kid in my platoon, he went and, you know, trying to get help. He's an outcast now. He's not even looked at. I mean no one looks at him, no one talks to him, no one says hi to him. He's not there. He's invisible.

ZWERDLING: After I talked to all these soldiers, I wanted to talk with the commanders who run Fort Carson. Soldiers say they're the ones who set the tone for the way the staff treats soldiers in trouble. But Army officials refused. So I contacted low level supervisors like sergeants. They're more accessible. And to my surprise they said it's true, we are giving some soldiers with problems a hard time. And here's why.

(Soundbite of music)

ZWERDLING: One evening I went to visit two of the supervisors who Tyler Jennings says have been tormenting him. Drew Preston and Gabriel Temples are sergeants in Jennings's platoon. They're called non commissioned officers. When I drop by the apartment they share, Preston boots up the computer and he shows a slide show their unit made in Iraq.

Sergeant DREW PRESTON: That's our front gate. This is us talking to Iraqis, weapons caches.

ZWERDLING: Preston and Temples start off saying they don't get why soldiers like Tyler Jennings have trouble when they come home from the war. The sergeants say they face the same horrors as Jennings did, but they can't wait to go back to Iraq. Gabriel Temples.

Sergeant GABRIEL TEMPLES: Yeah, I love my job. Like I enjoy going to Iraq. I had fun last time. Because a lot of people, they get up every morning, they take a shower, they go to work, they go home at the end of the day and they're thinking, you know, there's got to be more. There's got to be more. And then, you know, they throw in a movie and they're thinking, yeah, that's cool, you know? It gets their heart going. Yeah, well, we're the ones doing it. We're not the ones watching.

ZWERDLING: They say Tyler Jennings used to love fighting, too.

Sergeant TEMPLES: Jennings worked for me while in Iraq. He did awesome. He was a stellar soldier. Like you go to tell him to do something, he's already working on it. He's already getting it done.

ZWERDLING: But they since Jennings got home, he's a different man. Military studies show that when soldiers get PTSD or other emotional disorders, their behavior often changes dramatically, they commonly do drugs, they slough off work, they misbehave in other ways. Jennings has done it all. But Preston says, listen, he knows 20 soldiers at Fort Carson, including Jennings, who say they have PTSD, and he and Temples think all but one of them are faking it.

Sergeant PRESTON: The order comes down that, you know, we're going back. And then all of the sudden, oh, I got PTSD. I think guys are just getting scared. They're like, yeah, I don't want to go back and get into all of that, you know? So, yeah, I got PTSD, so whatever. But I mean, it's a war. You know, it's a war. It's not a happy day in la-la land. People are faced with fear so they tucked their tail and run.

ZWERDLING: So the sergeants say when the soldiers complain how the army's treating them, put it in the right perspective. For instance, Jennings and others say their supervisors and battle buddies literally won't talk with them anymore? Sergeant Drew Preston says that's true.

Sergeant PRESTON: I mean you got to earn your respect. And, you know, you got everybody trusting you and getting comfortable with, you know, your hands and their life and then you go do something like smoke weed or snort coke or something and that trust is pretty much gone. You know, you feel like you've been slapped in the face or, you know, cheated on.

ZWERDLING: So it sounds like it's true. A lot of people do give them the cold shoulder.

Sergeant PRESTON: Correct.

ZWERDLING: And Jennings and other soldiers with emotional problems say their supervisors harass them. Their sergeants make them just sit there at the base 24 hours at a time so everybody can walk by and stare to humiliate them, and Sergeant Preston says that's almost true.

Sergeant PRESTON: I don't know if it's to be humiliated. I think it's to be supervised because – I mean these cats – not cats, I'm sorry – these soldiers, they wouldn't show up to work. You know, so the military's way of correcting that is to have them there at work. It's kind of like back in school. Back in the days, you know, you had to sit in timeout.

ZWERDLING: Or the dunce's corner.

Sergeant PRESTON: Exactly. The dunce's corner.

ZWERDLING: And that brings us back to the night that Tyler Jennings says he tied a noose around his neck. He risked his life fighting for his country over in Iraq, but here at home his life was in shambles. He says he didn't know what to do but jump.

Mr. JENNINGS: And then after a while, you know, the sun came out and I just kind of like pulled it off around my neck and backed away from it. And then something clicked inside my

head and just said, you know, this is not the way.

ZWERDLING: Then Jennings called a supervisor at Fort Carson. He told them he had almost killed himself, so he was going to skip formation and check into a psychiatric ward. Now, the Defense Department's clinical guidelines say that when a soldier has been planning suicide, that's one of the main ways to help, put him in the hospital. Instead, Jennings's officers sent a team of soldiers to his house to put him in jail. They said Jennings was AWOL for missing work.

Mr. JENNINGS: I had them pounding on my door out there.

(Soundbite of pounding)

Mr. JENNINGS: They're saying Jennings, you're AWOL. The police are going to come get you. You know, you got 10 seconds to open up this door. My neighbors were all outside. So I was scared, I was really scared about it. But finally opened the door up for them, and I was like I'm going to the hospital.

