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Army: War stress may link Bragg deaths

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

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 7 (UPI) -- An Army report said Thursday that stress on soldiers from the nation's war on terror might have played a role in the cluster of killings and suicides at Fort Bragg last summer. It also concluded that the anti-malaria drug Lariam was an "unlikely" link.

The report said that Army mental health services are "flawed" because they inadvertently discourage soldiers and their families from seeking help when problems arise. It said counseling should be available on a more private and convenient basis, to reduce concerns that a soldier's career could be ruined if he seeks help.

The report was prepared by an epidemiology team that included two experts from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It was dispatched to the North Carolina base after the string of killings and suicides stunned Army officials and raised national concern that service in Afghanistan could have been a factor.

Soldiers stationed at the base were suspected in four of the five spouse killings, and in each case there was evidence of domestic problems. Three of the four soldiers had served in Afghanistan this year.

"It may not be a random coincidence that these tragedies are occurring at a time when (operational tempo) has increased significantly at Fort Bragg since 9/11," the report said in reference to the terrorist attacks on the U.S. on Sept. 11, 2001, and the war in Afghanistan that followed.

Studies show that frequent and stressful deployment by troops can play a role in domestic violence, the report said, noting that two of the soldiers had returned early from Afghanistan to deal with domestic problems. A third soldier had returned in January.

"The fact that Fort Bragg is at the forefront of the war in Afghanistan obviously raises valid questions that the recent ... homicides/suicides could in part be related to the stresses" of mobilizing to fight the war on terror, the report said. It said those stresses could include "combat/deployment experiences and/or other factors related to military duty."

The report called for more study on whether current military operations are leading to a greater mental health threat to troops and their families.

While not ruling out Lariam as a factor in any one killing or suicide, the report said the drug does not explain the strange cluster of violence over a short period of time.

Lariam was given to two of the soldiers who served in Afghanistan, the report said, adding there was no evidence that either soldier had problems with it.

The report acknowledged it had limited information in the case of Master Sgt. William Wright, who is charged with murder in the death of his wife, Jennifer. The epidemiology team said it did not speak with him or those who knew him for legal and privacy reasons.

United Press International has reported that Wright's acquaintances and family say he exhibited paranoid, delusional and confused behavior after returning from Afghanistan.

Some critics said the Army's conclusion dismissing Lariam was tainted by the fact that it created and licensed the drug and has vouched for its safety.

"The Army's report is consistent with their decades-long refusal to study the drug and its well-known side effects objectively," said Susan Rose, a consultant to Lariam litigators and an adjunct assistant professor in the public health school at George Washington University.

"The issue of Lariam's lethal side effects requires an honest assessment. Apparently, the Army is incapable of performing one."

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