

PTSD and Mental Health: How America's Wars Came Home With the Troops

Up Close, Personal, and Bloody

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After an argument about a leave denied, Specialist Ivan Lopez pulled out a .45-caliber Smith & Wesson handgun and began a shooting spree at Fort Hood, America's biggest stateside base, that left three soldiers dead and 16 wounded. When he did so, he also pulled America's fading wars out of the closet. This time, a Fort Hood mass killing, the [second](#) in four and a half years, was committed by a man who was neither a religious nor a political "extremist." He seems to have been merely one of America's injured and troubled veterans who now number in the hundreds of thousands.

Some 2.6 million men and women have been dispatched, often repeatedly, to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and according to a [recent survey](#) of veterans of those wars conducted by the Washington Post and the Kaiser Family Foundation, nearly one-third say that their mental health is worse than it was before they left, and nearly half say the same of their physical condition. Almost half say they give way to sudden outbursts of anger. Only 12% of the surveyed veterans claim they are now "better" mentally or physically than they were before they went to war.

The media coverage that followed Lopez's rampage was, of course, 24/7 and there was much discussion of PTSD, the all-purpose (if little understood) label now used to explain just about anything unpleasant that happens to or is caused by current or former military men and women. Amid the barrage of coverage, however, something was missing: evidence that has been in plain sight for years of how the violence of America's distant wars comes back to haunt the "homeland" as the troops return. In that context, Lopez's killings, while on a scale not often matched, are one more marker on a bloody trail of death that leads from Iraq and Afghanistan into the American heartland, to bases and backyards nationwide. It's a story with a body count that should not be ignored.

War Comes Home

During the last 12 years, many veterans who had grown "worse" while at war could be found on and around bases here at home, waiting to be deployed again, and sometimes doing serious damage to themselves and others. The organization Iraq Veterans Against the War ([IVAW](#)) has campaigned for years for a soldier's "right to heal" between deployments. Next month it will release its own report on a common practice at Fort Hood of sending damaged and heavily medicated soldiers back to combat zones against both doctors' orders and official base regulations. Such soldiers can't be expected to survive in great shape.

Immediately after the Lopez rampage, President Obama spoke of those soldiers who have


served multiple tours in the wars and “need to feel safe” on their home base. But what the president [called](#) “that sense of safety... broken once again” at Fort Hood has, in fact, already been shattered again and again on bases and in towns across post-9/11 America — ever since misused, misled, and mistreated soldiers began bringing war home with them.

Since 2002, soldiers and veterans have been committing murder individually and in groups, killing wives, girlfriends, children, fellow soldiers, friends, acquaintances, complete strangers, and — in [appalling numbers](#) — themselves. Most of these killings haven’t been on a mass scale, but they add up, even if no one is doing the math. To date, they have never been fully counted.

The first veterans of the war in Afghanistan returned to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in 2002. In quick succession, four of them [murdered](#) their wives, after which three of the killers took their own lives. When a New York Times reporter [asked](#) a Special Forces officer to comment on these events, he replied: “S.F.’s don’t like to talk about emotional stuff. We are Type A people who just blow things like that off, like yesterday’s news.”

Indeed, much of the media and much of the country has done just that. While individual murders committed by “our nation’s heroes” on the “home front” have been reported by media close to the scene, most such killings never make the national news, and many become invisible even locally when reported only as routine murders with no mention of the apparently insignificant fact that the killer was a veteran. Only when these crimes cluster around a military base do diligent local reporters seem to put the pieces of the bigger picture together.

By 2005, Fort Bragg had already counted its tenth such “domestic violence” fatality, while on the West coast, the Seattle Weekly had tallied the death toll among active-duty troops and veterans in western Washington state at seven homicides and three suicides. “Five wives, a girlfriend, and one child were slain; four other children lost one or both parents to death or imprisonment. Three servicemen committed suicide — two of them after killing their wife or girlfriend. Four soldiers were sent to prison. One awaited trial.”

 In January 2008, the New York Times tried for the first time to [tally](#) a nationwide count of such crimes. It found “121 cases in which veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan committed a killing in this country, or were charged with one, after their return from war.” It listed headlines drawn from smaller local newspapers: Lakewood, Washington, “Family Blames Iraq After Son Kills Wife”; Pierre, South Dakota, “Soldier Charged With Murder Testifies About Postwar Stress”; Colorado Springs, Colorado, “Iraq War Vets Suspected in Two Slayings, Crime Ring.”

