

Soldier with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Punished by Army

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Iraq war veteran Eric Jasinski, after seeking treatment for his post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), is being punished by the Army.

Jasinski turned himself in to the Army late last year, after having gone absent without leave (AWOL) in order to seek help for his PTSD. Help, he told Truthout, he was not receiving from the Army, even after requesting assistance on multiple occasions.

He was court-martialed and jailed for 25 days for having gone AWOL, during which time he was escorted in shackles to therapy sessions for his PTSD. After being released from prison, he was informed that he would be given an other-than-honorable discharge, which means he is likely ineligible for full PTSD treatment from the Veterans' Administration (VA) after he leaves the service.

Jasinski enlisted in the military in 2005, and deployed to Iraq in October 2006 as an intelligence analyst with the U.S. Army. He collected intelligence in order to put together strike packets – where air strikes would take place.

Upon his return to the U.S. after his tour, Jasinski was suffering from severe PTSD due to what he did and saw in Iraq, along with remorse and guilt for the work he did that he knows contributed to the loss of life in Iraq.

“What I saw and what I did in Iraq caused my PTSD,” Jasinski, 23-years-old, told Truthout during a phone interview. “Also, I lost a good friend in Iraq, and I went through a divorce – she left right before I deployed – and my grandmother passed away when I was over there, so it was all super rough on me.”

Upon returning home in December 2007, Jasinski tried to get treatment via the military. He was self-medicating by drinking heavily, and an over- burdened military mental health counselor sent him to see a civilian doctor, who diagnosed him with severe PTSD.

“I went to get help, but I had an eight hour wait to see one of five doctors. But after several attempts, finally I got a periodic check up and I told that counselor what was happening, and he said they’d help me... but I ended up getting a letter that instructed me to go see a civilian doctor, and she diagnosed me with PTSD,” Jasinski explained. “Then, I was taking the medications and they were helping, because I thought I was to get out of the Army in February 2009 when my contract expired.”

As the date approached, Jasinski was stop-lossed (an involuntary extension of his contract), an event that he said “pushed me over the edge” because he was told he was to be sent to

Iraq within a month.

During his pre-deployment processing, "They gave me a 90-day supply of meds to get me over to Iraq, and I saw a counselor during that period, and I told him, 'I don't know what I'm going to do if I go back to Iraq.'"

"He asked if I was suicidal," Jasinski explained, "and I said not right now, I'm not planning on going home and blowing my brains out. He said, 'Well, you're good to go then.' And he sent me on my way. I knew at that moment, when they finalized my paperwork for Iraq, that there was no way I could go back with my untreated PTSD. I needed more help."

Jasinski went AWOL, where he remained out of service until Dec. 11, 2009, when he returned to turn himself in to authorities at Fort Hood, in Killeen, Texas.

"He has heavy-duty PTSD and never would have gone AWOL if he'd gotten the help he needed from the military," James Branum, Jasinski's civilian lawyer, told Truthout. "This case highlights the need of the military to provide better mental health care for its soldiers."

Branum, who is also co-chair of the Military Law Task Force, told Truthout in December, "Our hope is that his unit won't court-martial him, but puts him in a warrior transition unit where they will evaluate him to either treat him or give him a medical discharge. He'd be safe there, and eventually, they'd give him a medical discharge because his PTSD symptoms are so severe."

But the Army scheduled a Summary Court Martial for March 31. At it, Jasinski was sentenced to 30 days in the Bell County Jail in Texas. Laura Barrett, Jasinski's mother, told the **Temple Herald Telegram**, "This has been a total outrage. I cannot believe my son who is diagnosed with PTSD from his deployment to Iraq would be sent to jail."

Branum submitted a clemency request asking that Jasinski be released on mental health grounds, or that he be transferred to the psych ward at Darnall Army Medical Center to complete his sentence. The Army did not respond.

Branum said, "We, as Americans, need to see how combat vets are treated today. Eric is in jail because he has PTSD and was denied the care he needed. His 'desertion' was an act of desperation, the act of a soldier who had no other options."

Jasinski wrote a letter from the Bell County Jail that said the following:

"When I am taken out of jail back to Fort Hood for any appointments I am led around in handcuffs and ankle shackles in front of crowds of soldiers... which is overwhelming on my mind. My guilt from treating prisoners in Iraq sub-human and I did things to them and watched my unit do cruel actions against prisoners, so being humiliated like that forces me to fall into the dark spiral of guilt. I now know what it feels like to have no rights and have people stare and judge based on your shackles and I feel even more like a monster cause I used to do this to Iraqi people.

"Even worse is the fact that this boils down to the military failing to treat my PTSD but I am being punished for it... I feel as if I am being a threat to others or myself and still the Army mental health professional blow me off just like in 2009 when I felt like I had no choice but to go AWOL, since I received a 5 minute mental evaluation and was stop-losses despite my PTSD, and was told

that they could do nothing for me. The insufficient mental evaluation from a doctor I had never seen before, combined with the insufficient actions by the doctor on 9 April show the Army is not trying to make progress.”

