

A Morally Bankrupt Military: When Soldiers and Their Families Become Expendable

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The military operates through indoctrination. Soldiers are programmed to develop a mindset that resists any acknowledgment of injury and sickness, be it physical or psychological. As a consequence, tens of thousands of soldiers continue to serve, even being deployed to combat zones like Iraq and/or Afghanistan, despite persistent injuries. According to military records, over 43,000 troops classified as “nondeployable for medical reasons” have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan nevertheless.

The recent atrocity at Fort Hood is an example of this. Maj. Nidal Hasan had worked as a counselor at Walter Reed, hearing countless stories of bloodshed, horror and death from dismembered veterans from the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. While he had not yet served in Iraq or Afghanistan, the major was overloaded with secondary trauma, coupled with ongoing harassment about his being a Muslim. This, along with other factors, contributed towards Hasan falling into a desperation so deep he was willing to slaughter fellow soldiers, and is indicative of fissures running deep into the crumbling edifice upon which the US military stands.

The case of Pvt. Timothy Rich also demonstrates the disastrous implications of the apathetic attitude of the military toward its own. Not dissimilar from Major Hasan, who clearly would have benefited from treatment for the secondary trauma he was experiencing from his work with psychologically wounded veterans, one of the main factors that forced Private Rich to go absent without leave (AWOL) was the failure of the military to treat his mental issues.

Rich told Truthout, “In my unit, to go to sick call for mental health was looked down upon. Our acting 1st Sergeant believed that we shouldn’t have mental issues because we were too ‘high speed.’ So I was afraid to go because I didn’t want to be labeled as a weak soldier.”

What followed was more harrowing.

“The other problems arose when I brought my girlfriend down to marry her. My unit believed her to be a problem starter so I was ordered not to marry her, taken to a small finance company by an NCO and forced to draw a loan in order to buy her a plane ticket to return home. They escorted her to the airport and through security to ensure that she left. Once the NCO left she turned around and hitchhiked back to Fort Bragg. Before the unit could discover us, we went to the courthouse and got married. We were then summoned by my Commander, Captain Jones, to his office and reprimanded. He called me a dumb ass soldier and a shit bag for marrying her and told my wife that she was a fool to marry someone as stupid as me. Members of my unit started referring to me as Pvt. Bitch instead of Pvt. Rich. The entire episode caused a lot of strain in our relationship. Unable to cope with all this, I bought two plane

tickets and went AWOL with my wife.”

Rich was later apprehended when a federal warrant was issued against him. After 11 days in a country jail, he was transported back to Fort Bragg in North Carolina. On August 17, 2008, he was wrongly assigned to Echo Platoon that was part of the 82nd Airborne, whereas his unit was part of the 18th Airborne.

Rich recollects, “I was confused when they assigned me to the 82nd. I was dismissed as a liar when I brought this up with my NCO Sgt Joseph Fulgence and my commander, Captain Thaxton. I ended up spending a year at Echo before being informed that I was never supposed to have been in the 82nd.”

At Fort Bragg, he was permitted to seek mental health treatment and was diagnosed with schizophrenia, psychosis, insomnia and a mood disorder. This, however, did not stop his commander from harassing him. His permanent profile from the doctor restricted him from being on duty before 0800 (8 AM) hours, but his commander, Sergeant Fulgence, dismissed the profile as merely a guideline and not a mandatory directive. The soldier was accused of using mental health as a pretext to avoid duty. So, Rich was up every morning for first formation at 0545 (5:45 AM). It wasn’t until he refused to take his medication because it made him groggy in the morning that his doctor called his commander and settled the matter. By then, Rich had already been forced to violate his profile for six months.

During this period, his mental health deteriorated rapidly. The combined effect of heavy medication and restrictions on his home visits resulted in his experiencing blackouts that led him to take destructive actions in the barracks. When he was discovered talking about killing the chain of command, he was put on a 24-hour suicide watch that seemed to have served little purpose, because on August 17 he was able to elude his guards and make his way to the roof of his barracks.

“I climbed onto the roof of the building and sat up there thinking about my family and my situation and decided to go ahead and end my suffering by taking a nose dive off the building,” Rich explained to Truthout.

His body plummeted through the air, bounced off a tree, and he landed on his back with a cracked spine. The military gave him a back brace, psychotropic drugs and a renewed 24-hour suicide watch, measures as effective in alleviating his pain as his failed suicide attempt.

When Truthout contacted him just days after his failed suicide attempt, a fatigued Rich detailed his hellish year-long plight of awaiting a discharge that never came. “I want to leave here very bad. For four months they have been telling me that I’ll get out next week. It got to the point that the NCOs would tell me just to calm me down that I’d be going home the next day. They went as far as to call my wife and requesting her to lie that she was coming to get me the next day. I eventually stopped believing them. I didn’t see an end to it, so I figured I’d try and end it myself.”

The noncommissioned officers in his barracks thought it was hilarious that Rich had jumped, and he was offered money for an encore that could be videotaped.

At the time he was in a “holdover” unit, comprised mostly of AWOL soldiers who had turned

themselves in or had been arrested. Others in his unit had untreated mental health problems like him or were suffering from severe PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) from deployments in Iraq and or Afghanistan.

According to Rich, every soldier in his platoon was subjected to abusive treatment of some kind or the other. "It even got to the point when our 1st Sergeant Cisneros told us that if it were up to him we all would all be taken out back and shot, and that we needed to pray to our gods because we were going to pay (for our actions)."

