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Analysis: Iraq casualties and causality

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WASHINGTON May. 31 (UPI) -- Over the Memorial Day weekend the newspapers and TV networks ran touching, often troubling stories about soldiers who died in Iraq and how their families have tried to cope.

There was one topic they did not touch, however: whether an anti-malaria drug associated with suicide and mental problems might have triggered a startling number of those deaths, and whether those families have gotten the answers they deserve.

Here are three worth pondering from the weekend's Washington Post:

--Army Master Sgt. James C. Coons, 35, who committed suicide July 4, 2003, at Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington after being evacuated from Iraq with psychiatric problems. He clearly was psychotic and hallucinated the face of a dead soldier in the mirror.

--Marine Pfc. Ryan R. Cox, 19, who was shot dead in Iraq June 15, 2003, by a fellow Marine during a minor argument. The Marine said he did not think the gun was loaded; he is serving three years in military prison.

--Army Specialist Dustin R. McGaugh, 20, who committed suicide in Iraq Sept. 30, 2003.

The last two soldiers were from Derby, Kan., as was another Marine who was killed by an enemy sniper. That makes Derby the hardest-hit small community in the United States. It also means two of the deaths that have devastated Derby came from non-combat gunshot wounds in 2003. That is the period when Lariam -- which has been associated with reports of suicide, aggression and psychosis -- was being prescribed to thousands of soldiers in Iraq.

After repeated inquiries by United Press International last year, the Army confirmed that as many as 11 of 24 suicides in 2003 were in units where Lariam could have been prescribed. (The Army originally told Congress there were only four such suicides.)

Coons's death at Walter Reed has just been listed as an Iraq casualty, so the number of suicides in Iraq and Kuwait for 2003 now stands at 25.

The next year, 2004, the military largely quit using Lariam in Iraq, and the number of suicides fell by more than half, to 12.

So far this year, there have been just three confirmed suicides, with two investigations still pending. That is an annualized rate of 7.4 per 100,000 -- almost two-thirds less than the 2003 suicide rate of 18.8.

Where do the three deaths highlighted here fit in?

"Dusty" McGaugh served in a field artillery unit in Fort Sill, Okla. UPI's investigation results suggest Fort Sill field artillery units were taking Lariam, based on information from a ranking officer who himself had been evacuated from Iraq for psychiatric problems he attributed to the drug.

There was another suicide in a Fort Sill field artillery unit -- Spc. Joseph D. Suell, who died of an overdose of pills June 16, 2003, in Iraq.

It is uncertain what percentage of Pfc. Cox's 1st Marines were taking Lariam, although some were -- and there were strange things going on in that division in 2003.

Cox was with the 1st Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division.

So was Marine Lance Cpl. Cory Ryan Geurin, who died exactly one month later -- July 15, 2003 -- when he fell off a palace roof where he was standing post in Babylon, Iraq.

Navy Hospitalman Joshua McIntosh was assigned to the 7th Regiment's 3rd Battalion. He died of a non-combat gunshot wound June 26, 2003.

Another Marine from the 1st Division, Pfc. James R. Dillon Jr., shot himself to death March 13, 2003, a week before the war began. He was with the 1st Marine's 3rd Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion.

So was Marine Pfc. Christian Daniel Gurtner. The Pentagon said his death April 2, 2003, was due to "an accidental discharge of a personal weapon, unclear whether his own or someone else's."

By the summer of 2003, there were so many suicides among troops in Iraq that the Pentagon dispatched a team from the Army Surgeon General's office to investigate and suggest solutions.

In all, UPI counted 20 non-combat deaths that involved suicide or fratricide or non-vehicle accidents out of 113 total Iraq casualties in the three summer months of 2003. Gun discharges. Self-inflicted wounds. Drownings. Falls from buildings.

Tuesday, The Washington Post ran a photo gallery of the 98 U.S. soldiers killed in Iraq between March 28 and May 19 of this year. Of those, seven died of non-hostile causes. Three of the deaths were from natural causes. Two resulted from a fire in a guard tower. That leaves just two that conceivably could be the kind of suicides, homicides or strange accidents that took the lives of 20 U.S. troops in Iraq in the summer of 2003.

Which leaves one wondering why media outlets who write about those deaths consider every possible angle but a small round pill.

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