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FORT CARSON: FIRST OF TWO PARTS

“We have a public disaster here, and no one really knows how to deal with it.”

SISTER KATERI KOVERMAN – A social worker who has counseled people in war zones for almost 40 years



THE GAZETTE FILE
Troops from the 2nd Brigade Combat Team marched as they were welcomed home after completing their first tour in Iraq in 2005.

CASUALTIES OF WAR

For one particularly battered unit, what happens when the hell of war comes home

BY DAVE PHILIPPS
The Gazette

Before the murders started, Anthony Marquez's mom dialed his sergeant at Fort Carson to warn that her son was poised to kill.

It was February 2006, and the 21-year-old soldier had not been the same since being wounded and coming home from Iraq eight months before. He had violent outbursts and thrashing nightmares. He was devouring pain pills and drinking too much. He always packed a gun.

“It was a dangerous combination. I told them he was a walking time bomb,” said his mother, Teresa Hernandez.

His sergeant told her there was nothing he could do. Then, she said, he started taunting her son, saying things like, “Your mommy called. She says you are going crazy.”

Eight months later, the time bomb exploded when her son used a stun gun to repeatedly shock a small-time drug dealer in Widefield over an ounce of marijuana, then shot him through the heart.

Marquez was the first infantry soldier in his bri-

SEE SOLDIERS • PAGE 3

EDITOR'S NOTE

For as long as wars have been waged, soldiers have been sent to kill or be killed. The lucky ones survive. Some return home unscathed; others are shell-shocked and emotionally scarred for life.

That's been true forever. But something changed in Iraq. Thanks to modern medicine, transportation and gear, soldiers survived injuries that would have killed yesterday's troops. They patrolled streets without battle lines, where smiling civilians waved one day and silently watched ambushes the next. Multiple deployments moved soldiers from war to home and back, again and again.

Most found a way to cope. But in one Fort Carson unit that took heavy casualties, men began to break. Some recall war crimes. Some came home, to Colorado Springs, and kept killing.

Those killings have prompted Fort Carson to re-examine how it treats soldiers. For the first time, the Army is demanding that commanders look for signs that a soldier is in trouble. This issue is of particular concern to the Pikes Peak region.

When soldiers come home, they bring the baggage of intense, prolonged brutality.

Today, following months of interviews with soldiers and their families and the examination of medical and military records, court documents and photographs, The Gazette presents the first of a two-day report that retraces the steps of the soldiers who ended up behind bars.

A word of caution: The details of battle are graphic, and the language is, at times, profane.

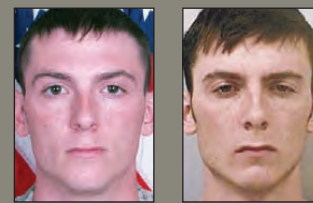
Finally, a disclosure in the interest of keeping our journalism transparent:

One former soldier interviewed for this report, Kenneth Eastridge, is serving time in prison. After Eastridge's arrest, his court-appointed lawyer was Amanda Philipps, wife of Dave Philipps, the reporter who wrote these stories. Dave Philipps did not make contact with Eastridge until after his wife's professional obligations to Eastridge were concluded. Amanda Philipps provided neither access to, nor information about, Eastridge.

JEFF THOMAS, EDITOR

ARRESTED IN KILLINGS

In the Army Arrested



Kenneth Eastridge



Bruce Bastien Jr.



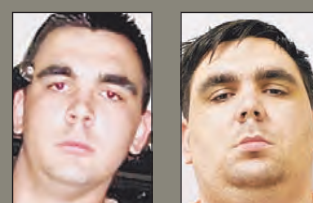
Louis Bressler



John Needham



Jomar Falu-Vives



Thomas Woolly

INSIDE

Violent deployments, violent homecomings: Chart details the high cost of war – both on the battlefield and at home – as battle-scarred troops return stateside. **Page 3**



CASUALTIES OF WAR

SOLDIERS: In Iraq, slaughter became a way of life

FROM PAGE 1

gade to murder someone after returning from Iraq. But he wasn't the last.

His 3,500-soldier unit — now called the 4th Infantry Division's 4th Brigade Combat Team — fought in some of the bloodiest places in Iraq, taking the most casualties of any Fort Carson unit by far.

Back home, 10 of its infantrymen have been arrested for murder, attempted murder or manslaughter since 2006. Others have committed suicide, or tried to.

Almost all those soldiers were kids, too young to buy a beer, when they volunteered for one of the most dangerous jobs in the world. Almost none had serious criminal backgrounds. Many were awarded medals for good conduct.

But in the vicious confusion of battle in Iraq and with no clear enemy, many said training went out the window. Slaughter became a part of life. Soldiers in body armor went back for round after round of battle that would have killed warriors a generation ago. Discipline deteriorated. Soldiers say the torture and killing of Iraqi civilians lurked in the ranks. And when these soldiers came home to Colorado Springs suffering the emotional wounds of combat, soldiers say, some were ignored, some were neglected, some were thrown away and some were punished.

Some kept killing — this time in Colorado Springs.

Many of those soldiers are now behind bars, but their troubles still reach well beyond the walls of their cells — and even beyond the Army. Their unit deployed again in May, this time to one of Afghanistan's most dangerous regions, near Khyber Pass.

This month, Fort Carson released a 126-page report by a task force of behavioral-health and Army professionals who looked for common threads in the soldiers' crimes. They concluded that the intensity of battle, the long-standing stigma against seeking help, and shortcomings in substance-abuse and mental-health treatment may have converged with "negative outcomes," but more study was needed.

Marquez, who was arrested before the latest programs were created, said he would never have pulled the trigger if he had not gone to Iraq.

"If I was just a guy off the street, I might have hesitated to shoot," Marquez said this spring, as he sat in the Bent County Correctional Facility, where he is serving 30 years. "But after Iraq, it was just natural."

More killing by more soldiers followed.

In August 2007, Louis Bressler, 24, robbed and shot a soldier he picked up on a street in Colorado Springs.

In December 2007, Bressler and fellow soldiers Bruce Bastien Jr., 21, and Kenneth Eastridge, 24, left the bullet-riddled body of a soldier from their unit on a west-side street.

In May and June 2008, police say Rudolfo Torres-Gandarilla, 20, and Jomar Falu-Vives, 23, drove around with an assault rifle, randomly shooting people.

In September 2008, police say John Needham, 25, beat a former girlfriend to death.

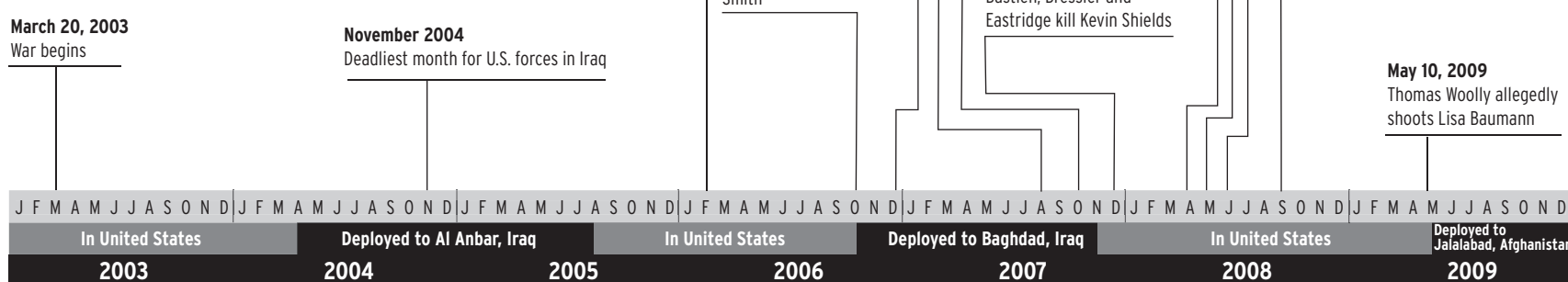
Most of the killers were from a single 500-soldier unit within the brigade called the 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment, which nicknamed itself the "Lethal Warriors."

Soldiers from other units at Fort Carson have committed crimes after deployments — military bookings at the El Paso County jail have tripled since the start of the Iraq war — but no other unit has a record as deadly as the soldiers of the 4th Brigade.

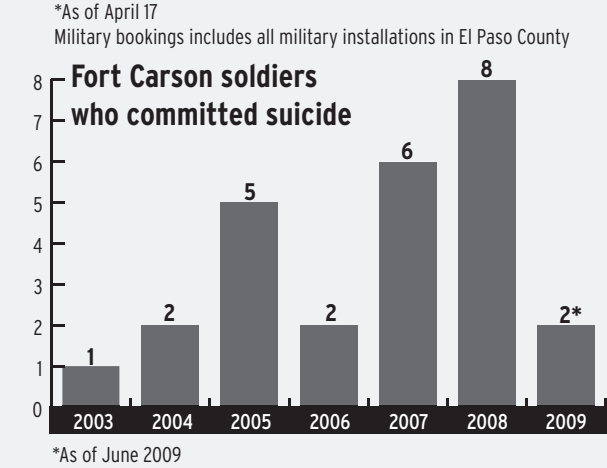
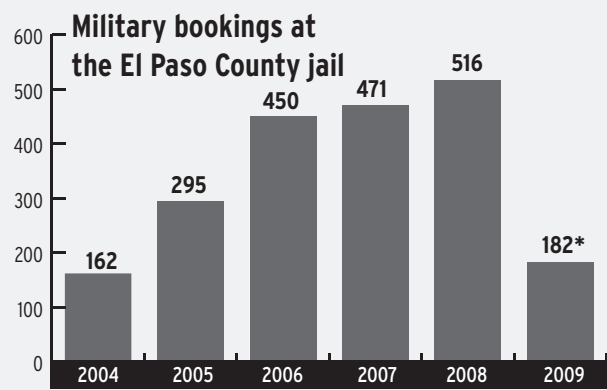
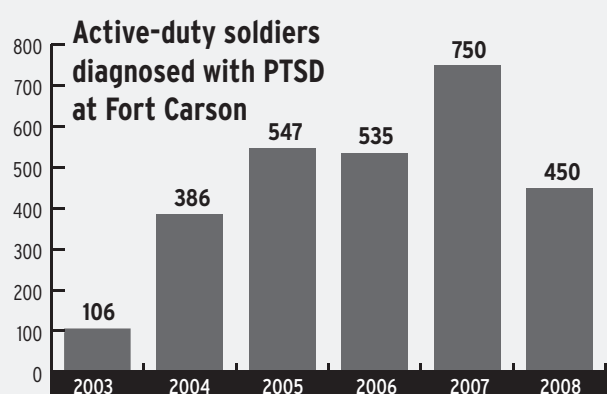
The brigade has used different names over the years. It was called the 2nd Brigade Combat Team of the 2nd Infantry Division on its two Iraq deployments before being designated the 4th Brigade Combat Team of the 4th Infantry Division before its recent deployment to Af-

Violent deployments, violent homecomings

In two bloody deployments to Iraq, the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division had twice the casualties of the average Army brigade combat team. Upon its return to Colorado Springs, two of its infantry battalions, the 1st Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment and 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment, have been plagued by soldiers committing violent crimes, including murders. Now both battalions just deployed again.



