

Los Angeles Times

U.S. soldier to plead guilty in killing of Taliban prisoner

Army Pfc. David Lawrence makes a plea deal for a reduced sentence, even though psychiatrists say he suffered severe mental illness at the time.

By David S. Cloud, Washington Bureau

May 21, 2011 8:51 p.m.

Reporting from Washington—

An Army private accused of killing a Taliban prisoner last year in Afghanistan has agreed to plead guilty, according to his attorney, even though several military psychiatrists concluded he was suffering severe mental illness at the time.

Pfc. David W. Lawrence is expected to receive a "substantially" reduced sentence for the killing of Mullah Mohebullah, a senior Taliban commander who was shot in the face last October while being guarded by Lawrence at a U.S. detention facility in Kandahar province, said James Culp, the defendant's lawyer.

Lawrence had been charged with premeditated murder in military court. The plea deal will spare Lawrence from a possible life sentence without parole, the minimum punishment he faced if convicted on the charge under military law.

It will also shield the Army from the controversy over locking up a 20-year-old soldier for the rest of his life after its own doctors diagnosed him with schizophrenia and post-traumatic stress syndrome.

The killing sparked tensions between the U.S. and Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who described it as an example of coalition forces' frequent use of excessive force. Karzai threatened to hold his own investigation. But the case also raised questions about whether the Army was being vigilant enough in screening troops for mental illness, especially in combat units.

The plea deal is expected to be accepted when court-martial proceedings convene at Ft. Carson, Colo., on Wednesday, the lawyer said. Lawrence is likely to serve his sentence at Ft. Leavenworth, Kan. Culp would not disclose the reduced sentence agreed to with Army authorities, saying it would be revealed in court. An Army spokesman declined to comment.

Lawrence's mental state at the time of the shooting was a matter of intense debate

throughout the seven-month case.

Culp said that his client's mental condition deteriorated last summer within weeks of his arrival in Afghanistan after the chaplain and seven soldiers from his unit were killed in a bomb attack. Lawrence had formed a close bond with Chaplain Dale Goetz, the first Army chaplain killed in combat since Vietnam, he said.

Ten days after Goetz's death, Lawrence requested to see a mental health therapist, complaining of depression and sleeplessness. He was pulled out of his unit in the Arghandab Valley and sent to a combat stress clinic at Kandahar air base, Culp said.

Mohebullah was killed a few weeks after Lawrence returned to his unit, the 1st Brigade of the 4th Infantry Division. In February, a board of Army psychiatrists concluded that Lawrence was "unable to appreciate the nature and quality or wrongfulness of his conduct" at the time of the killing. Even so, the board concluded Lawrence was capable of understanding why he was being prosecuted and was therefore fit to stand trial.

Culp had planned to argue that Lawrence was not guilty by reason of insanity. But there was also evidence that Lawrence carefully planned the killing and weighed the risks.

david.cloud@latimes.com