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Some wounded soldiers more likely to be punished

By KEVIN MAURER – 23 hours ago

FORT BRAGG, N.C. (AP) — Staff Sgt. Jason Jonas says when he goes to bed at night, he is terrified his medication will cause him to oversleep and miss morning roll call again.

His commanders are fully aware the paratrooper wounded in Afghanistan has been diagnosed with a sleep disorder, because he is one of about 10,000 soldiers assigned to the Army's Warrior Transition units, created for troops recovering from injuries.

Instead of gingerly nursing them back to health, however, commanders at Fort Bragg's transition unit readily acknowledge holding them to the same standards as able-bodied soldiers in combat units, often assigning chores as punishment for minor infractions.

In fact, the unit has a discipline rate three times as high as Fort Bragg's main tenant, the 82nd Airborne Division, and transition units at two other bases punish their soldiers even more frequently than the one at Fort Bragg, according to an Associated Press review of records obtained through the Freedom of Information Act.

"In my 10 years of service I have often seen soldiers mistreated, abused or left hanging, but never have I seen an entire unit collectively mentally and physically break down its members," said Jonas, a 28-year-old from Tempe, Ariz.

Jonas is one of 11 current or former soldiers who have spent time in Fort Bragg's transition unit and say that its officers are either indifferent to their medical needs or trying to drive injured men and women from the military. Some complain they are being punished for the very injuries that landed them in the unit.

"It is the military's way of dealing with it: `You're a fake. You need to go back to work,'" said Pfc. Roman Serpik, 25, who enlisted in Duluth, Ga. He said he injured his head and back in a practice parachute jump last April.

Jonas suffered a concussion on a jump in 1999 at Fort Bragg, and military doctors determined that that led him to develop narcolepsy, a disorder that causes people to fall asleep abruptly, he said. He provided copies of his medical profile to the AP to confirm he has the disorder.

He said medication for his condition made him miss formation five times, resulting in a demotion that cost him \$400 a month.

Officers in the transition battalion at Fort Bragg's Womack Army Medical Center would not discuss individual soldiers' medical or disciplinary records, citing privacy laws. Speaking generally, they said the way to get soldiers back on their feet is discipline, not accepting excuses.

"Do we hold our capable warriors in transition accountable to these standards, to include the Uniform Code of Military Justice and the various Army regulations? Unapologetically, yes, we do," said Lt. Col. Jay Thornton, the unit's commander.

Thornton said soldiers are "helped, not harmed, by maintaining an appropriate level of structure and military discipline."

Advocates for wounded soldiers question whether the tough-love approach is an effort to get rid of soldiers considered unlikely to return to regular duty.

"It creates a hostile environment where soldiers buckle and take a low-balled disability rating and benefits just to get out when they can," said retired Army Lt. Col. Mike Parker.

The Warrior Transition system was established two years ago to improve treatment of wounded soldiers after the scandal over shoddy conditions at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington.

Soldiers assigned to the units have combat injuries such as amputations and mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as minor ailments that didn't come from combat.

The transition unit at Fort Bragg issued what is known as an Article 15 — used for minor misconduct that doesn't rise to the level of a court-martial — roughly once a month for every 135 soldiers through the first nine months of 2008.

At Fort Knox, Ky., the rate was even higher — one Article 15 per month for every 96 soldiers. The highest rate was at Fort Drum, N.Y., home to the 10th Mountain Division, where the injured warriors' commanders issued one Article 15 per month for every 76 soldiers.

On the more lenient end, the Article 15 rate for the transition battalion at Fort Riley in Kansas, home of the 1st Infantry Division, was one for every 309 soldiers, and one for every 371 soldiers in the transition unit at Hawaii's Schofield Barracks, the base of the 25th Infantry Division.

The differences in the discipline rates point to a flaw in policy rather than pockets of misbehaving soldiers, said Paul Rieckhoff, founder and executive director of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America.

"We will be looking to the Army to take swift action and hold the appropriate people accountable," he said.

Commanders at the transition units at Forts Knox and Riley and at Schofield Barracks all declined to comment on how they handle discipline. At Fort Drum, spokeswoman Kate Agresti

said only that the base's transition battalion "follows appropriate military guidelines" that take a soldier's medical condition into account.

Jaime Cavazos, a spokesman with the Army Medical Command, declined to speculate on why the rate of Article 15s in the units differs so widely. "I suspect you'd find similar variances between line units throughout the Army," Cavazos said.

The current and former soldiers interviewed by the AP told similar stories about discipline within the unit at Fort Bragg. Most spoke on condition of anonymity because of fear of reprisal and warnings from above not to speak with reporters.

Sgt. Sheree Snow, 30, of Indianapolis, said she was evacuated from Iraq to Germany with fibroid tumors in February 2008, had a hysterectomy that May and was prescribed pain and sleeping medication for months afterward while at Fort Bragg. She said the medication led her to miss nine morning formations, and when she was trying to wean herself off the painkillers, an entire day.

Thornton, her commander, punished her with 14 days of extra duty and docked her two months' pay, she said.

"The leadership isn't trained to work with wounded soldiers," said Snow, who returned to her primary assignment at Fort Eustis, Va., this year. "I feel that the unit holds us to such high standards because they do not know better."

Jason Thomasson, a 34-year-old Iraq veteran from Winston-Salem, N.C., said he was sent to the unit after developing post-traumatic stress disorder, which he said led to extreme paranoia. He missed formations and left Fort Bragg without permission. For that he was demoted and eventually kicked out of the Army.

"Soldiers are being punished for injuries that they sustained while they were defending the nation," Thomasson said. "I was a model soldier before I had PTSD."

On the Net:

- Womack Army Medical Center: <http://www.wamc.amedd.army.mil>
- Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America: <http://iava.org>