Toll of war



SOURCES: Evans Army Hospital, El Paso County Sheriff's Office, ESRI, icasualties.org

ghanistan.

Leaders, too, have changed. The brigade is on its third commander since 2005 and the officers in its smaller units are almost all new. But many soldiers in the brigade have served at least one if not two war tours with the unit, changing uniform patches with the name change but seeing no change in their mission.

The vast majority of those soldiers have not committed crimes, but the number who have is far above the population at large. In a one-year period from the fall of 2007 to the fall of 2008, the murder rate for the 500 Lethal Warriors was 114 times the rate for Colorado Springs.

The battalion is overwhelmingly made up of young men, who, demographically, have the highest murder rate in the United States, but the brigade still has a murder rate 20 times that of young males as a whole.

The killings are only the headline-grabbing tip of a much broader pyramid of crime. Since 2005, the brigade's returning soldiers have been involved in brawls, beatings, rapes, DUIs, drug deals, domestic violence, shootings, stabbings, kidnapping and suicides.

Like Marquez, most of the jailed soldiers struggled to adjust to life back home after combat. Like Marquez, many showed signs of growing trouble before they ended up behind bars. Like Marquez, all raise difficult questions about the cause of the violence.

Did the infantry turn some men into killers, or did killers seek out the infantry? Did the Army let in criminals, or did combat-tattered soldiers fall into criminal habits? Did

Fort Carson fail to take care of soldiers, or did soldiers fail to take advantage of care they were offered?

And, most importantly, since the brigade is now in Afghanistan, is there a way to keep the violence from happening again?

Maj. Gen. Mark Graham, who took command of Fort Carson in the thick of the murders and ordered marked changes in how returning soldiers are treated, said he hopes so.

"When we see a problem, we try to identify it and really learn what we can do about it. That is what we are trying to do here," Graham said in a June interview. "There is a culture and a stigma that need to change."

Under his command, nearly everyone — from colonels to platoon sergeants — is now trained to help troops showing the signs of emotional stress. Fort Carson has doubled its number of behavioral-health counselors and tightened hospital regulations to the point where a soldier visiting an Army doctor for any reason, even a sprained ankle, can't leave without a mental health evaluation. Graham has also volunteered Fort Carson as a testing ground for new Army programs to ease soldiers' transition from war to home.

Eastridge, an infantry specialist now serving 10 years for accessory to murder, said it will take a lot to wipe away the stain of Iraq.

"The Army trains you to be this way. In bayonet training, the sergeant would yell, 'What makes the grass grow?' and we would yell, 'Blood! Blood! Blood!' as we stabbed the dummy. The Army pounds it into your

Changing names, same soldiers

The 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment has been called a few names since the Iraq war began in 2003.



Deployed to the deadliest places

Soldier deaths by province and the deployment locations of the 4th BCT, as of April 2009



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS, ERIN CLENNON, THE GAZETTE

head until it is instinct: Kill everybody, kill everybody. And you do. Then they just think you can just come home and turn it off. ... If they don't figure out how to take care of the soldiers they trained to kill, this is just going to keep happening."

'Satan's throne'

The violence started to take root in Iraq's Sunni Triangle, where the brigade landed in September 2004.

"It was actually beautiful. There were lots of palm trees," said Eastridge, who is a working-class kid from Kentucky who had never really been anywhere before he joined the Army.

But, he said, "the situation was ugly."

It was a little more than a year after President George W. Bush had landed on an aircraft carrier in front of a "Mission Accomplished" banner to announce the end of major combat operations. But the situation was growing worse. Rival militias of Sunnis and Shiites were gaining strength. Looting had crippled cities. And in a war with no clear front or enemy, the average monthly body count for U.S. soldiers was up 25 percent from a year earlier.

The brigade was in the worst of it.

None of it bothered Marquez.

In high school, he had been a co-captain on the football team and had run track. After graduation, he joined the infantry because the Army commercials full of guns and helicopters looked like the coolest job in the world.

Eastridge felt the same way. He was the closest thing to a criminal in the group of soldiers later arrested for mur-

der. He was trying to get his life together after growing up with a mother addicted to cocaine. He had been arrested for reckless homicide when he was 12, after he accidentally shot his best friend in the chest while playing with his father's antique shotgun. He pleaded guilty and was sentenced to counseling. After that, his record had been clean.

Felons cannot join the Army unless they get a waiver from a recruiter. Eastridge said he called a dozen until one told him, "Son, it looks like you just need someone to give you a chance."

Like Marquez, Eastridge wanted to join the infantry because, he said, "that's where you get to do all the awesome stuff."

After basic training, the Army sent both men to South Korea.

They were in different battalions of what became the 4th Brigade Combat Team. Marquez was in the 1st Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment; Eastridge, the 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry Regiment. Both were foot soldiers. Both were surrounded by other young, gung-ho GIs with no battle experience. And both learned in the spring of 2004 that they were going to Iraq.

"We thought it would be cool. It was what we signed up for," Marquez said.

It turned out not to be cool at all.

Ramadi, where Marquez landed, had a population the size of Colorado Springs but had no dependable electricity, let alone law and order. Sewage ran in rubble-choked streets. The temperature sometimes rose to 120 degrees.

And when roadside bombs blew civilians to bits, sol-

diers said, packs of feral dogs fought over the scraps.

Pat Dollard, a documentary filmmaker embedded in the area at the time, wrote that it looked like "Satan had punched a hole in the Earth's surface, plopped down his throne, and set up shop."

Marquez was assigned to hunt terrorists in the city. Eastridge patrolled the highway between Ramadi and Fallujah. With him was Bressler, a quiet, friendly gunner later arrested with Eastridge for murder.

Going on a mission usually meant tramping house to house in dust-colored camouflage, loaded down with rifles, pistols, body armor, ammo, grenades and water to fight the incessant heat.

Soldiers went out day and night, knocking on doors — sometimes kicking them in. They set up checkpoints. They seized weapons. They clapped hoods over suspected insurgents. They rarely found terrorists, but the terrorists found them.

A few days into the deployment, a sniper's bullet killed Marquez's lieutenant. Then another friend died in a car bombing. Then another.

Combat brigades always take higher casualties than the rest of the Army because they fight on the front lines, but, even by those standards, the 3,500-soldier brigade got pummeled. Sixty-four were killed and more than 400 were injured in the yearlong tour, according to Fort Carson — double the average for all Army brigades that have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan.

As the insurgents learned their craft, attacks became more gruesome.

A truck loaded with explosives careened into Eastridge's platoon, killing his squad leader, blowing fist-size holes in his platoon sergeant and pinning the burning engine against the baby of the unit, Jose Barco.

Bombs meant to kill soldiers shredded anyone in the area. Women had their arms ripped off. Old men along the road were reduced to meat.

"It just got sickening," said David Nash, a then-19-year-old private and Eastridge's best friend. "There was a massive amount of hate for us in the city."

One of the jobs of the infantry was to bag Iraqi bodies tossed in the streets at night by sectarian murder squads.

"First thing in the morning, all we would do is bag bodies," Eastridge said. "Guys with drill bits in their eyes. Guys with nails in their heads."

Eastridge said he was tar-

CASUALTIES OF WAR

SOLDIERS: Iraqi locals were hated and mistrusted

FROM PAGE 3

geted by snipers twice. Both bullets smashed against walls so close to his face that they peppered his eyes with grit. He laughed at his luck. He loved being a soldier.

In February 2005, Eastridge was in the gun turret of his Humvee when it drove over an anti-tank mine. A deafening flash tore off the front end. Eastridge woke up a few minutes later, several feet from the smoking crater.

He sucked it up. He was bandaged up and sent back on patrol. He said cerebral fluid was leaking out of his ear.

That was the job of the infantry. Eastridge's battalion was created in World War II and became known as the "Band of Brothers." It parachuted into Normandy on D-Day and fought in the Battle of the Bulge. In Vietnam, it helped turn back the Tet Offensive and take Hamburger Hill.

Men who heard the stories of past glory almost never got a chance for their own in Iraq. The enemy was invisible. The leading cause of death was hidden roadside bombs.

Sometimes, Marquez felt his only purpose was to drive up and down roads in an armored personnel carrier called a Bradley to clear away hidden bombs.

To unwind, soldiers spent hours playing shoot-'em-up video games. They even played one based on their own unit in Vietnam. They said it offered a release. They could confront a clearly defined enemy. They could shoot, knowing they had the right guy. They could win.

In Ramadi, Marquez and other soldiers said, it felt like they were losing.

"It just seemed like the longer we were there, the worse it got," said Marquez's friend in the 1st Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment, Daniel Freeman.

Freeman was knocked unconscious by a roadside bomb, but the most rattling thing, he said, was driving through the eerie calm, knowing an improvised explosive device, or IED, could kill every soldier in a Humvee without warning, or maybe just smoke one guy in the truck, leaving the others to wonder how, and why, they survived.

Hatred and mistrust simmered between soldiers and locals. Locals who waved to them one day would watch silently as they drove toward an IED the next.

"I'm all about spreading freedom and democracy and everything," said Josh Butler, another soldier in the 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry Regiment. "But it seems like the Iraqis didn't even want it."

Soldiers said discipline started to break down.

"Toward the end, we were so mad and tired and frustrated," Freeman said. "You came too close, we lit you up. You didn't stop, we ran your car over with the Bradley."

