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**A**rmy Sgt. John M. Russell “was finished fighting” and wished someone “would put a bullet in my head,” he told the court as he pleaded guilty April 22 to killing five service members at the Camp Liberty combat stress clinic in Iraq.

In exchange for his guilty plea, Russell will avoid the death penalty for the May 11, 2009, shooting on one of the U.S. military’s largest bases in Iraq.

But Russell refused to plead guilty to the premeditated killing of four soldiers and one Navy officer, which carries a maximum sentence of life in prison without possibility of parole, and attorneys will argue this portion of the case beginning May 6 at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash.

“My emotions grew out of control and overcame me,” Russell read from a written statement in court.

At the time, Russell said, he felt he would have been better off dead, and he planned to kill himself.

“I did not want to be alive anymore,” Russell said. “I felt totally hopeless ... [and] I was finished fighting, I didn’t want to live anymore, and I wished somebody would put a bullet in my head.”

Russell, now 48, was at the end of his third Iraq deployment when he began to exhibit changes in his behavior, soldiers interviewed in the aftermath of the shooting told investigators.

Referred to counseling, his weapon taken away, Russell was escorted into the Camp Liberty clinic. Inside, Russell, assigned at the time to Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 54th Engineer Battalion, got into an argument with the staff. He was asked to leave.

He had another confrontation outside the clinic and military police were called. Russell left, commandeered his escort’s rifle and vehicle, and returned to the clinic.

In the clinic, Russell opened fire, killing two behavioral health care providers, Maj. (Dr.) Matthew P. Houseal, 54, a psychiatrist and father of six from Amarillo, Texas, and Navy Cmdr. Charles K. Springle, 52, of Wilmington, N.C.

He also killed Staff Sgt. Christian E. Bueno-Galdos, 25, of Paterson, N.J.; Spc. Jacob D. Barton, 20, of Lenox, Mo.; and Pfc. Michael E. Yates Jr., 19, of Federalsburg, Md.

Bueno-Galdos and Yates were assigned to 3rd Battalion, 66th Armor Regiment, 172nd Infantry

# ‘I felt totally hopeless’

## Testimony recounts deadly medical clinic chaos



**Army Sgt. John Russell refused to plead guilty to the premeditated killing of four soldiers and one Navy officer, which carries a maximum sentence of life in prison without possibility of parole. Russell said he planned to kill himself. The trial in the case begins May 6.**

Brigade Combat Team of Grafenwoehr, Germany.

Barton belonged to the 277th Engineer Company, 420th Engineer Brigade, of Waco, Texas. He went to the clinic for help while he grieved the loss of his mother.

### Guilty to what degree?

The judge in Russell’s case accepted a guilty plea to second-degree murder, said James Culp, Russell’s attorney, who served in the Army as an enlisted infantryman before getting his commission and serving as an Army lawyer.

“The facts support that strongly,” Culp said. “It’s the truth. He was gravely mentally ill.”

As part of the plea agreement, the court proceedings that begin May 6 will be heard by the judge alone and not a panel or jury.

On Sept. 16, 2011, less than two months after the Article 32 hearing, the investigating officer recommended Russell be tried by general court-martial. However, Col. James Pohl, who also served as the investigating officer for the Article 32 for Maj. Nidal Hasan, accused in the 2009 shooting

rampage at Fort Hood, Texas, said Russell’s case should be referred as a noncapital case, which would have taken the death penalty off the table.

“This is a very serious case where five service members needlessly lost their lives at the hands of the accused,” Pohl wrote in his recommendation to Lt. Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti, who at the time was commanding general of I Corps and the convening authority in the case. “In my opinion, the accused’s undisputed mental disease or defect makes the death penalty inappropriate in this case.”

Scaparrotti disagreed, referring it as a capital case.

After his arrest, Russell spent more than 20 months in an inpatient facility, receiving intensive psychiatric care until he was deemed fit for trial. In March 2011, a board of experts found Russell suffered from recurrent and severe major depressive disorder with psychotic features, coupled with chronic post-traumatic stress disorder, at the time of the shooting.

