

Where Will They Get the Troops?

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Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

Global Research, November 09, 2009

[TomDispatch](#) 8 November 2009

As the Obama administration debates whether to send tens of thousands of extra troops to Afghanistan, an already overstretched military is increasingly struggling to meet its deployment numbers. Surprisingly, one place it seems to be targeting is military personnel who go absent without leave (AWOL) and then are caught or turn themselves in.

Hidden behind the gates of military bases across the U.S., troops facing AWOL and desertion charges regularly find themselves in the hands of a military that metes out informal, open-ended punishments by forcing them to wait months — sometimes more than a year — to face military justice. In the meantime, some of these soldiers are offered a free pass out of this legal limbo as long as they agree to deploy to Afghanistan or Iraq — even if they have been diagnosed with severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

In August 2008 at TomDispatch.com, we reported on the [deplorable conditions](#) at the 82nd Replacement Barracks at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. There, more than 50 members of Echo Platoon of the 82nd Airborne Division's 82nd Replacement Detachment were being held while awaiting AWOL and desertion charges. Investigations launched since then — in part in response to our article — have revealed that the plight of members of Echo Platoon is not an isolated one. It is, in fact, disturbingly commonplace on other bases throughout the United States. And it is from these "holdover units," filled with disgruntled soldiers who have gone AWOL, many of whom are struggling with PTSD from previous deployments in war zones, that the military is hoping to help meet its manpower needs for Afghanistan.

Nightmare in Echo Platoon

On August 16th, determined to put an end to unbearable mental and psychological pain, Private Timothy Rich, while on 24-hour suicide watch, attempted to jump to his death from the roof of Echo Platoon's barracks (where he had been held since being arrested for going AWOL). Prior to his suicide attempt, Rich had been offered amnesty by the military in exchange for agreeing to deploy to Afghanistan or Iraq.

He had already been through a hellish year awaiting a discharge and treatment for mental health problems. "I want to leave here very bad," he explained. "For four months they have been telling me that I'll get out next week. I didn't see an end to it, so I figured I'd try and end it myself."

He fell three stories, bouncing off a tree, before hitting the ground and cracking his spine. The military gave him a back brace, psychotropic drugs, and put him on a renewed, 24-hour suicide watch.

While he has recently been discharged from the military, Rich was not atypical of the

soldiers of Echo Platoon, some forced to wait a year or more in legal limbo — in dilapidated buildings under the authority of abusive commanders — for legal proceedings to begin, and many struggling with mental illness or PTSD from previous deployments. As Specialist Dustin Stevens told us last August: “[It’s] horrible here. We are treated like animals. Some of us are going crazy, some are sick. There are people here who should be in mental hospitals. And the way I see it, I did nothing wrong.”

Shortly after our story was published, Stevens told us that at least half a dozen soldiers in the platoon, including him, were suddenly given trial dates. Although he was likely to be found guilty and face punishment, Stevens claimed to be “relieved” to have an end in sight. Soon after, according to Echo Platoon informants, their barracks were condemned as a result of a military investigation of the site and, on October 19th, the platoon itself was disbanded.

Recently, due possibly to the attention his story drew to the mistreatment and indefinite detention soldiers were facing in Echo Platoon, Stevens was informed by the military he would be “chaptered out” — in other words, given an administrative discharge from the Army — and will not be forced to serve formal prison time.

James Branum, Stevens’ civilian lawyer, as well as the legal adviser to the G.I. Rights Hotline of Oklahoma and co-chair of the Military Law Task Force (MLTF), summed developments up this way: “After repeated complaints and congressional inquiry, Echo Platoon was shut down. The whole place was shut down. Everyone was scattered to other units. If your old unit still exists, they are sending you to your old unit. We know that at least one of the NCOs [non-commissioned officers] in charge of Echo Platoon was fired. I think this is a positive thing.”

Echoes of Echo

The troubling state of affairs in Echo Platoon may only have been the tip of the iceberg when it comes to Army holdover units. Evidence suggests that soldiers being held on other bases in the United States for AWOL and desertion face similar apathy or intentional neglect — and that they, too, are often left with the choice between living in legal limbo or agreeing to be sent to a war zone.

Scott Wildman, a former Army Specialist, went AWOL in 2007 when he was unable to receive adequate help for severe PTSD sustained after a 15-month deployment to Iraq. In February 2009, he finally turned himself in at Fort Lewis in Washington State, only to find himself lost in a labyrinthine bureaucracy. For the first four months, he was not allowed to leave a confined area and was forbidden even to walk around by himself.

Here’s how he describes his experience: “I was flipping out. My wife had left me while I was over there. I hadn’t seen my kids in a couple years. I came home and tried to get help. At Fort Lewis, they do not care about you. I had been diagnosed by civilian and military doctors with severe depression, PTSD, and severe anxiety. When you are at the unit, they make fun of you. They crack PTSD jokes. They all have it too, but they’re too cool.”

During the eight months he has been held at Fort Lewis, Wildman claims he has suffered verbal abuse and substandard mental healthcare. “The command treated me like dirt. My commander ignored me for the first couple months until my roommate jumped me. They’ll make sure you’re in the room and call you a ‘bunch of PTSD pussies.’”

Four weeks ago, Wildman was informed that he would be court-martialed, but was not given a trial date. Feeling he had no other choice, he went AWOL again and remains so today.