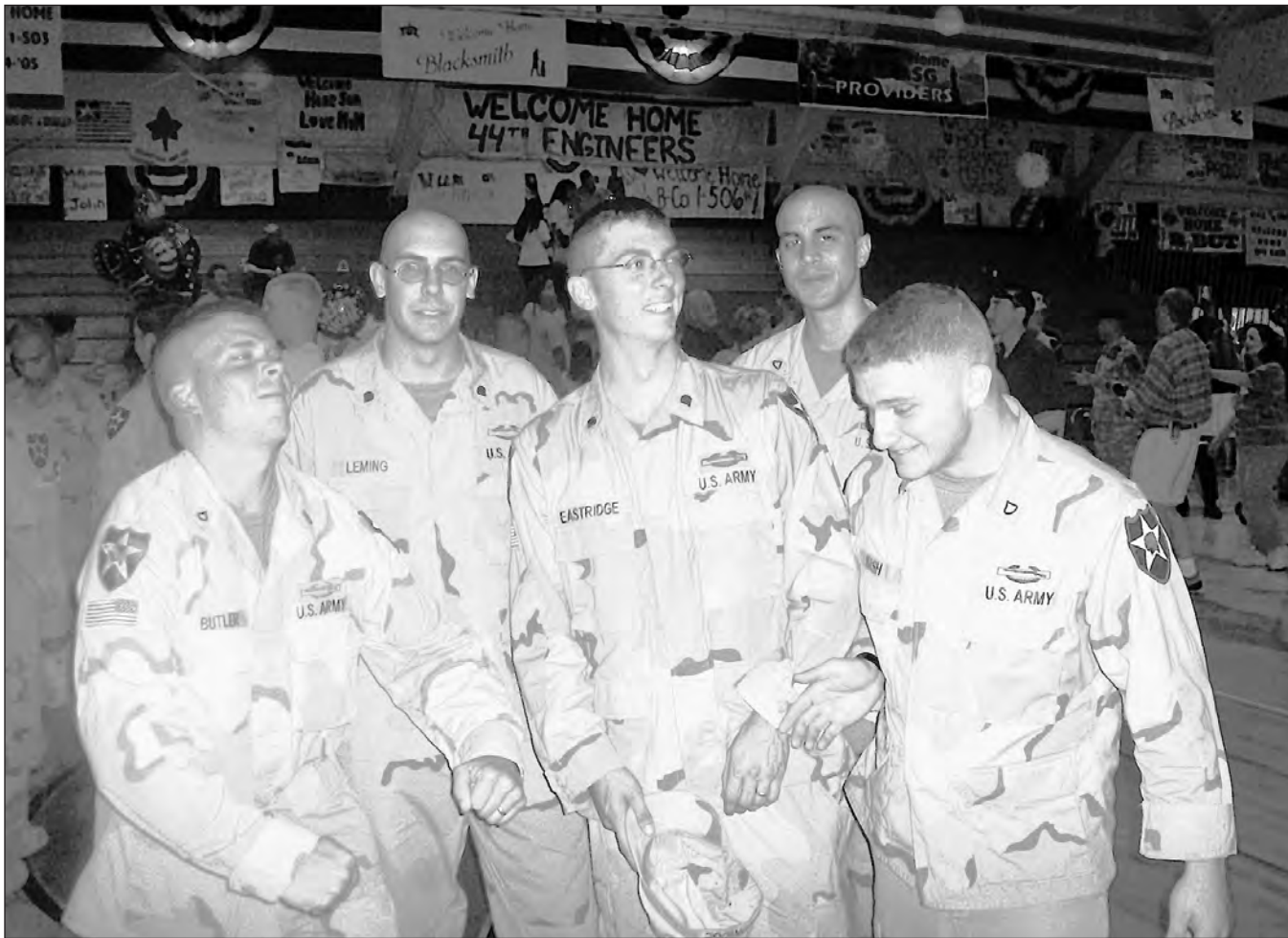
If soldiers were hit by an IED, they would aim machine guns and grenade launchers in every direction, Marquez said, and "just light the whole area up. If anyone was around, that was their fault. We smoked 'em."

Other soldiers said they shot random cars, killing civilians.

"It was just a free-for-all," said Marcus Mifflin, 21, a friend of Eastridge who was medically discharged with PTSD after the tour. "You didn't get blamed unless someone could be absolutely sure you did something wrong. And that was hard. So things happened. Taxi drivers got shot for no reason. Guys got kidnapped and taken to the bridge and interrogated and dropped off."

Soldiers later told El Paso County sheriff's deputies investigating Marquez for murder that, in Iraq, he got his hands on a stun gun similar to the one he later used on the Widefield drug dealer. They said he used it to "rough up" Iraqis.

Stun guns are banned by the Geneva Conventions. Using one is a war crime, but



In February 2005, a Humvee in which Eastridge was the turret gunner struck an anti-tank mine and had its front end sheared off. Waking up minutes later, several feet from a smoking crater, Eastridge said he was bandaged up and sent back out on patrol.

four soldiers interviewed by The Gazette said a number of soldiers ordered the stun guns over the Internet and carried them on raids. The brigade refused to make other soldiers who served during the tour available for interviews. The Army said it destroys disciplinary records after two years, so it has no knowledge of whether soldiers in the unit were punished.

After 10 months, Marquez said, all he wanted to do was go home.

In June 2005, with a month to go, his platoon was walking across a field when a sniper's bullet smashed through his best friend's skull under the helmet.

The platoon circled its guns and grenade launchers, Marquez said, and "tore that neighborhood up."

That night, Marquez got hit. His squad had just finished hosing his friend's blood out of their Bradley when they were called out on another mission. They loaded into two Bradleys and rolled toward downtown Ramadi.

Marquez was riding in the dark, cramped rear of the lead Bradley. In a flash, a blast tore through the floor. The engine exploded. Diesel fuel spewed everywhere in a plume of fire. Marquez said he watched the driver scramble out screaming, flames leaping from his clothes.

Marquez and the others clambered into the dark street, rifles ready. Another bomb slammed them to the ground.

Then came a flurry of bullets spitting across the dirt. Marquez was hit four times in the leg.

As blood spurted from his femoral artery, Marquez said, he raised his grenade launcher to return fire and realized the storm of bullets had come from the heavy machine gun on the other Bradley, which had just come around the corner.

"They must have seen our Bradley on fire, figured it was an attack and thought we were all dead," he said this spring, shaking his head,

"then just started shooting."

According to the Army, two soldiers died. Marquez said three others were wounded. Brigade commanders didn't make anyone familiar with the incident available.

Marquez was flown to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

He was still bleary on morphine on the Fourth of July weekend that he was told Bush was coming to award him a Purple Heart.

Marquez's sister, who was visiting, didn't want to see the president because she was so angry about the war and her brother's wounds, but Marquez was honored.

"I had gotten hurt, but it is part of the job. I wasn't mad at nobody," Marquez said.

He was in the hospital for three months and had 17 surgeries so he could keep his leg. Marquez was being medically discharged from the Army and could have stayed at the hospital, but he transferred to Fort Carson on Sept. 13, 2005, to spend his remaining months with his war buddies, who had just returned from Iraq.

He eventually learned to walk without a cane, but other wounds proved harder to heal. He started having nightmares about the war. He felt worthless and crippled, depressed and angry. On a visit home to California, he made his mom put away all his high school sports trophies.

The only things that made him feel better were the pain pills the doctors prescribed for him — and only if he took too many.

'Kumbaya period'

Post-traumatic stress disorder is like a roadside bomb.

The symptoms can remain hidden for months, then explode. They can cripple some soldiers and leave others untouched. And just like bombs disguised as trash or ruts in the road, PTSD can look like something else.

In many cases, it looks like a bad soldier. In addition to flashbacks and nightmares, Army studies say, symptoms

"Toward the end, we were so mad and tired and frustrated. You came too close, we lit you up. You didn't stop, we ran your car over with the Bradley."

DANIEL FREEMAN
Soldier in the 1st Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment

The screening asks soldiers a long list of questions about the deployment: Do you have trouble sleeping? Are you depressed? Did you clear houses or bunkers? Were you shot at? Did you witness brutality toward detainees? Did you have friends who were killed?

"Did you shoot people? Did you kill people? Did you see dead civilians? Did you see dead Americans? Did you see dead babies? No. No. No. No." Eastridge said, mimicking how he answered the questionnaire.

"I had seen and done all that stuff, but you just lie to get it over with."

Several soldiers said the same: They lied because they didn't want the hassle of more screening.

When the young infantrymen were set free in Colorado Springs, many packed Tejon Street bars such as Rendezvous Lounge and Rum Bay. When the bars closed, soldiers said, they often picked fights in the street.

By 2006, the police were being called to break up bar brawls almost every night. Extra police were assigned to the area.

The Colorado Springs Police Department doesn't track the crime statistics of individual units, but according to the El Paso County Sheriff's Office, jail bookings of military personnel as a whole increased 66 percent in the 12 months after the brigade returned.

The "Kumbaya period" lasted about six months, soldiers said.

Eastridge said he blew through almost \$27,000, mostly drinking at bars, but the first thing he did was buy guns: pistols, shotguns and an assault rifle similar to the one he carried in Iraq.

"After being in Iraq, it feels like everyone is the enemy," he said. "You feel like you need a gun so they don't come to get you."

His friends all felt the same way.

Nash slept with a loaded .45 under his pillow.

Butler kept a Glock .40-caliber with him all the time, even when he rocked his newborn baby.

Marquez bought three pistols, a riot-style shotgun and an assault rifle like the one he carried in Iraq. He carried a pistol constantly, he said, even when he went to church.

His buddy, Freeman, said he bought himself a "big, scary" snub-nosed .357 revolver.

"I couldn't go anywhere without it," he said. "I took it to the mall. I took it to the

In the front row, from left, Josh Butler, Kenneth Eastridge and David Nash celebrated their safe return from Iraq in 2005. Eastridge always wanted to be an infantryman because "that's where you get to do all the awesome stuff." Even though he was almost killed twice by snipers, Eastridge loved his job.



Anthony Marquez



Daniel Freeman



Torres-Gandarilla

COURTESY OF KENNETH EASTRIDGE

bank. I even had it right next to me when I took a shower. It makes you feel powerful, less scared. You have to have it with you every second of every day."

Some returning soldiers, especially those with family members to notice their behavior, went into counseling.

More than 200 Fort Carson soldiers have been referred to First Choice Counseling Center, a private counseling service in Colorado Springs. Davida Hoffman, the director, said her counselors were unprepared for what they heard.

"We're used to seeing people who are depressed and want to hurt themselves. We're trained to deal with that," she said. "But these soldiers were depressed and saying, 'I've got this anger, I want to hurt somebody.' We weren't accustomed to that."

In units that have seen the toughest combat in Iraq, one in four soldiers can screen positive for PTSD, the director of psychiatry at Walter Reed, Dr. Charles Hoge, said in an e-mail interview.

"Many soldiers continue to be able to perform their duties very well despite having significant symptoms," Hoge wrote. But others show what he called "serious impairment," and the worse the combat and the longer units are exposed, the worse the effects.

The affliction is as old as war itself.

Eric Dean, an author in Connecticut who specializes in war's psychological toll, reviewed records from the Civil War for his 1997 book, "Shook Over Hell," and found the same surge of crime and suicide that Fort Carson has seen.

"They have been in every war," he said. "They never readjusted. They ended up living alone, drinking too much."

They were "the lost generation" of World War I. They are the veterans of Vietnam who disproportionately populate homeless shelters and prisons today.

The psychological casualties may be particularly heavy in Iraq, he said.

"In the Civil War, if you experienced really traumatic fighting, chances are you didn't make it," he said. "Today, you can be blown up multiple times and go right back into the fight."

In Vietnam, most draftees did one yearlong tour. Since the start of the Iraq war, some soldiers have been deployed three times for 12 to 15 months each.

When a soldier faces constant threat of attack, studies suggest, the brain is flooded with adrenaline, dopamine and other performance-enhancing chemicals that the body naturally produces in a fight-or-flight response. Over time, the brain can crave these stimulants, like a junkie for his fix.

When the stimulant of combat is taken away, soldiers often have trouble sleeping, said Sister Kateri

CASUALTIES OF WAR

SOLDIERS: Drugs traded like students trade desserts

PAGE 6

Koverman, a social worker who has counseled people in war zones for almost 40 years. They can feel irritable, numb and paranoid, she said. They can sink into depression.

And they can search for another substance to replace the rush of war.

"Often they'll use booze or drugs to mask their symptoms until they become explosive," said Koverman, who moved to Colorado Springs from her convent in Ohio this year to help with the wave of PTSD. "We have a public disaster here, and no one really knows how to deal with it."

Men from the unit mostly dealt with it on their own.

Mifflin got deep into smoking pot to ease his nerves.

Nash was mixing pills and booze.

Eastridge got blotto on whatever.

Butler said he and a lot of guys started doing ecstasy and cocaine.