Russell also has brain damage affecting the parts of his brain that control emotions such as fear and anger, and his impulse control, Culp said.

Russell also was incited to kill himself when he sought help, Culp said.

“Those three components are the three keys to this horrific incident,” he said. “Remove any one of them and this never happens again.”

The Army has never conceded that there may have been issues relating to the treatment Russell received at the combat stress clinic, Culp said.

“That’s a problem, because the other two factors will likely arise again in another person, and what we have control over is our combat stress clinics, and we can ensure in the future that every single person is treated with dignity and respect,” he said.

Russell’s guilty plea comes at the end of an almost four-year wait for the victims’ families, who have expressed frustration at how the case has seemed to drag on.

“I personally believe in the death penalty, but four years ago, if you’d told me, ‘Here are your options: We’ll pursue the death penalty and four years from now we still wouldn’t be at trial, or life in prison and we’ll be done in a year and a half,’ I would have taken the life sentence,” said Springle’s brother, Thomas, himself a Navy officer.

“I understand that we’re not the only people who had a loved one killed in Iraq. Lots and lots of people did. I know how awful it is, and I don’t want anybody to think our loss is worse than others, it isn’t,” Thomas Springle said. “But he wasn’t killed by enemy fire. He was murdered, and something is supposed to be done about it.”

### Feeling, not thinking

Russell was quiet and introverted, but seemed to withdraw even more into his shell in early May 2009, Capt. Mark Natale, who at the time was a first lieutenant and Russell’s boss, testified during the Article 32.

“There were multiple times that we reached out to Sgt. Russell to participate in group or section functions ... and he didn’t want to participate,” he said.

Russell had difficulty sleeping after his first deployment to Iraq in 2003, and suffered from recurring nightmares, he told the court.

By the time he was near the end of his third tour in Iraq, “I felt more and more terrible,” he told the judge. “I was tired almost all the time. I was not sleeping right, and I was not eating right. ... When I wasn’t at work, I would usually just lay in bed. I felt more and more miserable as the months wore on.”

After a junior soldier complained about how Russell was treating her, he became extremely agitated.

“Can’t you see that they’re out to get me? This is going to screw up my career. You’re letting her dictate the terms to [a noncommissioned officer].”

Russell stormed away and was still angry the next day.

Russell, in his statement to the court, said he felt there was a conspiracy against him, and his chain of command “teamed up against me to ruin me.”

“I can’t explain really how much anger I was feeling, but it was very excessive and not appropriate for the situation,” he said. “I see that clearly now, but I did not see it at the time. I was doing very little thinking at this time, and an excessive amount of feeling.”

Natale decided to put off reprimanding Russell.

“Even though he just went off on me, I don’t think it’s the right thing at this time,” Natale said. “It would be very easy for me to just crush him and demean him and start screaming at him. However I felt that wasn’t the best way to handle it, especially since he was so upset and kind of out of character.”





Natale met with Russell every day after the incident. He wanted to make sure the soldier was eating well and feeling OK because he would see Russell looking "very pale, very jittery, shaky."

During one of their conversations, the men started discussing the treatment Russell had been receiving at the combat stress clinic.

Russell said Maj. Hryssio Fernbach, a psychologist he had seen at the clinic on nearby Camp Striker, treated him "like garbage," Natale said, and the two discussed possibly filing a complaint.

Fernbach, who also testified during the Article 32, remembered things differently, describing Russell's demeanor as "neutral" and that Russell's chain of command didn't tell her he was unhappy with how she treated him.

"I looked at him dead in the eye and said, 'Are you thinking about hurting yourself?'" Natale said. "He paused, looked at me for a second, and said, 'No sir, because if I was going to do that, I probably would have done it already.'"