Jasinski was released from jail on April 24, having served 25 days of a 30-day sentence. He has since been informed he will receive an other-than-honorable discharge, which means he will not have full health benefits with the Veterans’ Administration, and thus little to no assistance from the military for treating his PTSD.

According to the Army, every year from 2006 onwards has seen a record number of reported and confirmed suicides. A 2008 Rand Corporation report revealed that at least 300,000 veterans returning from both wars had been diagnosed with severe depression or PTSD.

Jasinski’s case is representative of a growing number of soldiers returning from the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan who are going AWOL when they are unable to get proper mental health care treatment from the military for their PTSD.

Jaskinski’s experience with the military has inspired him to offer advice for other soldiers who need PTSD treatment but are not receiving it.

When asked what he feels the military needs to do in order to rectify this problem, he said, “A total overhaul of the mental health sector in the military is needed... we had nine psychiatrists at our center, and that’s simply not enough staff, they are going to get burned out after seeing 50 soldiers each in one day. We need an overhaul of the entire system, and more good psychiatrists, not those just coming for a job, but good, experienced mental health professionals need to be involved.”

Chuck Luther, who served 12 years in the military, is a veteran of two deployments to Iraq, where he was a reconnaissance scout in the 1st Cavalry Division. The former sergeant was based at Fort Hood, Texas, where he lives today. Luther told Truthout in November that the military tried to discharge him without assisting him with his PTSD, instead diagnosing him with “personality disorder.”

In response, Luther went on to found and direct “The Soldier’s Advocacy Group of Disposable Warriors.”

“The way things are set up right now in the military is that if a soldier gets a chance to go to mental health, which is something military commanders tend to try to prevent from happening in the first place, but if soldiers go, psychologists and psychiatrists address and diagnose their PTSD and write it up, but this does not mean that they will get treatment,” Luther explained to Truthout.

At the time, he described a situation very similar to that of Jasinski’s.

“The doctors then send it to command, but that doesn’t mean the soldiers will get treatment,” said Luther. “The soldier can push it up to the commander, but the commander can deny it and that’s as high as it gets. Soldiers are listed as not being able to serve by a military doctor, but they are nonetheless medicated and sent out into combat anyway.”

“The military is trying to get everybody these ‘other-than-honorable discharges’ or diagnosing them with ‘personality disorder’ so they don’t have to take care of them after

they discharge,” Aaron Hughes, an Iraq war vet, told Truthout.

Hughes, a national organizer for the group Iraq Veteran’s Against the War, said that Jasinski was already involved in the paperwork process required by the military for him to receive a medical discharge.

“This was underway when he went to jail,” Hughes added, “He would do his time for going AWOL, then get a medical discharge. Instead, they are switching this mid-stream and giving him an ‘other-than-honorable’ discharge, which means he gets no benefits. My main concern is that he did his time and did everything he was supposed to do, and they are still not living up to their side of the bargain.”

Kernan Manion is a board-certified psychiatrist who treated Marines returning from war who suffer from PTSD and other acute mental problems born from their deployments, at Camp Lejeune – the largest Marine base on the East Coast. While he was engaged in this work, Manion warned his superiors of the extent and complexity of the systemic problems, and he was deeply worried about the possibility of these leading to violence on the base and within surrounding communities.

“If not more Fort Hoods, Camp Liberties, soldier fratricide, spousal homicide, we’ll see it individually in suicides, alcohol abuse, domestic violence, family dysfunction, in formerly fine young men coming back and saying, as I’ve heard so many times, ‘I’m not cut out for society. I can’t stand people. I can’t tolerate commotion. I need to live in the woods,’” Manion explained to Truthout. “That’s what we’re going to have. Broken, not contributing, not functional members of society. It infuriates me – what they are doing to these guys, because it’s so ineptly run by a system that values rank and power more than anything else – so we’re stuck throwing money into a fragmented system of inept clinics and the crisis goes on.”

“It’s not just that we’re going to have an immensity of people coming back, but the system itself is thwarting their effective treatment,” Manion said.

Jasinski told Truthout that his previous commander, who he referred to as Captain Floer, told his mother that Jasinski was “faking my PTSD symptoms,” since “the job he held {in Iraq} was behind a computer.”

While in jail, Jasinski was denied access to his regular therapy sessions. He was taken periodically to other sessions, but he told Truthout, “The mental health center on Fort Hood told me I had to wait for more help.”

At a later session at the same center, Jasinski said, “I was told upon my follow-up visit that my suicidal ideations were all in my head and was sent on my way.”

“Again the military is casting its soldiers aside, and shows no mercy for soldiers or their families,” Jasinski told Truthout, “I do not want their money, but I want them to at least acknowledge and act upon the problems in order to repair the broken.

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