Marquez started destroying himself with the pills that were supposed to help him.

For his injuries, he said, doctors at Carson's Evans Army Community Hospital prescribed him 90 morphine pills, 90 Percocets, and five fentanyl patches every three weeks.

"They were for pain," he said. "And I still had pain. But, mostly, I was using them to get high."

He could not get Iraq out of his head. Doctors prescribed antidepressants and sleeping pills, but he said they didn't help. He was saving up Percocet, then downing a handful on an empty stomach.

He said he started trading his morphine with other soldiers for an anti-psychotic called quetiapine and an anti-anxiety drug called clonazepam. Improper use of either can cause psychotic reactions, anxiety, panic attacks, aggressiveness and suicidal behavior, but, Marquez said, injured soldiers traded them like children in a lunchroom swapping desserts.

"It was real common among the guys who were hurt," Marquez said.

At one point, Marquez said, he ate his three-week supply of meds in half the time, then went back to Evans claiming he had lost his pills.

He said a doctor told him security measures prevented him from giving Marquez more narcotics, but he could write the soldier a paper prescription he could fill in Colorado Springs.

Marquez agreed. Fort Carson said privacy laws prohibit commenting on medical treatment.

Marquez's mother is a police officer in Southern California. She said when her son came home to visit at Christmas 2005, six months after being shot, she knew something was seriously wrong. He would stay in his room all day in a daze and try to down old pain pills in the medicine cabinet. He would have dreams so violent that she was afraid to wake him.

In February 2006, she said, she called his sergeants and told them he was a danger to himself and others and needed help.

She said the sergeants told her that her son would have to seek treatment on his own.

An Army spokesman said there is no Army policy on how to handle such calls. It is up to individual commanders.

The response didn't make sense, she said. As a law enforcement officer, if she shot someone, she was required to go through counseling, she said. Her son had weathered a long, gruesome combat tour, yet he had no such requirement.

Few of the young infantry soldiers felt like they needed counseling.

"We were just partying," Butler said. "Some guys went in for PTSD, but we thought that was just a bullshit excuse to get out of the Army."

Those who did seek treatment faced obstacles.

Six months after getting



Members of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team received specific instructions prior to marching to a welcome-home ceremony at Fort Carson's Special Events Center in July 2005. Soldiers returning from combat zones often undergo a period of euphoria that can last a few months. Problems may take three to six months to begin cropping up.

KEVIN KRECK, THE GAZETTE

“Most of these guys were ordinary people put in really (expletive) situations – the side effect is you turn good people into ravenous beasts.”

DAVID NASH

back from Ramadi, Marquez's friend, Freeman, who had been injured by a roadside bomb, said he started to feel "shell-shocked" and depressed and decided to go to Evans Army Community Hospital.

"I did it on the down-low because I didn't want my unit to know," he said.

The psychiatric ward was overwhelmed by soldiers, he said. Cases of PTSD at Fort Carson had climbed from 26 in 2002 to more than 600 in 2006, according to the hospital. Getting an appointment could take weeks, soldiers said. Counseling in the ward, in most cases, was in group settings only.

Freeman said the hospital staff prescribed him anti-depressants and told him they were so busy that he wouldn't receive counseling for a month.

A few weeks later, on Feb. 22, 2006, Freeman got in a fight with a man he had never met, Kenneth Tatum, in the China Express restaurant on B Street. Freeman pulled out his .357 and, before he knew it, he said, Tatum was bleeding on the ground. He had shot him through the thigh.

Freeman was arrested for attempted murder and pleaded guilty to felony menacing. He served two years and got out in January. He is unemployed, living at his mother's house in Alabama. He said he still has headaches and memory problems and is getting therapy for PTSD at a nearby Veterans Affairs hospital.

Because of his crime, he is not eligible for most Army benefits.

"I was a good soldier before this," he said. "Now I'm a screwed-up Iraq vet with a felony conviction. I don't have many prospects. I was good at what I did in the infantry. . . . Too bad it followed me home."

The Army spends millions of dollars to help soldiers such as Marquez and Freeman. It has programs to mentally prepare soldiers for deployment, treat them overseas and rehabilitate them when they return. Top brass, including the highest-ranking officer in the Army, Gen. George Casey, have said taking care of returning soldiers' mental health is a top priority.

But sentiments and programs at the top sometimes don't reach the trenches, soldiers and experts said.

In infantry units such as the Lethal Warriors, soldiers said, toughness and bravery are prized above all else. Anyone who says he has PTSD is immediately thought of as not worthy of wearing the uniform, soldiers said. In Army slang, they said, he is deemed a "shit bag."

When the brigade returned

home from the Sunni Triangle, sergeants sometimes refused to let soldiers seek help for PTSD and taunted them for being weak or faking it, said Andrew Pogany, a former Fort Carson Special Forces sergeant who now investigates complaints for the advocacy group Veterans for America.

"They just don't want to deal with it," Pogany said.

Some commanders punished soldiers for displaying PTSD symptoms, soldiers said.

Mifflin, who is now unemployed and lives in his mother's house in Florida, went to a Fort Carson psychiatrist for counseling because he said he sometimes wanted to kill civilians in Colorado Springs. The psychiatrist checked him into Cedar Springs, an inpatient mental hospital in Colorado Springs. He stayed for about a week, he said.

"As soon as I got out, I had a scheduled bitching session with the sergeant so he could yell at me about what a liar I was," he said. "After they found out a guy was getting evaluated for PTSD, they would try to find any little thing to kick him out."

Dozens of soldiers who screened positive for PTSD received an "other than honorable" discharge from the Army – the equivalent of being kicked out – for infractions such as missing duty and drug use, Pogany said. If soldiers are kicked out, they often aren't eligible for free health care, counseling or other benefits that soldiers who are medically discharged with PTSD receive. Often, Pogany said, that means veterans who need help the most don't get it.

Some soldiers coming back to Colorado Springs seemed fine. Bressler, who later murdered two soldiers, seemed as nice and mellow as ever, soldiers said. He got married, always showed up for training and seemed to be doing well.

Others fell apart. Eastridge, who had been awarded medals for achievement and good conduct, started having nightmares and mousing off to his commanders. In March 2006, he got in a drunken fight with his girlfriend and was arrested for putting a gun to her face. After that, he said, he stopped showing up for work. He said he was AWOL on and off for six months.

"I started slapping my wife around, too," Butler said. "She just never called the police."

Butler said he was emotionally numb some days and ready to explode others. He couldn't understand why he was so angry, but he still thought PTSD was just a lame excuse.

One night, he called East-



KIRK SPEER, THE GAZETTE

Maj. Gen. Mark Graham, Carson's former commander, said "there is a culture and a stigma that need to change" in regard to how soldiers returning from war are treated.

ridge and told him to come over to his house. He wanted his buddies to shoot him in the leg so he wouldn't have to go back to Iraq.

"We were all excited we were going to get to shoot him," Eastridge said.

When he got to the apartment, Barco, the platoon baby who had been burned by the exploding Humvee in Iraq, was there.

They found a dark parking lot, Eastridge said, and Barco shot Butler through the calf with a .32. Butler screamed. Blood went everywhere.

"It was hilarious," said Mifflin, who saw him shortly afterward. "He only ended up getting out of duty for a few days, but that's only part of why he did it. He also wanted the Percocets they prescribed him at the hospital."

After a number of 4th Brigade soldiers got in trouble for DUIs and drugs, the brigade increased the number of random drug tests soldiers have to take, troops said. The rate of Fort Carson soldiers testing positive in 2006 was 16 times what it had been in 2004, according to the post. Twenty percent of them were enrolled in substance-abuse programs. Most, soldiers said, were just given the boot. Nash and Butler were kicked out of the Army for snorting cocaine in the summer of 2006.

Eastridge was supposed to be kicked out too, soldiers said, but he wasn't around to be discharged.

More than 400 soldiers have been kicked out of the brigade for misconduct since the start of the war, according to Fort Carson. Only 57 were discharged for mental

health reasons.

Butler went to prison for beating his wife, who was pregnant at the time. He said their child was born with severe birth defects and died. He blames it, in part, on their fights.

There is no easy way to track how many Butlers are out there – soldiers who didn't commit violent crimes until after they were kicked out of the Army and left Colorado Springs.

"That's the shadiest thing about the Army. They just throw these guys away," said Nash, now a pipeline welder in Louisiana. He said he still struggles with the effects of combat. He can't go to bars because he gets into fights, and his car is loaded with what he called "enough guns for World War III."

"The Army neglected their responsibility to take care of soldiers they trained to be this way," he said. "Most of these guys were ordinary people put in really shitty situations – the side effect is you turn good people into ravenous beasts."

So many soldiers were leaving or getting kicked out of Eastridge's company in 2006, Eastridge said, that commanders created a new platoon for them.

Marquez's battalion created a similar company, called Echo Company, soldiers said. Soldiers called it the "Shit-Bag Brigade."

An Army spokesman said it "is unknown" whether these units existed.

Marquez was assigned to the Shit-Bag Brigade even though his only offense was being too physically disabled to train with the rest of his

unit. He said he had to do the menial tasks designed to punish the others, such as pull weeds along the road.

He started not showing up for duty. He took more pills. He bought more guns and kept them in his car, he and other soldiers said.

It was no secret. Sergeants later told police that Marquez had showed off his stash of weapons. His mother said they did nothing.

Sergeants also told sheriff's deputies they thought he was abusing pills.

"Maybe if they had punished him like they were supposed to, he would not be in for murder," his mother said.

On Oct. 22, 2006, three days before Marquez was scheduled to be honorably discharged, he limped down to the Widefield drug dealer's basement, carrying a .45-caliber pistol in one hand and a 500,000-volt stun gun in the other. He shocked the dealer – 19-year-old Johnathan Smith – with the stun gun and grabbed his stash of marijuana, according to witness statements to El Paso County sheriff's investigators. When the dealer tried to fight back, investigators say, Marquez shot him through the heart, picked up the shell casings, grabbed the weed and walked out.

Prosecutors said he was planning a robbery. Marquez said he was just there to buy some weed and, when a fight started over the price, his infantry reflexes took over.

"When someone grabs you or something, you're going to light 'em up," he said. "It probably won't even be that hard because it's not like it's your first time."

Marquez didn't respond to letters asking him why he used a stun gun and whether he used it in Iraq.

A week after the murder, sheriff's deputies questioned his commanders at Fort Carson in search of a motive.

Capt. David Larimer, the soldier's company commander, told detectives Marquez had been diagnosed with PTSD, but Larimer didn't believe it. According to the detectives' written summary, Larimer said he thought Marquez was just a "whiny bitch."

'Heart of Darkness'

The day Marquez was arrested, his brigade was on its way back to Iraq.

They were sent to tame the one spot in the country that was more dangerous than their first assignment: downtown Baghdad.

"Violence is probably as bad as I've seen it, in Baghdad in particular," Gen. John Abizaid, commander of U.S. forces in the Middle East said just weeks before the soldiers arrived. "If not stopped, it is possible that Iraq could move towards civil war."

In the warren of city streets, terrorist bombs killed scores of civilians. Sunni and Shiite murder squads mas-

CASUALTIES OF WAR

SOLDIERS: New unit a mix of veterans, untested youth

FROM PAGE 7

sacred one another by the thousands. The United Nations estimated that 3,000 Iraqis were being murdered a month.

