

Pentagon Continues to Use “Personality Disorder” Discharges to Cheat Veterans out of Benefits

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An army sergeant who had received 22 honors including a Combat Action Badge prior to being wounded in Iraq by a mortar shell was told he was faking his medical symptoms and subjected to abusive treatment until he agreed to a “personality disorder”(PD) discharge.

After a doctor with the First Cavalry division wrote he was out for “secondary gain,” Chuck Luther was imprisoned in a six- by eight-foot isolation chamber, ridiculed by the guards, denied regular meals and showers and kept awake by perpetual lights and blasting heavy metal music—abuses similar to the punishments inflicted on terrorist suspects by the CIA.

“They told me I wasn’t a real soldier, that I was a piece of crap. All I wanted was to be treated for my injuries,” 12-year veteran Luther told reporter Joshua Kors of “The Nation” magazine (April 26th). “Now suddenly I’m not a soldier. I’m a prisoner, by my own people. I felt like a caged animal in that room. That’s when I started to lose it.” The article is called “Disposable Soldiers: How the Pentagon is Cheating Wounded Vets.”

Luther had been seven months into his deployment at Camp Taji, 20 miles north of Baghdad, when a mortar shell exploded at the base of his guard tower that knocked him down, slamming his head into the concrete. “I remember laying there in a daze, looking around, trying to figure out where I was at,” he said. Luther suffered permanent hearing loss in his right ear, tinnitus, agonizing headaches behind his right eye, severe nosebleeds, and shoulder pain.

The sergeant took a Chapter 5-13 PD discharge in order to escape his confinement, becoming one of 22,600 soldiers so separated since 2001, a discharge that relieves the Pentagon of the responsibility and cost of long-term care for the wounded. An Army major told Luther to sign the discharge papers or “you’re going to be here a lot longer.” Luther recalled, “They had me broke down. At that point, I just wanted to get home.” Many of the PD discharge recipients are soldiers who have served two and three tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, author Kors writes.

Sgt. Angel Sandoval, who served under Luther, said Luther’s insistence on his wearing ceramic plates strapped to his bulletproof vest saved his life and described Luther as “one of the greatest leaders I had.” Yet this is the man the Army imprisoned when he requested medical treatment. “This should have been resolved during the Bush administration. And it should have been stopped now by the Obama administration,” Paul Sullivan, executive director of Veterans for Common Sense, is quoted as saying about PD discharges. “The fact that it hasn’t is a national disgrace.”

Luther's case is no isolated example, writes Kors, noting that in the past three years "The Nation" has uncovered more than two dozen such cases. "All the soldiers were examined, deemed physically and psychologically fit, then welcomed into the military. All performed honorably before being wounded during service...Yet after seeking treatment for their wounds, each soldier was diagnosed with a pre-existing personality disorder, then discharged and denied benefits," Kors writes.

This past December, he reports, VA doctors found Luther to be suffering from migraine headaches, vision problems, dizziness, nausea, difficulty hearing, numbness, anxiety and irritability—and diagnosed him with traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder, declaring the veteran 80 percent disabled. The diagnosis cleared the way for the sergeant to receive disability benefits and lifetime medical care.

With his health improving, Luther has vowed to fight the military on behalf of other soldiers who got a raw deal like himself. He founded Disposable Warriors, a one-soldier operation near Fort Hood, Texas, that assists soldiers fighting their discharge and those appealing their disability rating, Kors reports. Luther says the base had 12 suicides last year as of June 2nd but reported only two. Luther is quoted in a November 21, 2009, article on "Truthout" as saying there is only one mental health professional for every 1,263 soldiers "and that is the first failure."

After opening Disposable Warriors, Luther found a threatening note on his car windshield that read: "Back off or you and your family will pay!!" Whoever wrote that note doesn't know Chuck Luther very well.

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