ZWERDLING: Don't take Jennings's word for it. I talked to a supervisor in his platoon who says he'll get in trouble if we use his name or his voice. The supervisor said he's read an official Army report on this incident and it corroborates Jennings's account.

There's one officer who makes a striking confession. Maybe he was too tough on another soldier at Fort Carson who had emotional problems. Sergeant Nathan Towsley still gets worked up when he talks about him.

Sergeant NATHAN TOWSLEY: Well, oh man. Where do I begin?

ZWERDLING: Towsley is 22. He has huge biceps. Actually, he retired from the Army a few months ago, but before that, Towsley supervised one of the soldiers we met earlier in this piece – Alex Orham. The Army's records show that Orham landed in Iraq last year, just after he turned 19. After he left, his commanding officers gave him a certificate of achievement. It reads PFC Orham's dedication to duty and phenomenal performance are in keeping in the finest traditions of military service.

But when Orham got back to Fort Carson, the medical staff diagnosed him with PTSD. Towsley said the guy couldn't do anything right.

Sergeant TOWSLEY: Everyday he'd show up to work and he just looked like (expletive). You know, his uniform would be just a mess. He'd be dirty, you know, he'd be unshaven.

ZWERDLING: Yes it's possible that at least some of those problems might be triggered by whatever experiences he did have in Iraq.

Sergeant TOWSLEY: Yeah, I think so. Because it is true that I was very tough on him. A lot of the leadership in the company was hard on him only because we were hoping maybe he could improve, maybe he could get better. And, you know, that could be a big part of it too, that we were always riding him so hard.

ZWERDLING: Towsley said he feels sorry for soldiers like Orham, but the bottom line is they don't belong in the Army.

Sergeant TOWSLEY: Yeah, I'll be blatantly honest. I think some people are just weak. You know, you just have to buck up and be a man and face it.

ZWERDLING: So would we ever find you going to therapy and saying I'm depressed, I have nightmares.

Sergeant TOWSLEY: No, absolutely not. Actually my girlfriend wants me to and she says I have anger problems. She thinks that I have, you know, a severe case of PTSD, but I don't see it.

You know, like I said, I just, I don't like people who are weak minded. Don't come complaining to me and crying to me about your problems because everybody has problems. When I'm dealing with Alex Orham's personal problems on a daily basis, I don't have time to train soldiers to fight in Iraq. I have to get rid of him because he's a detriment to the rest of the soldiers.

ZWERDLING: In fact, evidence suggests that's a pattern at Fort Carson. Officials are kicking out soldiers with PTSD, and they're doing it in a way that masks their problem. A lawyer named Richard Travis explains how they can do it. Travis used to be the Army's senior prosecutor at Fort Carson. Now he's in private practice. He says if you have a soldier who has PTSD, you might not want to admit that's why you're discharging him because then the Army has to pay the soldier special mental health benefits. It's expensive. Instead, you kick out the soldier for breaking the rules and the Army pays fewer benefits, maybe none.

Mr. RICHARD TRAVIS (Lawyer): Maybe none. The easiest way to get rid of someone is to do it patterns of misconduct. Under patterns of misconduct, all they have to do is, for instance, be late for formation or maybe they didn't follow the order correctly. He didn't necessarily disobey it, but you didn't do it the way that I wanted you to do it.

ZWERDLING: Just look at the Army's files on Alex Orham. They showed he had PTSD, but his officers expelled him from the Army earlier this year for patterns of misconduct. Doctors diagnosed another soldiers named Jason Harvey with PTSD. Officials kicked him out a few months ago with patterns of misconduct.

And a therapist diagnosed Tyler Jennings with PTSD in May, but the Army's records show they're kicking him out because he used drugs. We've obtained files on other soldiers which suggest the same pattern, and the Army's kicking out most of them with a less than an honorable discharge. They're leaving in disgrace.

So I asked William Winkenwerder, the assistant secretary of defense. Is it true? Are officials at Fort Carson kicking out soldiers with emotional problems so they don't have to deal with them?
Mr. WINKENWERDER: I absolutely believe that that's not true.

ZWERDLING: On the other hand, Winkenwerder says he doesn't know what's going on at Fort Carson. He says before our interview he hadn't heard that soldiers with emotional problems say their officers are mistreating them.

Mr. WINKENWERDER: But if those kinds of concerns are being expressed, we need to look at them, and I can assure you that we will. We are a very large system. So to change the attitude dealing with mental health concerns is a very large task. I know that we've made great progress, but I know at the same time that those who are there who still don't understand that it needs to be taken very seriously.

ZWERDLING: We've been asking the Pentagon for two months now to tell us how many soldiers the Army's kicked out of Fort Carson and why. They haven't sent that information. There is a footnote to this story. I called Nathan Towsley recently to double check some facts. Towsley's the retired sergeant who said that soldiers who come back from the war with emotional problems are weak. Remember? Towsley said he'd never go near a therapist. But he says now that after our interview, he started to realize he needs help. Towsley says he's depressed, he can't control his anger. And Towsley says maybe he can help other soldiers by admitting that he just started therapy.

Daniel Zwerdling, NPR News.

SIEGEL: You can hear more stories from soldiers at Fort Carson and share your comments about this report at our Web site, NPR.org.

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