The Lethal Warriors were assigned to one of the deadliest corners of the city, a bullet-riddled neighborhood called Al-Doura. The Warriors' battalion commander, Lt. Col. Stephen Michael, called it the "Heart of Darkness."

Eastridge showed up for duty shortly before the brigade shipped out. He was happy to be there. He never felt more alive than when he was in a war zone.

"It's almost like a religious experience to see a battlefield," he said. "To hear the explosions — to see a person bleeding out and die — see everything on fire and smell the smoke and burning flesh. It makes you truly realize what it is to be alive. Combat is the biggest rush you can have."

Since the start of his first deployment, he had covered himself in tattoos.

On his arm was a memorial to his sergeant killed by a car bomb. On his wrists were red dotted "kill lines" marking where, if needed, he could slit them. On his arm were the twin lightning bolts of the Nazi SS. Wrapping his neck like a collar were the words "BORN TO KILL, READY TO DIE."

If the Army had followed its own rules, he would not have returned to Iraq for another tour.

Army regulations bar anyone with a pending felony from deploying.

Eastridge was awaiting trial for putting a gun to his girlfriend's head. He said his commanders knew it.

But when the young soldier showed up and begged his sergeant to let him go back to Iraq, he did. The Army was evasive about if, and why, commanders knowingly deployed Eastridge with a felony hanging over his head.

Eastridge said there was a reason the unit wanted him back. He was one of the best gunners in the battalion.

Soldiers said he was "surgical" with a machine gun and utterly fearless.

"He was really good. If I had 10 Eastridges, my job would be a lot easier," said his platoon sergeant, Michael Cardenas.

Eastridge had the most kills of anyone in his company, Cardenas said.

He was exactly the type of soldier to have in the Heart of Darkness.

Only a few of Eastridge's buddies from the last tour were still with him. Louis Bressler, a cool, unflappable gunner, was there. So was Jose Barco, who, soldiers said, had persuaded commanders to let him return to Iraq even though he was so burned from the explosion in his previous tour that he had trouble sweating.

Many of the unit's other soldiers had been kicked out for drugs, or discharged with PTSD or other disabilities, soldiers said. The Army would not provide numbers. But for every missing soldier, there was a new kid.

Jomar Falu-Vives had signed up because his mother was a nurse stationed in Baghdad, and he wasn't going to let her go without him.

John Needham was a surfing champion from California who signed up because, with the insurgency raging, it looked as if his country needed him.

Bruce Bastien was a skinny, red-cheeked guy from Connecticut who was assigned as the new medic for Eastridge's platoon.

Not even the veterans were prepared for how bad Baghdad would be, Eastridge said.

At one point, the unit was losing a soldier a day to the hospital or the morgue.

At first, Eastridge said, he enjoyed the intensity of it. He had a competition going with Bressler to see who could kill more bad guys. His final count, he said — and his sergeant confirmed — was about 80.

But after a few months, the raids, gore and constant



Troops from Fort Carson conducted a foot patrol in the Al-Doura neighborhood of Baghdad in July 2007. In the spring of that year, soldiers left the security of their central base to man small outposts throughout the city's enclaves.

ONLINE >

In depth

For audio of Eastridge's prison interview, a letter written by Needham and an Army report on the "Lethal Warriors," go to gazette.com

threat of roadside bombs started to get to him. He couldn't sleep. He was on edge all the time. Doctors at the base diagnosed him with PTSD, depression, anxiety and a sleep disorder. They gave him antidepressants and sleeping pills and put him back on duty.

When he went back to the doctors a few weeks later saying the pills were not working, his medical records show, they doubled his dose.

In the spring of 2007, as part of the surge to take back Baghdad, the 500 Lethal Warriors were moved out of their central base into 100-soldier Combat Outposts, known as COPs, scattered in the neighborhoods.

"Once we got to the COPs, it was way worse," Eastridge said. "We would have mortars and rocket fire and drive-bys every single day."

With the wounded list mounting, noncombat soldiers were pulled in to fill combat positions when guys got hit, soldiers said, and even they couldn't fill the holes. By summer 2007, the company was so depleted that Humvees designed to be manned by five soldiers were going on patrol with three, said Eastridge and his sergeant.

There was no time for mental health care in the COPs, Eastridge said. Often, his squad would come in from an all-night mission, pull off their body armor, get attacked and have to slap their armor right back on and go out. Sometimes, he said, they wouldn't sleep for days.

Eastridge's Iraqi translator introduced him to Valium as a way to relax. At first, he would just take a couple before missions. Then he was taking a couple all the time. Then he was taking a lot more.

Winning and losing it

The surge worked.

Lethal Warrior commanders designed a victory strategy based on intensive foot patrols and strong community ties, where soldiers were assigned to patrol small neighborhoods and ordered to get to know every neighbor. They built a Baghdad version of Neighborhood Watch, where locals could be the eyes and ears of the Army. Cardenas, who started the tour carrying a cell phone so he could call his wife to say goodbye if he got shot, began handing out his number to locals as a hot line on where to find the bad guys.

During the first six months of the 15-month deployment, soldiers were attacked multiple times every day, according to an ARMY magazine article by a Lethal Warrior captain.

By the end, he wrote, they were not getting attacked at all.

In the first six months, soldiers had to collect mutilated Iraqi bodies left by murder squads every morning.

By the end, there were no bodies to retrieve.

Bomb attacks dropped to near zero.

But the victory came at a

price.

Under the strain of daily violence, Eastridge, Bastien and Bressler started to lose it.

Needham did, too. A few weeks after arriving in Baghdad, he was on foot patrol when a sniper's bullet shattered his friend's head, splattering Needham with brains. In the months that followed, he was hit by six IEDs, Needham wrote in letter to his father. One blast made him hit the roof of his truck so hard that he cracked his spine.

On every occasion, his father, Michael Needham, said, his sergeant's response was to "suck it up."

For the most part, Needham did. When a rocket-propelled grenade blew a fellow soldier, Thomas Woolly, out of the gun turret of a Humvee in their convoy, Needham jumped behind the gun and started firing, Needham's father said.

"He wasn't giddy about being there," his father said. "But he was secure in what he was doing, fighting as an infantryman in an honorable way."

Then something began gnawing at him, his father said.

In the quest to win, Michael Needham said that his son told him that some in his platoon turned ugly.

The soldier said some loaded their rifles with hollow-point bullets designed to expand on impact, making them more lethal. These bullets are banned by international treaties.

It wasn't just one platoon, either. Eastridge said soldiers in his platoon, including himself, used hollow-point bullets, too. It was easy to get them sent from home, Eastridge said. Both soldiers said some guys in their units carried illegal stun guns, as soldiers had in the first deployment.

The Army said it investigated Needham's claims and found no evidence.

But there was more to the platoon's tactics.

In a December 2007 letter to the Inspector General's Office of Fort Carson, which investigates crimes within the Army, Needham told of the atrocities he saw. His father provided a copy to The Gazette.

One sergeant shot a boy riding a bicycle down the street for no reason, John Needham said. When Needham and another soldier rushed to deliver first aid, the sergeant said, "No, let him bleed out."

Another sergeant shot a man in the head without cause while questioning him, Needham said, then mutilated the body, lashed it to the hood of his Humvee and drove around the neigh-



COURTESY OF KENNETH EASTRIDGE

Eastridge was "surgical" with a machine gun, fellow soldiers said. He recorded approximately 80 kills in Iraq.

borhood blaring warnings to insurgents in Arabic that "they would be next."

Other Iraqis were shot for invented reasons, then mutilated, Needham said.

The sergeants particularly liked removing victims' brains, according to Needham.

Needham offered a photograph of a soldier removing brains from an Iraqi on the hood of a Humvee and other photos as evidence. His father supplied copies to The Gazette.

The Army's criminal investigation division interviewed several soldiers from the unit and said it was "unable to substantiate any of his allegations."

"Those guys were seriously whacked," Needham's father said. "And it began to grate on him."

In March 2007, Needham went to the battalion's doctor, saying he was "losing it" and needed a break, according to a summary of his service that he wrote. He was prescribed the antidepressant Zoloft and sent back to work. In May, Needham said, he went back to the doctor and was again sent back to work. In June, according to medical records, he went again. And in September, Commanders always sent him back out on patrol, he said.

Around that time, he posted a note on his MySpace page: "I'm falling apart by the seams it seems the days here bleed into each other I have to find the will to live man I miss my brothers. These walls are caving in my despair wraps me in its web, I feel I'm sinking in, throw me a lifesaver throw me a life worth living. I'm a part of death I am death this is hard to admit but this shits getting old."

A few nights later, on Sept. 18, Needham and a fellow soldier bought a contraband can of whiskey and tried to drink away their sorrows. Then Needham took out a gun and fired a shot at his head, his father said. The bullet missed. Needham was detained by his commanders for illegally discharging a firearm. After a few weeks of arguing by phone and e-mail, Needham's father convinced the unit to let his son see a doctor. The soldier was diagnosed with severe PTSD and flown to

Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

"What led him to the point of such deep despair that he would attempt suicide?" his father, a retired Army officer, asked. "I understand it. He was trained as a soldier. He was a good soldier, and his group was doing things he knew was wrong. And he was in this prolonged combat situation where they have all this armor and lifesaving technology to keep them alive, but mentally, they are in pieces."

The breaking point

Eastridge started to crumble around the same time.

He had been a decorated soldier during his first tour. But in the second, his judgment melted away.

He started searching medicine cabinets for Valium while raiding houses.

Then he started stealing cash and weapons from civilians, which he said he would sell back to the Shiite militia.

He was disciplined by his battalion for stealing once, he said, after he ransacked a house, but only because it belonged to a well-connected man. Most of the time, he got away with it.

He was disciplined again when he flipped out on patrol. Someone shot at his squad from a nearby farmhouse. Eastridge fired about 20 grenades into the house, then stormed in and said he found a farmer and his two dogs in the back and spotted a shell casing from an AK-47 on the ground.

Eastridge demanded to know where the shooter was.

The man said he didn't know.

Eastridge shot one of the man's dogs, then asked where the shooter was.

The man said he didn't know.

Eastridge shot the man's other dog.

His lieutenant told him he needed to cool off and go sit in the truck.

On the way out, Eastridge passed the man's herd of a dozen goats. He leveled them with a machine gun. Then he ordered a private to shoot the man's two cows. Then he shot his horse.

"I was really (expletive) losing it," Eastridge said, shaking his head.

The Army hasn't supplied disciplinary records for Eastridge or several other soldiers requested under the Freedom of Information Act, but Eastridge's account was confirmed by his platoon sergeant.

Bressler and Bastien started losing it, too.

In May 2007, Bastien went home on leave. While there, the medic was thrown in jail for beating his wife, according to police records. Bastien, who is in prison, declined to be interviewed for this story. After his arrest, the Army kept him in Colorado Springs.

In June 2007, Bressler saw his best friend killed in a firefight, according to soldiers. After that, Bressler, who had always been a mellow, stable guy whom soldiers could find at the poker table in the COP, started to withdraw, soldiers say.