It was then that Natale decided to remove the bolt from Russell's weapon. "He gave me the bolt and said, 'Thanks for looking out for me, sir, I appreciate that.'"

On May 10, 2009, Russell went to see psychiatrist Michael Jones, at the time a lieutenant colonel assigned to the combat stress clinic.

During that meeting, Russell talked about how he had recently seen two other behavioral health specialists but they weren't helpful, Jones said at the Article 32.

"He was rather disdainful in the encounters with the other two therapists," Jones said.

At 5 a.m. May 11, 2009, Chaplain Peter Keough heard a knock on his door.

He shook himself awake and opened the door to find Russell and then-1st Lt. David Vasquez, the HHC executive officer.

Russell was "very distraught, anxious," Keough said. The men sat on the front stoop of Keough's room and talked, but Keough quickly realized Russell needed more than pastoral care. He said "he just wished that someone would put a bullet in his head," Keough said.

The chaplain urged Russell to think about his wife.



Barton



Bueno-Galdos



Houseal



Springle



Yates

"He said he was tired of it, but we started talking about his wife and he told me how much he loved her and she loved him, and we talked about their dogs a bit," Keough said. "And still, he was so visibly shaken that we knew he needed some professional help immediately."

Russell told Keough he hadn't received the care he wanted, but said Jones had been "fairly helpful."

Russell agreed to see Jones again, and the three walked to the battalion headquarters to make the call.

When Russell arrived for his second appointment with Jones, the soldier was "obviously upset, angry," Jones testified during the Article 32.

"He looked to be more angry or irritated than depressed," he said. "I had barely started to ask him any questions when he abruptly got up and left."

When Russell rushed out of the clinic, Jones said he asked the soldier at the front desk to call the military police.

"It looked like we had somebody who had ... a potential for suicide, based on what I had been told [by his chain of command] earlier in the day," Jones said.

Jones said he went outside to try and persuade Russell to go back into the clinic, but Russell was "adamant" to return to his unit.

Staff Sgt. Enos Richard, who was Russell's escort that day, testified that Russell and Jones argued in the clinic parking lot.

"Everybody thinks this is about my career," Richard said Russell told Jones during a heated exchange. "I could give a damn about my career. You guys think it's a joke. It's not a joke."

When the MPs arrived, Russell jumped up, pulled a knife out of his pocket, dropped it to the ground and put his hands together in front of him.

"Arrest me. Take me to jail," Russell said, according to Richard.

But Russell hadn't done anything wrong, so he was released to return to his unit.

Richard and Russell had just

pulled into their unit area when Russell reached into the back seat of the white Ford SUV and grabbed Richard's M16 rifle.

"I ask him what he's doing and I tell him to give me my weapon back, and he responds with 'Give me the keys or I'll shoot you,'" Richard testified at the Article 32. "I looked at him and I didn't see any emotion, no nothing. It was just kind of blank, in his eyes, in his face, like he didn't care about anything anymore."

Richard gave Russell the keys and backed away slowly.

Russell got into the driver's seat, and when Richard tried to open the door, Russell pulled it shut, locked the door and sped off, Richard said.

Richard ran toward the battalion headquarters and, out of breath and in a panic, told three senior NCOs that Russell had grabbed his rifle and took off in the truck.

The soldiers sprang into action, posting sentries around the building and fanning out to search Russell's living quarters.

They all thought Russell was determined to kill himself. That was Russell's initial plan, he said in court.

"My plan was to kill myself. I felt more terrible than I had ever felt before, and I wanted the pain to stop," he said. "But I was also feeling more and more angry at Lt. Col. Jones over how he treated me."

Russell said he looked for a place to pull over and kill himself, but there were too many people and too much traffic around.

"I was crying and saying goodbye to my wife and dogs," he said. "I lit a cigarette, smoked it, and after that I don't remember anything else about the ride."