Tim's wife Megan had to bear his never-ending ordeal in equal measure. She witnessed the military's callousness up close. She informed Truthout, "Since February of this year, Tim's unit had been telling him he would be out in two weeks. After two weeks when he asked, they would repeat the same thing. At times he would get excited and start packing his belongings and I would try to figure out how to get him home to Ohio. He would call me crying in relief because he thought we were going to be together again real soon. The military forced me to lie to him too. When he realized they did not mean to release him he grew very destructive during his black out spells. Eventually he simply gave up on coming home."

Megan first realized there was a problem with the way the military was treating her husband when she noticed him doing and saying things that were out of character for him, like apologizing for not being a good husband and father and being openly suicidal. He had also begun to self-medicate with alcohol, an increasing trend among soldiers not receiving adequate mental-health treatment from the military.

She revealed to Truthout, "He had quit for the girls and me but it seems like he could not handle the stress and needed an escape. This caused a huge problem between us and we began to argue about it. He became severely depressed, pulled away from me, and started to do things he normally doesn't do, such as giving away his money and belongings, and telling the recipients that he wouldn't need those things in hell."

She sensed that her husband would be in trouble if he were to stand up for himself, so she began to advocate on his behalf. Her attempts to do so met with fresh abuse from his commanders. The chain of command banned her from the company barracks and had her escorted off post. The couple was commandeered into Sergeant Fulgence's office where they were chastised. The sergeant referred to Megan as "a bad mother" and "a bitch." When Megan attempted to leave the office in protest, the sergeant ordered her to stay and listen to what he had to say.

This was followed by an encounter with the commander of the platoon, Commander Thaxton. The commander in this case ordered Tim to shut up, and threatened him with confinement. He demanded that Megan explain what kind of mother would bring her child to a new location without a place to live. She tried telling him that the AER loan was for her to come to Fort Bragg since they had lost their house after Tim's arrest and loss of job. Although the paperwork for the loan clearly stated that it was for her travel, food and lodging at Fort Bragg, the commander insisted it was for an apartment. When Tim intervened to say that the \$785 would not be sufficient to pay rent and bills, especially since he wasn't being paid his wages and his wife couldn't work because of the baby, and according to Tim, both Sergeant Fulgence and Captain Thaxton "had a nice laugh over that" and dismissed the duo, referring to them as "juvenile dumb-asses."

After Tim returned from being AWOL and was brought up on charges, he went through 706 (a psychology board) that declared him mentally incompetent at the time of his being AWOL. It took a painfully long amount of time for the charges to be dismissed without prejudice. The soldier believes that his superiors deliberately refused to do the requisite paperwork for his clearance and subsequent resumption of his pay.

He told Truthout, “Every time I came on base I got arrested even though I was on active duty again. Then my wife and I got an AER loan for her to come down to Fort Bragg. When she got there and my pay continued to be withheld, the AER money ran out and my wife and child had to sleep in the van we owned. When my unit found out they called the Military Police and ordered me to give custody of my daughter to my father.”

When Tim refused to do that, they punished him by confining him to the barracks and barring his wife from entering the base. To add insult, the chain of command took away his van keys and said that neither he nor Megan was allowed use it.

The nightmare ended when the military finally released Pvt. Timothy Rich, and by default, Megan. He was discharged and “allowed” to enter the ranks of US citizens searching for jobs and health care. Their traumatic journey to that starting point is what distinguishes them from their civilian counterparts.

Rich’s advice to anyone thinking of joining the military today: “Don’t join. Everything they advertise and tell you about how it’s a family friendly army is a lie.”

Sgt. Heath Carter suffered a similar fate at the hands of an indifferent military command. Upon return from the invasion of Iraq, he discovered that his daughter Sierra was living in an unsafe environment in Arkansas under the care of his first wife, who had full custody of the child. Heath and his new wife, Teresa, started consulting attorneys in order to secure custody of Sierra, who also suffered from a life-threatening medical condition. Precisely during this time, the military chose to keep changing Carter’s duty station from Fort Polk, Louisiana, to Fort Huachuca, Arizona, then to Fort Stewart, Georgia. Not only did these constant transfers make it difficult for Carter to see his daughter, they also reduced his chances of gaining custody of Sierra. Convinced that this was a matter of life and death for his daughter, he requested compassionate reassignment to Fort Leavenworth, Missouri, about two hours from his first wife’s home in Arkansas.

His appeals to the military command, the legal department, chaplain and even to his congressman failed, and the military insisted that he remain at Fort Stewart, Georgia. Having run out of all available avenues, in May 2007 he went AWOL from Fort Stewart and headed home to Arkansas where he fought for and won custody of Sierra, and was able to literally save her life by obtaining needed medical care for her.

However, on January 25 of this year, Carter was arrested at his home by the military police, who flew him back to Fort Stewart where he has been awaiting charges for the past eight months. Being a sergeant, he is in a regular unit and not in a holdover, but that does not help his cause. Initially, his commander told him it would take a month and a half for him to be sent home. Several months later, it was decided he would receive a court-martial.

Carter feels frustrated, “Now I have to wait for the court martial. It’s taken this long for them to decide. If we had known it would take this long, my family could have moved down here. Every time I ask when I’ll have a trial, they say it is only going to be another two weeks. I

get the feeling they are lying. They have messed with my pay. They're trying to push me to do something wrong."

His ordeal has forced Carter to reflect on the wars. He admits that, although his original reason for going AWOL was personal and he had otherwise been proud of his missions, he sees things in Iraq differently today. "I don't think there is any reason for us to be there except for oil."

Yet, both Private Rich and Sergeant Carter were offered deployments to Afghanistan amid their struggles. It is soldiers like these that the military will use to fill the ranks of the next "surge" of troops into Afghanistan, which at the time of this writing, appears to be as many as 34,000 troops.

The stage is set for more tragic incidents like the recent massacre at Fort Hood.

Sarah Lazare contributed to this report.

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