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Army struggles with mental health amid 2 long wars

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FORT CARSON, Colo. — A baby-faced, chain-smoking infantryman who was on a prescribed antidepressant when he allegedly shot and killed a captured Taliban member is the latest challenge to the Army's ability to address mental health problems in the ranks while fighting two lengthy wars.

Pfc. David Lawrence, 20, had also told family members before the shooting that he was hearing voices.

Lawrence is charged with premeditated murder in the Oct. 17 death of the prisoner, who prosecutors say was asleep in a jail cell when he was shot. If convicted, Lawrence could face execution or life in prison.

His case comes as the military grapples with a rising numbers of suicides, post-traumatic stress disorder cases and traumatic brain injuries. At the same time, commanders are striving to maintain the Army's numerical strength and soldier discipline in the face of repeated deployments.

At a military court hearing for Lawrence last week, prosecutors suggested he was faking mental illness in hopes of getting a lighter sentence. Lawrence asked for and received help from mental health providers in Afghanistan, according to testimony.

But when he returned to his unit, he wasn't given the care or supervision he needed, his civilian attorney, James Culp, said in an interview. Instead, Culp said, he was assigned to longer-than-normal shifts on guard duty.

"I think what this case shows is there's these complex, contradictory needs in the military," said Barbara Van Dahlen, a clinical psychologist and founder of Give An Hour, a nonprofit that provides free mental health services to returning troops and their families.



Nov. 30: Pfc. David Lawrence takes a break from an Article 32 hearing at Fort Carson, Colo. Lawrence is charged with fatally shooting a jailed Taliban leader he was supposed to be guarding in Afghanistan. His lawyer portrays him as a young man afflicted with schizophrenia and depression and given scant medical care after asking the Army for help. (AP)

"On the one hand ... we have to look out for these folks," she said. "On the other hand, we have to keep control of our forces."

Lawrence was assigned to Fort Carson's 1st Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, and was stationed at a U.S. outpost in the Arghandab Valley just outside the city of Kandahar. He was standing guard at the cell of the Taliban member, identified in Army documents only as Mohebullah, who was awaiting transfer to NATO coalition custody.

At the Fort Carson hearing, prosecutors described Lawrence as a zealot bent on killing the enemy. They said his words and actions indicated he deliberately arranged to be the only guard on duty at the prisoner's cell.

Prosecutors said Lawrence didn't tell Army officials until after the shooting that he was hearing voices, and that after his arrest he spoke of "playing the crazy card."

Lawrence's father, Brett Lawrence of Lawrenceburg, Ind., and lawyer Culp portray the soldier as a troubled young man from a family with a history of schizophrenia. Before the shooting, Lawrence was badly shaken by the deaths of two friends in Afghanistan, including a chaplain, his father and his lawyer said.

Brett Lawrence said that if his son failed to report hearing voices to Army doctors and officers in Afghanistan, he understands why.

David Lawrence saw "what his uncle and his grandmother and his aunt had went through, how they were treated when they were hearing voices," the father told The Associated Press. "I believe he kept it to himself (in Afghanistan) so he would not be ridiculed like they were."

Culp, hired by Lawrence's father, said the soldier never mentioned "playing the crazy card" until after he spoke with a military defense attorney at a hearing in Afghanistan.

Under questioning by Culp at last week's hearing, some soldiers testified the "crazy card" comment might have been a product of Lawrence's conversation with the military lawyer. The soldiers spoke by speaker phone from Afghanistan.

"Playing the crazy card" may have been Lawrence's way of saying the military lawyer gave him some hope of using a mental illness defense, Culp told the AP after the hearing.

Brett Lawrence said he doesn't believe his son would fake mental illness to excuse a fatal shooting.

"My son would not throw his life away for one person. He is a smart kid. He would not go in there and just do it because he wanted to kill somebody," the father said.

Van Dahlen said a trained mental health provider will be able to determine whether David Lawrence has schizophrenia.

"You can't really fake being schizophrenic ... not when an evaluator is looking at this," she said.

During last week's hearing in a windowless room at Fort Carson, Lawrence repeatedly appeared to doze off, which Culp said was the influence of drugs prescribed by Army doctors, including one for schizophrenia.

Like the other Army personnel at the hearing, Lawrence wore combat fatigues. His thick blond hair was cropped short, and he wore rectangular, black-rimmed glasses.

During breaks, he went outside and smoked, often two cigarettes in quick succession.

Dimitri Andre Jenkins, a medic in Lawrence's platoon, testified that after Chaplain Dale Goetz was killed by an improvised bomb in August, he saw Lawrence "chain-smoking and looking at the ground, angry."

Last Thursday, Lawrence was admitted as an inpatient to a mental health treatment center in Colorado, his father said, although he didn't know the name or city of the center.

Lawrence was admitted at the direction of the Army psychiatrist in charge of his case, not officers in the Army judicial system, Culp said.

A Fort Carson spokesman said officials couldn't discuss the matter.

It was unclear what impact Lawrence's hospitalization would have on the prosecution. Also unclear was whether it would bolster the defense argument that last week's hearing shouldn't have started until the Army completed a mental health evaluation of Lawrence.

That review is expected to be finished by Dec. 10. It includes an assessment of Lawrence's mental state at the time of the shooting and whether he is capable of participating in his own defense, according to a document provided to the AP.