The Times found that about a third of the murder victims were wives, girlfriends, children, or other relatives of the killer, but significantly, a quarter of the victims were fellow soldiers. The rest were acquaintances or strangers. At that time, three quarters of the homicidal soldiers were still in the military. The number of killings then represented a nearly 90% increase in homicides committed by active duty personnel and veterans in the six years since the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Yet after tracing this “cross-country trail of death and heartbreak,” the Times noted that its research had probably uncovered only “the minimum number of such cases.” One month later, it [found](#) “more than 150 cases of fatal domestic violence or [fatal] child abuse in the United States involving service members and new veterans.”

More cases were already on the way. After the Fourth Brigade Combat team of Fort Carson, Colorado, returned from Iraq later in 2008, nine of its members [were charged](#) with homicide, while “charges of domestic violence, rape, and sexual assault” at the base rose sharply. Three of the murder victims were wives or girlfriends; four were fellow soldiers (all men); and two were strangers, chosen at random.

Back at Fort Bragg and the nearby Marine base at Camp Lejeune, military men [murdered](#) four military women in a nine-month span between December 2007 and September 2008.

By that time, retired Army Colonel Ann Wright had identified at least 15 highly suspicious deaths of women soldiers in the war zones that had been officially termed “non-combat related” or “suicide.” She [raised a question](#) that has never been answered: “Is there an Army cover-up of rape and murder of women soldiers?” The murders that took place near (but not on) Fort Bragg and Camp Lejeune, all investigated and prosecuted by civilian authorities, raised another question: Were some soldiers bringing home not only the generic violence of war, but also specific crimes they had rehearsed abroad?

Stuck in Combat Mode

While this sort of post-combat-zone combat at home has rarely made it into the national news, the killings haven’t stopped. They have, in fact, continued, month by month, year after year, generally reported only by local media. Many of the murders suggest that the killers still felt as if they were on some kind of private mission in “enemy territory,” and that they themselves were men who had, in distant combat zones, gotten the hang of killing — and the habit. For example, [Benjamin Colton Barnes](#), a 24-year-old Army veteran, went to a party in Seattle in 2012 and got into a gunfight that left four people wounded. He then fled to Mount Rainier National Park where he shot and killed a park ranger (the mother of two small children) and fired on others before escaping into snow-covered mountains where he drowned in a stream.

Barnes, an Iraq veteran, had reportedly experienced a rough transition to stateside life, having been discharged from the Army in 2009 for misconduct after being arrested for drunk driving and carrying a weapon. (He also threatened his wife with a knife.) He was one of more than 20,000 troubled Army and Marine veterans the military [discarded](#) between 2008 and 2012 with “other-than-honorable” discharges and no benefits, health care, or help.

Faced with the expensive prospect of providing long-term care for these most fragile of veterans, the military chose instead to dump them. Barnes was booted out of Joint Base Lewis-McChord near Tacoma, Washington, which by 2010 had surpassed Fort Hood, Fort Bragg, and Fort Carson in violence and suicide to become the military’s “[most troubled](#)” home base.

Some homicidal soldiers work together, perhaps recreating at home that famous fraternal feeling of the military “band of brothers.” In 2012, in Laredo, Texas, federal agents posing as leaders of a Mexican drug cartel arrested Lieutenant Kevin Corley and Sergeant Samuel Walker — both from Fort Carson’s notorious Fourth Brigade Combat team — and two other soldiers in their private hit squad who had [offered](#) their services to kill members of rival cartels. “Wet work,” soldiers call it, and they’re trained to do it so well that real Mexican drug cartels have indeed been [hiring](#) ambitious vets from Fort Bliss, Texas, and probably other bases in the borderlands, to take out selected Mexican and American targets at \$5,000 a pop.

Such soldiers seem never to get out of combat mode. Boston psychiatrist Jonathan Shay, well known for his work with troubled veterans of the Vietnam War, points out that the skills drilled into the combat soldier — cunning, deceit, strength, quickness, stealth, a repertoire of killing techniques, and the suppression of compassion and guilt — equip him perfectly for a life of crime. “I’ll put it as bluntly as I can,” Shay writes in [Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming](#), “Combat service per se smooths the way into criminal careers afterward in civilian life.” During the last decade, when the Pentagon relaxed standards to fill the ranks, some enterprising members of at least [53 different American gangs](#) jumpstarted their criminal careers by enlisting, training, and serving in war zones to perfect their specialized skill sets.

Some veterans have gone on to become domestic terrorists, like Desert Storm veteran [Timothy McVeigh](#), who killed 168 people in the Oklahoma federal building in 1995, or mass murderers like [Wade Michael Page](#), the Army veteran and uber-racist who killed six worshippers at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, in August 2012. Page had first been introduced to the ideology of white supremacy at age 20, three years after he joined the Army, when he fell in with a neo-Nazi hate group at Fort Bragg. That was in 1995, the year three paratroopers from Fort Bragg murdered two black local residents, a man and a woman, to earn their neo-Nazi spider-web tattoos.