In July 2007, Eastridge said, Bressler went crazy and attacked his commanding officer, threatening to kill him.

Bressler, who is in prison, declined to be interviewed. He was diagnosed with PTSD, according to his wife. The Army decided he was too unstable and dangerous to be in Iraq, so they sent him back to Colorado Springs.

Eastridge went on one more mission.

He was the gunner manning the M240 machine gun on a Humvee — a big gun that shoots 600 rounds per minute. He said he was ordered to guard the street while the rest of his platoon searched a house.

Eastridge said he told his lieutenant he was going to kill people as soon as the officer was out of sight. Then he asked the driver to put some heavy-metal "killin' music on."

His lieutenant laughed and walked off, Eastridge said.

Families were out playing soccer and barbecuing. Eastridge said he just started shooting. He pumped a long burst of rounds into a big palm tree where a few old men had gathered in the shade.

People started running. They piled into their cars and sped away. There was a no-driving rule in effect in the neighborhood, so, Eastridge said, he put his cross hairs on every car that moved.

"All I could think of was car bombs, car bombs, car bombs, and I just kept shooting," he said.

Orders came over the radio to cease fire, he said, but he kept yelling, "Negative! Negative!"

Eastridge said he shot more than 1,700 rounds. When asked how many people he killed, he said, "Not that many. Maybe a dozen."

He was court-martialed a short time later on nine counts, including drug possession and disobeying orders. Killing civilians wasn't one of them.

For that, he said, he was put on guard duty.

Then, in August 2007, sergeants found him with 463 Valium pills in his laundry and a naked female soldier in his bed, according to court testimony. His staff sergeant confronted him about the woman, and Eastridge lashed out, according to his mother, Leanne Eastridge, screaming that he would kill the sergeant, suck out his blood and spit it at his children. Eastridge was court-martialed for disobeying orders and drug possession and sent to a prison camp in Kuwait for a month.

This spring, Eastridge said it was funny that sex and drugs were what got him court-martialed, considering the things he did in Iraq. "Things that can never be told, but that everybody knew about and approved of — basically war crimes."

He got a health screening as part of the court-martial. Doctors diagnosed him with chronic PTSD, antisocial personality disorder, depression, anxiety and hearing loss. In late September 2007, his commanders decided he was too unstable and dangerous to stay in Iraq, so the Army sent him back to Colorado Springs.

MONDAY
July 27, 2009

THE NEWS
TODAY

The Gazette

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LOCAL

Rental-unit fee on council's agenda

Plan would keep code enforcement by charging landlords \$1 per unit. **A3**

Person killed in Springs shooting

Another suffered serious injuries. **A3**

Rain makes a mess of area roadways

Up to 2 inches fell. **A3**

TIP JAR

A chance for used books

Born Again Used Books, 1529 N. Union Blvd., is holding its biannual Home-school Book Fair, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Aug. 8. Free for home-schoolers and those who teach home-schoolers to buy, sell or trade books. To reserve a spot, call 528-8622.

Past tips at gazette.com/economy.

Times are tough.

Know of a great bargain, helpful job resource or clever way to save money? E-mail bill.radford@gazette.com.

NATION

Palin leaves office in Parnell's hands

Alaskans got a new governor Sunday. Sarah Palin stepped down, and Lt. Gov. Sean Parnell stepped in. True to form, Palin did not go quietly. **A13**

Troops came close to going to Buffalo

George W. Bush considered sending U.S. forces to capture members of a New York group linked to al-Qaida in 2002. **A13**

Pathogen facility put in risky locale

The Department of Homeland Security is under fire for building a research center for highly infectious animal diseases in a tornado-prone part of the country. **A7**

WORLD

Nuke-powered sub launched by India

The country celebrated the debut of its nuclear-powered submarine, and the U.S. sees India's growing military might as a possible counter to long-dominant China. **A14**

SPORTS

Oh, Broncos fans, it's time for camp

And Alphonso Smith will be there. The cornerback selected in this year's draft inked a deal on the eve of training camp. **B4**

See-saw stays on side of Rockies


Colorado wrapped up a series with the San Francisco Giants with a 4-2 win. In doing so, the Rockies increased their lead over the Giants in the wild-card standings to two games. **B1**

Vive le Contador! Spaniard wins Tour

Alberto Contador took the yellow jersey. Lance Armstrong was third. **B1**

LOCAL WEATHER

High 80 • Low 57

50 percent chance of thunderstorms.  FULL REPORT B6

 Vol. 138 • No. 126
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FORT CARSON: SECOND OF TWO PARTS

Smaller crimes at first – DUI, domestic violence, drugs. It was clear to many that something wasn't right, that something needed to be done.



BRYAN OLLER, THE GAZETTE

Soldiers from the 4th Infantry Division's 4th Brigade Combat Team learn to relax as part of a new class designed to teach soldiers to manage combat stress.

WARNING SIGNS

DAVE PHILIPPS
dave.philipps@gazette.com

After coming home from Iraq, 21-year-old medic Bruce Bastien was driving with his Army buddy Louis Bressler, 24, when they spotted a woman walking to work on a Colorado Springs street.

Bressler swerved and hit the woman with the car, according to police, then Bastien jumped out and stabbed her over and over.

It was October 2007. A fellow soldier, Kenneth Eastridge, 24, watched it all from the passenger seat.

At that moment, he said, it was clear that however messed up some of the soldiers in the unit had been after their first Iraq deployment, it was about to get much worse.

"I have no problem with killing," said Eastridge, a two-tour infantryman with almost 80

SEE SOLDIERS • PAGE 8



PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAEL NEEDHAM

John Needham on patrol in Baghdad in 2007. A few days later, his father said, the truck was bombed, wounding several soldiers. Needham has been charged with killing a woman in California.

EDITOR'S NOTE

This is the second in a two-part series that retraces the steps of a group of Fort Carson soldiers who fought in Iraq and returned home to Colorado Springs, some of them to kill. It also details how the Army is trying to help soldiers who have been traumatized by battle.

This package represents months of interviews with soldiers and their families and the examination of medical and military records, court documents and photographs.


A word of caution: The details of battle are graphic, and the language is profane at times.

Finally, a disclosure in the interest of keeping our journalism transparent:

One former soldier interviewed for this report, Kenneth Eastridge, is in prison. After his arrest, his court-appointed lawyer was Amanda Philipps, wife of reporter Dave Philipps. Dave Philipps did not contact Eastridge until after his wife's professional obligations to Eastridge were concluded. Amanda Philipps provided neither access to, nor information about, Eastridge.

JEFF THOMAS, EDITOR

ONLINE > In depth

 Part I of the series, previous stories about this unit, a letter by soldier John Needham alleging war crimes, audio of Kenneth Eastridge's prison interview and more at gazette.com

CASUALTIES OF WAR

SOLDIERS: Violence patterned like a crescendo

FROM PAGE 1

confirmed kills. "But I won't just murder someone for no reason. He had gone crazy."

All three soldiers belonged to the 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment, part of Fort Carson's 4th Brigade Combat Team. The 500-soldier infantry battalion nicknamed itself the "Lethal Warriors."

They fought in the deadliest places in the war twice — first in the Sunni Triangle, then in downtown Baghdad. Since their return late in 2007, eight infantry soldiers have been arrested and accused of murder, attempted murder or manslaughter. Another two soldiers from the brigade were arrested and accused of murder and attempted murder after the first tour. Others have committed other violent crimes. Others have committed suicide.

Many of the soldiers behind bars and their family members say the violence at home is a consequence of the violence in Iraq. Soldiers came home angry, confused, paranoid and depressed. They had trouble getting effective mental health care. Most buried their symptoms in drugs and alcohol until they exploded.

The Army is seeking new ways to care for returning soldiers and keep the violence from continuing — crucial now because the unit shipped out in May to Afghanistan, where the monthly coalition casualty rate has doubled since the beginning of the year. Soldiers are scheduled to return to Colorado Springs in spring 2010.

The first step toward solving the problem, the post's most recent commander said, is to understand it.

Maj. Gen. Mark Graham took command of Fort Carson in September 2007, just before the worst of the violence. He said that after studying the murders, he saw that soldiers rarely snap without warning. Guys who get in big trouble often get in little trouble first, and the problem grows until it explodes.

Graham calls this pattern "the crescendo."

It may start with a soldier showing up to work reeking of booze, getting arrested for domestic violence, or mouthing off to an officer.

"When a guy who had it together starts showing little problems, it could be a sign of something much bigger," Graham said.

Most of the soldiers now behind bars back up Graham's theory of the crescendo.

Before Bastien stabbed the woman in 2007, he was arrested three times on suspicion of beating his wife and burning her with cigarettes.

Before Bressler shot two soldiers in Colorado Springs in 2007, Eastridge said, he assaulted his commanding officer and tried to kill himself.

Before Jomar Falu-Vives, 23, allegedly gunned down three people in Colorado Springs in two drive-by shootings in 2008, his wife said she called his sergeants to warn he was liable to "take someone's life."

Before John Needham, 25, allegedly beat a woman to death in 2008, his father said, he tried repeatedly to get treatment for post-trau-



BRYAN OLLER, THE GAZETTE

Soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan often have trouble coping with daily life back home. Some of that stress might be responsible for criminal activities involving soldiers, officials say, leading to increased efforts by Fort Carson to manage the problem.

matic stress disorder.

The pattern of trouble is clear in hindsight, Graham said, but hard to spot when it is developing.

"Our challenge is to catch it early, so we can help these soldiers," he said. "We are educating young commanders on taking care of their soldiers. But it's a very tough problem."

Graham, who had one son killed by a roadside bomb in Iraq a year after his other son committed suicide while training to be an officer, made mental health a focus upon taking command of Fort Carson.

He said suicide and homicide are "different reactions to the same or similar problem. You treat both in the same way."

Under his watch, Fort Carson more than doubled the number of mental health counselors. A new Army program will soon give each brigade a "master resiliency trainer" to strengthen troops' psychological fitness the way drill sergeants strengthen their muscles. A special unit has been created to track soldiers who are too physically or psychologically wounded to stay with their battalions. Soldiers visiting a doctor at Fort Carson for even a sprained ankle are now screened for symptoms of PTSD and depression.

And perhaps most important, Graham said, in the Army, where mental illness has long been taboo, commanders at Fort Carson are being trained to tell soldiers it is OK to seek treatment.

"There is a culture and a stigma that need to change," Graham said.

It is unclear if the new measures can counter the entrenched Army culture or the effects of repeated deployments. Though some of the new programs have been in place for two years, the violence has not stopped.

Colorado Springs police arrested a Fort Carson soldier from the Lethal Warriors in May in the killing of a 19-year-old woman. Another soldier shot himself in the head this year. Another was arrested on suspicion

of breaking a civilian's jaw in March. Another is awaiting trial in the shooting of a pregnant woman.

Graham, who handed over command of the post last week, said Fort Carson is doing everything it can to help its soldiers. "I wish I could predict how all this is going to go," he said. "I can't say it is not going to happen again."

'All I know how to do is kill'

For Bastien, the Army medic, the crescendo started to peak just after midnight on Aug. 4, 2007, when he was driving his silver Audi to get cigarettes after a night of drinking at Bressler's apartment.