#### 'Like slow motion'

Capt. Larry Ake, the physician assistant for the 54th Engineer Battalion, called the Camp Liberty clinic to warn them about Russell. "Gunfire started going off over the speaker," Ake said. "We could hear the gunfire going off for what seemed like eternity. It sounded like a whole firefight was going on the other side of the phone line."

Ake said he feels guilty for not calling the clinic sooner.

"I was thinking suicide, so I didn't make all these calls to warn people for another 10 minutes," he said. "If I had made that connection right from the get-go, I might have called 10 minutes sooner, and maybe they could have protected themselves."

At the front desk of the clinic, Sgt. Domonick Morales was checking Spc. Jacob Barton's weapon into the clinic's lockbox when he heard the gunshots.

Morales, the clinic's patient administrator, said he thought, at first, the sound was the metal doors in the clinic slamming shut.

He turned his attention back to Barton and Pfc. Michael Yates and his escort, Staff Sgt. Christian Bueno-Galdos. More shots rang out.

Yates grabbed Barton's weapon and looked into the chamber.

"I remember him saying, 'Please have ammo. Please have ammo,'" Morales said.

But Barton's weapon was empty, and as Yates walked toward the hallway of the clinic, Morales heard "a couple of shots."

Yates scrambled out, trying to get to an exit. Frantic and scared, he yelled out: "Oh God, oh God."

"He was going through the first set of doors and then I didn't hear anything else," Morales said. "I heard a shot and then nothing else."

Morales, Barton and Bueno-Galdos scrambled for cover. Morales and Barton crouched together under a desk.

"I looked and I see boots," Morales said. "You know, Army boots, and so I go down, creep down lower to look, and then I saw Sgt. Russell."

Morales said he couldn't believe it.

"Obviously, we thought it was a fight in the war," he said. "It was just weird seeing your own in that situation. I remember telling Barton that it's one of us."

Russell walked outside briefly, then came back into the clinic, Morales said.

Russell made a beeline for Bueno-Galdos, who was behind a filing cabinet.

"I see him go on his tippy toes and shoot down," Morales said. "I can hear Bueno screaming out, 'Oh God, oh God, oh God.' And then I hear another shot. And then, I don't hear anything else."

Russell then turned and walked

toward the desk. Morales and Barton were head-to-head underneath.

"It was like slow motion," Morales said. "I hear this one shot and my ears start ringing. I look up toward the gunshot and I see the bullet come through the desk. It hits Barton right in his head."

Barton's head snapped back and his body slumped into Morales.

"I'm thinking this is a dream," Morales said. "How can this be happening? Is anybody ever going to come?"

Morales saw Russell walk outside, and waited a few seconds before running to the back door, where he saw Navy Cmdr. Charles Springle sprawled on the floor.

"I'm trying to process who that is I'm running toward," Morales said. "I see the body, and there's blood around the top area, and as I'm running that way, two more shots rang out."

Morales had to jump over Springle's body to get outside. As he looked back, "I saw Sgt. Russell," Morales said. Outside, Morales ran as fast as he could.

Special Agent Abass Golfrey of Criminal Investigation Command was working at the Criminal Investigation Command office on Camp Liberty, across the street from the clinic, when he heard the gunshots.

"I just killed some people," Russell said, Golfrey's told the Article 32 hearing.

Russell, whose boots were stained with blood, did not fight his arrest, Golfrey testified.

"He went to his knees and put his hands up," Golfrey said.

Russell does not remember the events of that day, Culp said.

"He snapped," he said, explaining why Russell is contesting the "premeditated" part of the charges against him.

"Did he take the weapon with the intent to go back to kill those people, or did he take that weapon with the intent to kill himself?" Culp said. "Was it premeditated or not? Did he have the wherewithal to plan ... or was this an act of rage that overtook him?"

Russell could not plead to the fact that he planned the shooting, Culp said.

"He pleaded to being overwhelmed by rage, that he cannot remember the incident," he said. "Reviewing the evidence, he concedes it's clear he intended to kill those innocent victims, but he does not agree he planned it." □

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