An unknown number of such killers just walk away, like Army Private (and former West Point cadet) Isaac Aguigui, who was finally [convicted](#) last month in a Georgia criminal court of murdering his pregnant wife, Sergeant Deirdre Wetzker Aguigui, an Army linguist, three years ago. Although Deirdre Aguigui’s handcuffed body had revealed multiple blows and signs of struggle, the military medical examiner failed to “detect an anatomic cause of death” — a failure convenient for both the Army, which didn’t have to investigate further, and Isaac Aguigui, who collected a half-million dollars in military death benefits and life insurance to finance a war of his own.

In 2012, Georgia authorities charged Aguigui and three combat veterans from Fort Stewart with the execution-style murders of former Private Michael Roark, 19, and his girlfriend Tiffany York, 17. The trial in a civilian criminal court revealed that Aguigui (who was never deployed) had assembled his own [private militia](#) of troubled combat vets called FEAR (Forever Enduring, Always Ready), and was plotting to take over Fort Stewart by seizing the munitions control point. Among his other plans for his force were killing unnamed officials with car bombs, blowing up a fountain in Savannah, poisoning the apple crop in Aguigui’s home state of Washington, and joining other unspecified private militia groups around the country in a plot to assassinate President Obama and take control of the United States government. Last year, the Georgia court convicted Aguigui in the case of the FEAR executions and sentenced him to life. Only then did a civilian medical examiner determine that he had first murdered his wife.

The Rule of Law

The routine drills of basic training and the catastrophic events of war damage many soldiers in ways that appear darkly ironic when they return home to traumatize or kill their partners, their children, their fellow soldiers, or random strangers in a town or on a base. But again to get the stories we must rely upon scrupulous local journalists. The Austin American-Statesman, for example, [reports](#) that, since 2003, in the area around Fort Hood in central Texas, nearly 10% of those involved in shooting incidents with the police were military veterans or active-duty service members. In four separate confrontations since last

December, the police shot and killed two recently returned veterans and wounded a third, while one police officer was killed. A fourth veteran survived a shootout unscathed.

Such tragic encounters prompted state and city officials in Texas to develop a special Veterans Tactical Response Program to train police in handling troubled military types.

Some of the standard techniques Texas police use to intimidate and overcome suspects — shouting, throwing “flashbangs” (grenades), or even firing warning shots — backfire when the suspect is a veteran in crisis, armed, and highly trained in reflexive fire. The average civilian lawman is no match for an angry combat grunt from, as the president [put it](#) at Fort Hood, “the greatest Army that the world has ever known.” On the other hand, a brain-injured vet who needs time to respond to orders or reply to questions may get manhandled, flattened, tasered, bludgeoned, or worse by overly aggressive police officers before he has time to say a word.

Here’s another ironic twist. For the past decade, military recruiters have made a big selling point of the “veterans preference” policy in the hiring practices of civilian police departments. The prospect of a lifetime career in law enforcement after a single tour of military duty tempts many wavering teenagers to sign on the line. But the vets who are finally discharged from service and don the uniform of a civilian police department are no longer the boys who went away.

In Texas today, 37% of the police in Austin, the state capitol, are ex-military, and in smaller cities and towns in the vicinity of Fort Hood, that figure rises above the 50% mark. Everybody knows that veterans need jobs, and in theory they might be very good at handling troubled soldiers in crisis, but they come to the job already trained for and very good at war. When they meet the next Ivan Lopez, they make a potentially combustible combo.

Most of America’s military men and women don’t want to be “stigmatized” by association with the violent soldiers mentioned here. Neither do the ex-military personnel who now, as members of civilian police forces, do periodic battle with violent vets in Texas and across the country. The new Washington Post-Kaiser survey reveals that most veterans are [proud](#) of their military service, if not altogether happy with their homecoming. Almost half of them think that American civilians, like the citizens of Iraq and Afghanistan, don’t genuinely “respect” them, and more than half feel disconnected from American life. They believe they have better moral and ethical values than their fellow citizens, a virtue trumpeted by the Pentagon and presidents alike. Sixty percent say they are more patriotic than civilians. Seventy percent say that civilians fail absolutely to understand them. And almost 90% of veterans say that in a heartbeat they would re-up to fight again.

Americans on the “home front” were never mobilized by their leaders and they have generally not come to grips with the wars fought in their name. Here, however, is another irony: neither, it turns out, have most of America’s military men and women. Like their civilian counterparts, many of whom are all too ready to deploy those soldiers again to intervene in countries they can’t even [find on a map](#), a significant number of veterans evidently have yet to unpack and examine the wars they brought home in their baggage — and in too many grim cases, they, their loved ones, their fellow soldiers, and sometimes random strangers are paying the price.

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