The rest of their battalion was still fighting in Iraq.

Bastien was in Colorado Springs because he had been arrested and accused of beating his wife while on leave in May 2007.

Bressler was in town because the Army had sent him back from Iraq early, in July, with PTSD, according to his wife. He was awaiting a medical discharge because, Eastridge said, he attacked an officer in Iraq.

Bastien and Bressler declined requests for interviews.

According to court documents, that night the pair spotted a drunk 23-year-old Fort Carson private they didn't know named Robert James, who was walking home from a bar, and pulled the Audi over to give him a ride.

Bastien later told police that he and Bressler decided to rob James. They drove to a dark parking lot.

Bressler pointed a .38 revolver at James and demanded his money. James pulled a few crumpled bills from his pockets — about \$25. Bressler shot him twice and gathered the scattered bills.

The random crime left police with no leads.

A little over a month later, in late September, Eastridge landed under Army escort at the Colorado Springs Airport.

The once-decorated soldier

had been court-martialed in August 2007 on suspicion of possession of drugs, disobeying orders and threatening an officer. Medical records show that, after two bloody deployments, the Army diagnosed him with paranoia, depression, insomnia, anti-social personality disorder, PTSD, homicidal thoughts and hearing loss caused by constant shooting and explosions.

His Army escorts were taking him to Fort Carson — not for treatment, he said, but to get kicked out of the Army.

From there, he was going to jail. In Colorado Springs, there was a warrant waiting from a year before, when he skipped a court date on charges of putting a gun to his girlfriend's head.

At the baggage claim, Eastridge said, while his escorts waded into the crowd to grab their bags, he ran. He said he hopped in a cab, took it to a cheap hotel and called the only people in town he knew: Bastien and Bressler.

"When I met up with those guys, they were weird," he said. They were paranoid and aggressive, he said.

"They kept saying, 'Do you want to go rob someone? Do you want to go kill someone? I just thought they were kidding, but they had gone a little crazy.'"

Eastridge did have plans to rob someone. Compared with Iraq, it would be easy.

He wanted to do it alone, but he had no car and no gun. Bressler and Bastien had both, Eastridge said, and they insisted on coming along.

On Oct. 29, 2007, wearing all black, they attempted to rob a nightclub manager as she emerged from a club. When they botched that, they drove off and spotted a young woman named Erica Ham walking down the street. Bressler hit her with the car and she crashed onto the hood. Then Bastien jumped out to grab her bag and started stabbing her. When she tried to fight back, Eastridge pulled out a pistol and yelled for her to get on the ground.

Ham was unable to iden-

tify her attackers, and police had no leads.

The stabbing sobered Eastridge up, he said. He turned himself in for his year-old domestic violence charge and spent most of November in the El Paso County jail. He bonded out on Nov. 27, 2007. A few days later, he returned to Fort Carson, where he received an "other than honorable" discharge for possession of drugs in Iraq.

After two tours in Iraq, Eastridge was depressed, paranoid, violent, abusing drugs and haunted by nightmares. But because he was other-than-honorably discharged, he said, he was ineligible for benefits or health care. He was no longer Uncle Sam's problem. He was on his own.

"I had no job training," he said. "All I know how to do is kill people."

A few days later, on Nov. 30, 2007, Eastridge went drinking with Bastien and Bressler. According to court documents, the three ran into a fellow soldier, Kevin Shields, who was celebrating his 24th birthday.

They downed shots at the downtown bars until closing, then drove around, smoking a joint, until they were lost on the west side.

In the first, dark hours of Dec. 1, 2007, Bressler and Shields got in a fight when Shields teased the tough gunner for throwing up in the car. Bressler told Bastien to pull over because he needed to puke again. Bressler leaned against a pole like he was sick, then turned around and shot Shields in the head. The soldier fell to the ground, and Bressler shot him four more times.

Bressler fished a few things out of Shields' pockets to make the shooting look like a robbery, and they sped away.

Soldiers who saw the trio drinking with Shields at Rum Bay helped police tie them to the crime, court documents say.

Bressler was convicted of conspiracy to commit murder and sentenced to 60 years.

Bastien pleaded guilty to

the same charge and also got 60 years.

Eastridge pleaded guilty to accessory to murder and got 10 years.

None used their experiences in Iraq as a defense.

"When I was sentenced, the judge told me 'Look at how many people go to Iraq and how few come back and commit crimes,'" Eastridge said,

"But that's not fair. A lot of the soldiers who go to Iraq just drive trucks or check IDs or sit in the Green Zone. Look at combat troops. And look at what kind of combat they did. My unit was in the worst neighborhood in the bloodiest part of the war. Even in my platoon, there were guys that stayed in the truck and guys that did most of the fighting. Look at that tiny number. It's not the hundreds of thousands that go, it's the few hundred that see heavy, heavy combat. It changes lives."

'Give me the gun'

The rest of the Lethal Warriors returned home from Iraq in December 2007.

Some went wild in the bars, overflowing with the same pent-up jubilation troops experienced after the first tour. Then the crescendo started.

Jose Barco, who was burned so badly in the first tour that, soldiers said, he had to beg commanders to allow him back for the second tour, was arrested on suspicion of domestic violence. Then drunken driving. Then burglary with a deadly weapon. Then he got divorced. Finally, he was arrested and accused of taking a pistol to a house party.

On April 25, 2008, he was with a crowd in the basement of a friend of a friend's house, police say, when he got in an argument, pulled out the gun and shot a round through the ceiling. There was a fight. He was thrown out. A few minutes later, when the party crowd was still standing on the front lawn, he drove by, spraying bullets. Police say one hit 19-year-old Ginny Stefania,

SEE SOLDIERS • PAGE 9

BREAKDOWN OF A SOLDIER

John Needham was hit by six explosive devices in Iraq, according to his father. He repeatedly asked for help for post-traumatic stress disorder in 2007 but received only pills. After 11 months at war, he tried to commit suicide. After being discharged from the Army in 2008 with PTSD, he allegedly beat a woman to death in his father's California home.



COURTESY OF MIKE NEEDHAM

John Needham home on leave from Iraq in January 2007.



COURTESY OF MIKE NEEDHAM

John Needham on the hood of a Humvee shortly before attempting suicide.



COURTESY OF MIKE NEEDHAM

John Needham on patrol in Baghdad. His father said the Army didn't provide sufficient help.



COURTESY OF THE

ORANGE COUNTY JAIL
Arrested on suspicion of beating a woman to death.

CASUALTIES OF WAR

SOLDIERS: Problem is hard to see, hard to act on

FROM PAGE 8

who was six months pregnant, in the thigh. Stefanic suffered minor injuries.

Barco, who declined to be interviewed, was arrested Jan. 7. He posted \$25,000 bail and is awaiting trial for attempted murder.

It was a classic case of the pattern that Graham said most soldiers follow when they spiral out of control. Before the big stuff, there is little stuff. Catching it in time can save lives.

Fort Carson has trained key leaders to spot the warning signs.

When a soldier is drinking too much or acting out, instead of punishment, they are supposed to get help.

"But it's a very tough problem," said Graham, who ordered the new programs. "If a soldier is showing all the risk factors, what can you do? You can't lock them up. They haven't done anything. But what we can do is provide them every opportunity to get the care they need and try to break down the stigma against seeking help."

Like Barco, Jomar Falu-Vives started hitting his wife.

Soldiers say the lifelong Army brat seemed to handle Baghdad OK. Back home, Falu-Vives would go out to sing karaoke with other soldiers and go shooting at the firing range off Rampart Range Road, according to fellow soldiers.

But his ex-wife, Jolhea Vives, said he had turned mean.

He always liked to party and had a short temper, she said. But when he got back from Iraq, it was worse. Soon after, they filed for divorce.

Falu-Vives' lawyer did not respond to a request for an interview.

His ex-wife said he had episodes where he "went into combat mode." At one point, she said, he stuck a loaded .45 in her mouth.

She said she called his sergeant, saying that he was violent and was going to kill somebody, but the Army did nothing.

An Army spokesman said, "There is no specific Army policy that provides guidance on these types of situations. It is up to the soldier's chain of command."

The soldier's commanders declined to be interviewed.

On May 26, 2007, Falu-Vives was riding in the back seat of his friend and fellow soldier Rodolfo Torres-Gandarilla's Chrysler sedan on the way back from a bar, according to his arrest affidavit. Near South Circle Drive, he allegedly saw two men standing in front of a house on the corner of Flintshire Street and Monterey Road, lifted an AK-47 and started shooting. One of the men in front of the house, Army Capt. Zachary Szody, collapsed with a bullet in his knee and another in his hip.

Ten days later, Falu-Vives was cruising in his black Chevy Tahoe with Torres-Gandarilla and two other Army buddies, according to the affidavit.

Near midnight, he pulled up to an intersection five blocks from the first shooting. Amairany Cervantes, 18, and her boyfriend, Cesar Ramirez-Ibanez, 21, were setting up signs for a yard sale the next morning, the affidavit said.

"Give me the gun," police said he told a friend sitting in the back seat. He shot the woman in the back five times, police said, her boyfriend, four times. Both died almost instantly. Falu-Vives sped back to his apartment, where he stood on the balcony watching the red and blue lights converge on the spot.

He listened to sirens wailing in the night and, according to what witnesses told police, held up his hands and said, "I love that sound."

Falu-Vives' mother, Lt. Col. Marta Vives, is an Army nurse in a Combat Stress Team. She helps soldiers in war zones who are starting to lose it. It is one of a number of programs the Army has created since the war began.

When her son was patrolling Baghdad, she was



BRYAN OLLER, THE GAZETTE

Returning from combat can be very stressful for soldiers. Fort Carson has increased the number of behavioral health care workers and has assigned family life consultants to help soldiers readjust.



Jomar Falu-Vives



Thomas Woolly



Bruce Bastien



John Needham



Jose Barco Jr.



Rodolfo Torres-Gandarilla



Kenneth Eastridge



Louis Bressler

stationed just a few miles away.

Reached at Fort Hood, Texas, she said the Army has many programs to help troops, but soldiers often avoid the counseling and medication offered, and leaders sometimes don't give GIs time or permission to visit.

"There is still a stigma behind getting help," she said. "That is the hardest part. It is still seen as a sign of weakness."

She said she has talked to the battalion commander of the Lethal Warriors and the commander of Fort Carson to tell them that many efforts to treat troops' mental problems are not trickling down to privates like her son.

Falu-Vives was arrested July 30, 2008.

Torres-Gandarilla pleaded guilty to accessory to murder in April and is expected to testify against Falu-Vives in August.

Falu-Vives' mother said she never saw evidence of her son having problems.

"He isn't a criminal," she said. "He never killed a fly — except when it was his job."

Before Falu-Vives could be charged with first-degree murder, another Lethal Warrior was arrested for the same thing.

Pushed until they broke

John Needham struggled to find normalcy after trying to kill himself in Iraq in September 2007.

The tall California surfer had been hit by six roadside bombs before getting drunk one night in Baghdad and putting a gun to his head, his father, Michael Needham, said.