"I'd been going to see some military counselors, but we weren't making progress on the real problem.... They give us classes on calm and peacefulness, but they are right near the shooting ranges. There's gunfire and explosions all around, people being screamed at all the time because it's infantry. It's not a good place for someone with [mental health] issues."

At one point, despite a confidentiality protocol that should have prevented it, Wildman's commanders went through his medical evaluations and found out that he had been involved in the accidental killing of two little girls in Iraq. They proceeded to needle him by threatening to write him up for war crimes.

Explaining why he once again went AWOL, Wildman says, "I didn't know what was going to happen next. I had to remove myself from that situation."

"Examples of how the military is treating soldiers, like the case of Wildman, are common," comments Kathleen Gilberd, co-chair of the MLTF. She also points out that the Army, stretched thin by years of multiple deployments to two war zones, has taken to downplaying potentially severe medical conditions to keep soldiers eligible for service overseas. It is commonplace, she reports, for formerly AWOL soldiers to be "bribed" with offers of having all charges, or potential charges, dropped, as long as they accept deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan.

"A lot of folks who are under-diagnosed or misdiagnosed are being deployed second and third times," she adds. "Barrier mechanisms that should prevent this from happening are being routinely ignored... If someone is on psychotropic medication or is diagnosed with a fresh psychiatric condition, there should be a 90-day observation period and delay, under DOD [Department of Defense] policy."

Remarkably, that sometimes-ignored 90-day hold period for military personnel on psychotropic medications does not always apply to soldiers who are diagnosed with traumatic brain injury (TBI) of a sort commonly caused by roadside bombs. According to an Armed Forces Health Surveillance Center analysis, reported in the [Denver Post](#) in August 2008, more than "43,000 service members — two-thirds of them in the Army or Army Reserve — were classified as nondeployable for medical reasons three months before they deployed" to Iraq. The process, if anything, only seems to be accelerating when it comes to Afghanistan.

Deploying the Undeployables

Not all soldiers go AWOL in order to save their minds and bodies. Some are trying to save their families. One soldier held in Bravo Platoon, a holdover unit of the 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division at Fort Carson in Colorado Springs (who did not want his name made public) disclosed that, having returned from service in Iraq, he was told he would soon be redeployed there. Because his mother was ill, he refused and was threatened with a court martial.

"When I turned myself in, I submitted a binder with letters from my mom's doctors and state officials that made clear that I needed to be home to take care of my mother. At that time, they had me on restriction and lockdown 24/7 to keep me from leaving again. Later they

punished me. I was assigned extra duty and received a rank reduction from E3 to a private. I was treated like crap.”

He and the other soldiers in his holdover platoon were subjected to verbal abuse and made to do menial jobs. He claimed that he was threatened daily with being sent to the United States Disciplinary Barracks at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, the military’s maximum security correctional facility — and then was urged to agree to go back to Iraq instead. It made no difference that he had “no-go” orders from doctors at Fort Carson exempting him from overseas deployment.

His commander promised him a clean slate if he would redeploy to Iraq, insisting that the only alternative was a court-martial. Despite a regimen of humiliation, he stood his ground and was finally discharged for family hardship in September 2008. There were at least 11 other soldiers then in Bravo Platoon. Like their counterparts in Echo, most were told that their records would be wiped clean once they agreed to redeploy. The alternative was a non-judicial punishment, followed by a court-martial some months down the line.

As he tells it, Sergeant Heath Carter, originally based at Fort Polk, Louisiana, found himself torn between pressing family needs and an indifferent military command. On returning from the invasion of Iraq, he discovered his daughter living in what he believed to be an unsafe environment. Heath and his new wife started consulting attorneys in order to secure custody of the child. Precisely during this time, the military began changing Carter’s duty station. He was moved from Fort Polk to Fort Huachuca, Arizona, then on to Fort Stewart, Georgia, reducing his chances of gaining custody.

Convinced that this was a crucial matter for his daughter, he requested compassionate reassignment to Fort Leavenworth, Missouri, about two hours away from her. His appeals to the military command, to his chaplain, even to his congressman failed. In May 2007, having run out of options, he went AWOL from Fort Stewart, heading home to fight for custody, which he won.

This January 25th, however, he was arrested at his home by 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, not a holdover one. Initially, his commander assured him he would be sent home within a month and a half. Several months later, the same commander decided to court-martial him.

Carter feels frustrated. “If they had done that in the beginning, I would have been home by now. It’s taken this long for them to decide. Now I have to wait for the court-martial. 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’s only going to be another two weeks. I get the feeling they’re lying. They’ve messed with my pay. They’re trying to push me to do something wrong.”

His ordeal has forced Carter to reflect on America’s wars. Once, he admits, he was proud of his mission in Iraq. Now, he sees things differently. “I don’t think there is any reason for us to be there except for oil.”

His wife, who witnessed her husband’s callous treatment, says, “He’s been there [Iraq], done that, and seen horrible, terrible things, so of course he doesn’t want to go back.”

While the Obama administration decides how many thousands of troops to send to Afghanistan, service men and women are already facing repeated deployments, oftentimes while having already been diagnosed with medical conditions that should render them unfit for deployment.

Nothing has changed for these beleaguered troops, except the venue of their maltreatment and the desperation with which the military is now struggling to make the necessary deployment numbers as it continues to fight two endless wars.

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