

Seventh Iraq war veteran kills himself

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WASHINGTON, March 16 (UPI) -- A Colorado-based Army Special Forces soldier back from Iraq shot himself in the head in his front yard Sunday night, according to police -- at least the seventh soldier who has committed suicide after serving there.

William Howell, 36, shot himself after following his wife around the yard with a handgun, according to the El Paso County Sheriff's Office. Howell served with the 10th Special Forces group in Iraq and returned to Fort Carson last month, according to the Army.

Another soldier who was attached to that unit in Iraq, Staff Sgt. Georg-Andreas Pogany, has claimed that the 10th Special Forces Group ignored him when he sought help with mental problems there, and then charged him with cowardice instead. Pogany, 32, also says the Army is ignoring the side effects of an anti-malaria drug called Lariam he took with the Special Forces, which has been linked to mental problems, aggression and suicides.

The Army's Special Operations Command did not respond to a question Tuesday about whether Howell had taken the drug or had sought help for mental health concerns.

The El Paso County Sheriff's Department got a phone call just before 9:30 Sunday night from Howell's wife about a "physical disturbance" at their home in Monument. She said her husband had gone to get a gun. Police said the line then went dead. When they called back, Howell said there was no problem.

When police arrived, Howell was following his wife around the yard with a handgun and talking to her. "He was ordered to drop his weapon by one of the officers, but instead placed the weapon to his head and pulled the trigger," the sheriff's office said in a statement. One officer fired at Howell, not realizing whom Howell was shooting at, and hit Howell in the arm. The El Paso County Coroner said Howell died from his own shot.

Howell's wife was treated for a minor head injury. A 13-year-old and two infants were in the house, unharmed.

Police said they have no records of previous domestic disputes involving Howell or his address.

Pogany, the soldier who was charged with cowardice, has said he suffered a debilitating panic attack in Iraq last fall after seeing the body of a mangled Iraqi while with 10th Special Forces. He says he sought help, but was rebuffed, and eventually charged with cowardice, which is punishable by death. The Army has since withdrawn those charges but he continues to fight the Army on others.

In Iraq, the Special Forces had just given Pogany his third Lariam pill when he suffered the attack. The Food and Drug Administration warns that Lariam can cause panic attacks, thoughts of suicide, depression, anxiety, paranoia, delusions and psychosis that can occur long after taking the drug.

A leading veterans' advocate two months ago warned Congress that soldiers who experience mental problems during or after deployments need help and not punishment.

"Nowhere is this apparent disregard for psychological injuries more apparent than in the case of Sgt. Georg-Andreas Pogany, who was charged with cowardice," Steve Robinson, Executive Director of the National Gulf War Resource Center, told a House Armed Services Committee panel on Jan. 21.

Robinson, a former Army Ranger, told UPI that some soldiers have heard about the Pogany case and are afraid of seeking help because of what happened to him. "This Pogany case has had a chilling effect on soldiers coming forward. I have talked to soldiers who have said it," he said.

Robinson also asked Congress to look into Lariam. "This drug needs to be investigated to determine if it is harming and in some cases killing our own soldiers," Robinson told that panel.

It is not clear whether Howell ever asked for help when he returned from Iraq, but Pogany's attorney, Rich Travis, said the Special Forces have created an "atmosphere" that makes soldiers afraid to seek help. "I think it is the Special Forces that does create an atmosphere where you can not approach your commander and ask for help," Travis said. "I don't think it is a leap of logic to think (Howell) knew how Georg was treated by the chain of command. I think it was pretty well known."

Travis also said the Army, which invented Lariam, is now ignoring its side effects.

Three special operations soldiers who served in Afghanistan and had apparently taken Lariam allegedly killed their wives at Fort Bragg in the summer of 2002. Those three soldiers also committed suicide.

In the investigation into the Fort Bragg killings, the Army said that Lariam could not have triggered a cluster of five apparent murders and three suicides from that summer because some suspects did not take Lariam.

Suicides in connection with Operation Iraqi Freedom have become an issue after an unusual spike occurred last summer in Iraq. The Pentagon says 21 Army suicides have been confirmed in Iraq and Kuwait -- reflecting a suicide rate within the normal range. A report on mental health problems in Iraq was ordered last August by the Army surgeon general but has not been released.

According to the Army, six soldiers have killed themselves after returning from Iraq, not counting Howell. UPI reported that one soldier back from Iraq died last July, and another this January, at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. A Fort Campbell soldier who had been in Iraq killed himself in January.

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