The soldier was diagnosed with PTSD, flown to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. and put on antipsychotics, an anti-depressant, an antiseizure drug used to calm PTSD soldiers and a potent blood-pressure drug used to silence nightmares. Side effects of the cocktail can include hangover-like symptoms, short-term memory loss, irritability, aggression, hallucinations, sleepwalking, paranoia and panic attacks. So many of the side effects were like the symptoms of his PTSD that his father said it was hard to know if they

were making him better or worse.

For a month, Needham stayed at the hospital. On Nov. 9, 2007, according to orders provided by his father, Needham's battalion commander had him transferred to Fort Carson so he could be sent back to Iraq.

"It's just bizarre, we couldn't figure out why they were doing this to him," his father said.

Needham's father and Andrew Pogany, a veterans' advocate and former Fort Carson sergeant, persuaded commanders to keep Needham from going back to Iraq so he could continue psychiatric treatment.

But, his father said, his son didn't get it.

Laws prevent the Army from discussing medical treatment of soldiers. Needham's father said his son was kept on the drugs but never received counseling.

Instead, he said, his son was berated by sergeants.

"They would write things on the chalkboard in his barracks like 'John Needham is a shit bag cry baby PTSD boohoo,'" his father said.

It was so bad that when Needham went home for Thanksgiving in 2007, his father refused to let him return to the Army.

"We basically kidnapped him," his father said. He took his son to Balboa Naval Hospital in San Diego, and argued with Fort Carson until the soldier was reassigned to Balboa.

Needham was honorably discharged from the Army on July 18, 2008, with chronic PTSD and moved back to his father's house in San Clemente, Calif. But, his father said, he was not better.

"He was severely different," his father said.

John Needham was groggy and vacant from the pills. He had lost much of his hearing from bomb blasts. He often drank himself to oblivion. He was paranoid and afraid of crowds.

He begged his father to buy him an assault rifle like the one he carried in Iraq. Eventually, they compromised on a pistol that shot rubber BBs. Needham carried it almost everywhere, his father said.

The former soldier was going to regular counseling at a local Veterans Affairs hos-

pital, but, his father said, it wasn't enough.

His son had frightening flashbacks. Late one night, he rummaged through the bathroom naked, smearing his face and body with cosmetics as if they were camouflage paint. He sharpened one end of a broom handle to make a weapon. His father said he found him crouching silently behind the couch. His father said his son always took off his clothes when he had a flashback.

"He needed to be committed," his father said. "He needed serious psychiatric help. I tried to put him in the hospital, but the VA said they could only treat him as an outpatient. . . . I could see the train wreck coming."

On the night of Sept. 1, 2008, Needham was at home hanging out with a girlfriend in his bedroom on the ground floor. His father was two floors above, taking a shower.

A 19-year-old woman named Jacquelyn Villagomez, whom the soldier had recently broken up with, came in. The women fought, his father said. Needham's girlfriend called the police. They arrived a few minutes later, and Needham answered the door naked and bleeding, his father said.

Villagomez's body lay in his bedroom, he said.

His father said he heard a ruckus, went downstairs and watched the police tackle his son. The soldier fought back as they put him in cuffs. Michael Needham said he stared, weeping, as his naked son lay bleeding and struggling, incoherent on the driveway as the police tasered him again and again.

John Needham is awaiting trial on suspicion of murder. In May, family members mortgaged their houses to bail him out. He is now getting inpatient treatment at a VA hospital, Michael Needham said.

"I know the Army would like to say it is not responsible for this, that it didn't train them to do this. But that is bullshit," Michael Needham said.

"They trained them to kill, then when they didn't have enough men for the surge, they pushed these guys until they broke, then threw them away."



KIRK SPEER, THE GAZETTE

Fort Carson's most recent commander Maj. Gen. Mark Graham ordered changes in the way soldiers are treated after they return from war.

or the Army's deployment of soldiers with pending civilian felonies.

The study recommended better mental health care and training, programs to "ensure there is no humiliation or belittling" of soldiers seeking mental health care, and more studies to "assess a possible link between deployment, combat intensity, and aggressive behavior."

But Graham said the report does not offer a simple cure.

"We didn't see any one thing that we could identify and say, yes, this is the reason these soldiers do this," he said.

Instead, he said, Fort Carson and the Army have instituted a wide array of changes.

Evans Army Community Hospital has increased the number of behavioral health care workers from 37 to 71. Many are assigned to mobile teams within brigades, so soldiers don't have to go to the hospital to seek help.

Fort Carson also has added 16 "military family life consultants," whom soldiers and their families can visit anonymously for help with everything from relationship problems to financial concerns.

Fort Carson started referring soldiers to private counselors in Colorado Springs in 2006. The number seeking private counseling surged from 11 in 2006 to 2,171 in 2008, according to Evans Army Community Hospital.

"We see that as a sign of strength, not weakness," said Roger Meyer, Evans spokesman. "It shows we are having success in our efforts to educate soldiers on the signs of stress."

In Colorado Springs, lawyers and law enforcement agencies have created an experimental veteran's court to catch returning soldiers who get in trouble with the law and steer them toward help instead of jail.

Soldiers charged with felonies will be sentenced to counseling and substance abuse treatment. The court is expected to take its first cases in August.

The Army has created Warrior Transition Units to manage the care of soldiers, like Needham, who are too mentally or physically disabled to stay with their units.

Colorado's senators urged the Army last week to include Fort Carson in a pilot alcohol abuse program.

Graham said the Army is also trying to change the culture.

All low-level leaders, he said, are now taught to treat mental illness like any battlefield injury.

"If a soldier is shot or injured, other soldiers know how to give him care," Graham said. "We need to get soldiers to understand the signs of combat stress so they can do the same thing — get their buddy the care he needs."

Staff Sgt. James Combs, with the Lethal Warriors, said in June that the combat stress education is more comprehensive than when he was a private in the late 1990s.

Now, he said, sergeants teach soldiers that "You may be able to pull the trigger on our M4 or M16, but you have to understand what it is doing to you mentally, and you need to be prepared for that."

"We don't just throw them to the wolves like we used to," he said.

It is not clear how effective the changes will be.

The current commanders of the Lethal Warriors, who would implement many of the changes, declined repeated requests for interviews.

And Fort Carson's new programs have not prevented more occurrences of destructive behavior.

On May 10, Thomas Woolly, the soldier Needham replaced in a blown-out Humvee turret in Baghdad in 2007, was drinking with friends after midnight at an apartment just a few blocks from Fort Carson.

Woolly had done two tours with the Lethal Warriors and was in the new War-

CASUALTIES OF WAR



U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SPC. OLANREWAJU AKINWUNMI

Army 1st Sgt. James Naughton with his squad leaders in Baghdad in 2007. The soldiers are from 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team.

SOLDIERS: Counseling can do only so much, experts say

FROM PAGE 9

rior Transition Unit, about to be medically discharged because, his grandmother, Gladys Woolly said, "He was blowed up so many times until it damaged his brain."

Woolly, 24, had a drink in one hand and a loaded .45 Long Colt revolver in the other, according to his arrest affidavit, when a friend's husband, who had been arguing with the group, banged on the door.

ONLINE > In depth

Part I of the series, previous stories about this unit, soldier John Needham's letter alleging war crimes, audio of Kenneth Eastridge's prison interview and more at gazette.com

Police say Woolly cocked the gun's hammer. After the husband left and Woolly went to uncock the gun, the hammer slipped. The bullet killed 19-year-old Lisa Baumann, who was standing on the other side of the room.

Woolly was charged with manslaughter. He is out on bail and is scheduled for arraignment in August. He did not respond to interview requests.

Two weeks later, Roy Mason, 28, another Lethal Warrior who had served two tours and landed in the Warrior Transition Unit, went AWOL, drove to California, parked at the beach, called 911 from his car, asked them to clean up the mess quickly "before kids see," then shot himself in the head, media reports said.

Civilian mental health professionals caution that the Army programs treat the symptoms but do not address the underlying cause.

"There are some good things going on," said Davida Hoffman, the director of First Choice Counseling, a private clinic that treats about 250 Carson soldiers.

But counseling can do only so much, she said. The quality of treatment is not the cause of the problem. Combat is.

The more combat soldiers see, she said, the more problems they will have. The more problems soldiers have, the more problems Colorado Springs has.

"Soldiers simply cannot handle repeated deployments," she said. "If these guys keep seeing deployments like the stuff they saw in Iraq, we could have a very dangerous situation."

Graham agreed that repeated deployments are tough on soldiers. But the Army has a job to do, he said, and the rate of deployment is not expected to slow for at least 12 to 18 months.

On the same day Mason put a gun to his head at the beach, his old brigade was deploying to Afghanistan.

Most of the guys from the first deployment had left the Army, transferred to a different unit, been kicked out, wounded or killed. But for every one gone there is a new recruit. And while some attitudes in the Army are changing, the day-to-day reality of the foot soldier is not. Since June, insurgent attacks have killed three in the brigade.

No one may have a better view of the Army's challenges than Sgt. Michael Cardenaz. In many ways, he is the battle-worn face of today's soldier.

The solid, bald-headed Lethal Warriors staff sergeant and father of two was in the same platoon as Eastridge, Barco and Bastien in Baghdad. Cardenaz often played Texas Hold 'em with Bressler at the base. He went bowling with Falu-Vives just days be-

fore Falu-Vives was arrested in the yard sale sign shootings. He has done three tours in Iraq and two in Kosovo. He said he has had close scrapes with 35 IEDs, scores of rocket-propelled grenades and one 500-pound bomb. He has taken shrapnel twice. He describes himself as an "old-school career soldier." He is 29.

With every arrest of a fellow soldier, he was shocked, he said, but he does not think it is just coincidence that so many guys in the unit are now in jail.

"These are all younger guys. They are just kids, straight out of high school, from mom's house to basic training to Iraq. You throw them in a tour like this, and there is going to be an aftermath," he said. "Time was, before I really understood it, my reaction would have been 'fry 'em.' But now I can empathize. . . . If they did what they did, fine, they have to answer to the justice system, but these guys like Eastridge who tried so hard and loved the Army . . . they are a casualty of war. Their psyches are casualties of war."

He agreed that the deployment to Afghanistan will be different from the ones that he said screwed up his friends.

"There is much more attention to the mental side," he said. "I've been trained to do stress debriefings and suicide prevention. I remember a time in the Army when mental health was taboo. It was career over. That's not the case anymore."

But, he said, the stigma is alive and well, especially among infantrymen.

"There's still a feeling that if you got to go see the doc, you're a punk. There are a lot of people who still feel that way. I'm not going to lie to you, I do," he said.

Real soldiers, he said, "just suck it up."

"That's what I do. I think I was given a God-given talent to suck it up. Horrible things happen, I suck it up. I don't let it bother me."

In March, Cardenaz was arrested in a felony assault.

He was walking with his wife past The Thirsty Parrot on Tejon Street, in full dress uniform after the Lethal Warriors' annual ball, when some civilians hanging out in front of the bar said something. Or maybe Cardenaz said something to them. Witnesses say the sergeant dropped one with a single punch. When another guy came after him to ask why he did it, police say, Cardenaz broke his jaw.

The sergeant posted bail and did not show up for his court hearing July 15.

His lawyer told the judge that Cardenaz had deployed to Afghanistan.

Call the writer at 636-0223.