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Bragg probes new domestic violence report

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From the [Washington Politics & Policy Desk](#)

Published 1/22/2003 3:27 PM

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 22 (UPI) -- The U.S. Army is probing allegations that another Fort Bragg soldier tried to kill his wife just after returning from Afghanistan.

Carol Branch told United Press International that on Dec. 21, her husband, Sgt. Marvin Lee Branch, tried to strangle her after slamming her against the back door of the couple's house on Fort Bragg, seven days after he returned from six months in Afghanistan. Carol Branch said the attack, in front of her three young daughters and 69-year-old mother, was so violent that her 7-year-old daughter tried to defend her with a kitchen knife.

"He came at me like a linebacker. He rushed in from the front door to the back door and my back hit the back door," Branch said in a telephone interview from Florida, where she and her three daughters are staying with a friend.

Branch's commanding officer, Col. Martin Schweitzer of the 3rd Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, said Sgt. Branch flagged down military police outside the Branch home late Dec. 21 or early Dec. 22. "The MPs saw an incredibly tense situation between the spouse and the husband," and the accounts of events differ between Sgt. Branch and his wife, said Schweitzer.

Contacted by UPI, Sgt. Branch, 35, declined an interview on advice from his attorney. He has been in and out of the Army for a total of 10 years, according to his wife, and the couple has been married for two years.

The alleged incident comes just three months after the Army released a report expressing "great concern" about a wave of domestic homicides at Fort Bragg this past summer. The Army said it is investigating this latest incident.

Four Fort Bragg soldiers -- three of whom had been to Afghanistan -- allegedly killed their wives this past summer. Two of those soldiers killed themselves.

Fort Bragg officials expressed shock at that cluster of homicides. An Army epidemiology team investigated, and issued a report calling for more access to mental health and family counseling for soldiers and their families. It dismissed concerns that an anti-malaria drug given to troops might have triggered some of the cases.

The Army said soldiers in Branch's regiment were given the anti-malaria drug, Lariam, which has been linked to reports of such severe mental problems as aggression, paranoia, psychosis and suicide. An Army spokesman, citing privacy concerns, would not say whether Branch had taken the drug but confirmed that soldiers in his unit had taken either Lariam or an alternative, doxycycline, until Nov. 26.

Fort Bragg soldiers told UPI last summer that the drug has caused them to lose control of their anger. Soldiers from Fort Drum, N.Y., and Little Rock Air Force Base, Ark., have told UPI they suffered serious mental problems caused by Lariam, including homicidal impulses.

Lariam's manufacturer, Hoffmann-La Roche, said this summer that mental problems might last "long after" taking the drug, but that it had not been linked to violent criminal activity.

Carol Branch, 31, said her husband had been physically and verbally abusive before going to Afghanistan: He pushed and shoved her and he spanked her 8-year-old until she bruised, she said, adding that he had always been able to maintain some control.

But after his return from Afghanistan she said he had become wildly angry and uncontrollably violent, smashing a shelf in the refrigerator and throwing a bar stool, which hit her 21-month-old daughter in the leg. Branch said her husband claimed he could not remember the bar-stool incident. She said he also could no longer control his anger in front of the children or other people.

"He has had a bad temper, that is evident. But it had escalated since Afghanistan. He was very defensive, very

aggressive and very violent," she said. "He did not care what came out of his mouth. He was throwing things. He threw a bar stool -- anything that was in his reach. This time it was more intense. It was heightened. Everything was worse. ... He became very violent, very destructive."

Carol Branch said she was not familiar with Lariam.

Pfc. William Speller, who served in the 505th with Sgt. Branch and took Lariam in Afghanistan, alleged that in Afghanistan, Branch was paranoid, with thoughts that his wife might be unfaithful while he was away. Speller said Branch worked in supply and did not see combat in Afghanistan.

"He was probably more paranoid," Speller said about Branch's behavior in Afghanistan. "He always argued with her (before) but I never saw him get to the point where he thought she was cheating."

Fort Bragg Garrison Commander Col. Tadd Davis said the Army believes the drug did not play a role in this incident. "Based on everything we have been able to determine, no, we do not believe (Lariam) played a role in this particular event."

The Oct. 18 report from the Army on the four Fort Bragg soldiers who allegedly killed their wives this June and July said that Lariam was an "unlikely" factor to explain the "cluster" of killings over such a short 43-day period, in part because it found no evidence that two of the soldiers took Lariam. The report noted that all the marriages were plagued with domestic problems, although there was no evidence of violence in any of the relationships before the killings.

Col. Dave Orman, a psychiatry consultant to the Army Surgeon General, acknowledged to UPI when the report was issued that it does not rule out Lariam as a factor in any one incident. "We are not in a position, nor did we have adequate information to say definitively that the possible ... side effects of Lariam played absolutely no role," Orman said.

Carol Branch, 31, was critical of what she says was the Army's reluctance to charge her husband with a crime. She said the Army did little to help her escape the post, giving her only \$476 to take a 20-hour Greyhound bus ride to Florida. "That was a very long ride, 20 hours with a baby," Branch said. "I'm trying to save my life and I've got to beg (the Army for help)? I can see how those other mothers died. They were trapped."

Schweitzer said that after the events, he issued a "no-contact" order barring Sgt. Branch from contacting his wife until June and launched an Army inquiry that could result in criminal charges against Sgt. Branch. He said the \$476 dollars given to Carol Branch followed military rules that limit dispersing cash in such cases. XVIII Airborne Corps Public Relations Officer Major Gary Tallman said Sgt. Branch is also undergoing counseling.

A judge in Cumberland County Jan. 7 dismissed two restraining orders against Sgt. Branch.

"The leadership of Fort Bragg takes very seriously the safety and well being of military spouses and families," said Davis, who added that the Army has taken aggressive steps to respond to the latest incident.

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