

SEATTLEWEEKLY

Home Front Casualties

Murders and suicides by military personnel might be part of the Iraq war toll.

By Rick Anderson

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When young Marine Renee DiLorenzo of Whatcom County was shot and killed last month, she became an uncounted statistic of war. Same for Kim Denni, killed last year in a place appropriately called Battle Ground. They are among 10 Western Washingtonians who've died in military-related conflicts since the 2003 invasion of Iraq—four in just a two-week period last month.

None of the casualties, however, occurred in Iraq. Like the others before them, the four all died on the home front: DiLorenzo, 18, who'd just signed up for the U.S. Marines, was killed July 28 by boyfriend Saxxon Rech, 20. Rech, who was mysteriously discharged early from the Marines in February, then turned the shotgun on himself. Army Spc. Leslie Frederick Jr., 23, a decorated Fort Lewis soldier who served in Iraq, committed suicide July 26 in Tacoma. And Army Spc. Brandon Bare, 19, also an Iraq vet, stabbed to death his wife, Nabila, 18, at Fort Lewis, military prosecutors allege.

The case of Nabila Bare is at least the third in the past two years involving a local soldier who killed a lover after returning from Iraq; the DiLorenzo/Rech deaths may also qualify. Altogether since 2003, there have been seven homicides and three suicides on Western Washington soil involving active troops or veterans of Iraq, based on an accounting of medical examiner, military, and news reports. Fives wives, a girlfriend, and one child have been slain; four other children have lost one or both parents to death or imprisonment. Three servicemen have committed suicide—two of them after killing their wife or girlfriend. Seven of the deaths are linked to soldiers from Fort Lewis. Four soldiers have been sent to prison, and one awaits trial.

No one can say if the killings can be directly connected to the psychological effects of war. But most involve a risk factor distinctive to the military—armed men trained to kill—and some killers carry the invisible scars of war. Bare, for example, was being treated for a brain injury from an Iraq roadside bomb. Army Reserve Sgt. Matthew Denni, who killed his wife, Kimberly, in Battle Ground, Clark County, apparently suffered from the post-traumatic stress of Iraq combat, convincing a jury to convict him of second-degree rather than first-degree murder. Two weeks ago, Sgt. 1st Class James Pitts was imprisoned for drowning his wife in the bathtub of their Lakewood, Pierce County, home just weeks after returning from Iraq. "I wish I was dead," he told a judge.

Statistics on home-front casualties tend to be anecdotal. Neither the Pentagon nor the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) keeps figures on military-involved stateside homicides or suicides. "It's almost impossible to track," says Steve Robinson, head of the National Gulf War Resource Center in Maryland. "I tracked it last year and found as many as 35 suicides [nationwide], but I am sure it's higher now." Another group, the National Gulf War Service Center, estimates as many as 90 soldiers and vets committed suicide while serving in Iraq or Afghanistan or after returning home—including

several at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

After four women at North Carolina's Fort Bragg were killed by their military husbands over six weeks in 2002, the Army stepped up mandatory counseling on combat trauma and domestic violence prevention. But the Pentagon's mission is fighting real, not imagined, wars, and VA counseling is underfunded. "They're doing something," says Robinson, "but I don't think it's enough."

The Body Count

July 28, 2005—Marine veteran **Saxxon Rech**, 20, given an early honorable discharge from the service in February, killed girlfriend Renee DiLorenzo, 18. DiLorenzo, who'd recently enlisted in the Marines, was shot in the back at Rech's family home in Everson, Whatcom County; Rech then turned the shotgun on himself. A motive is unknown. Rech joined the Marine Corps in November 2003, and officials are so far uncertain why he was discharged after just 16 months, or whether he saw combat in Iraq, where Marines from his regiment have been killed in action.

July 26, 2005—Army Spc. Leslie Frederick Jr., 23, stationed at Fort Lewis, shot and killed himself at his South Tacoma apartment. Wounded while serving 15 months in Iraq, Frederick had recently been among the first soldiers to receive the Army's new Combat Action Badge, which represents, says Army Chief of Staff Gen. Peter J. Schoomaker, "the Warrior Ethos." Frederick, according to relatives, suffered psychologically from the stress of combat. His wife also won a divorce and custody of their child six days before his suicide.

July 12, 2005—Army Spc. **Brandon Bare**, 19, was arrested and later charged with stabbing to death his wife, **Nabila Bare**, 18, at their Fort Lewis residence. Nabila was hoping to return to high school for her senior year this fall. Brandon Bare, who was wounded by a March roadside bomb explosion in Iraq, had spent about six months in combat with Fort Lewis' second Stryker Brigade and was receiving counseling for behavioral problems. He faces a military trial.

April 21, 2004—Army Sgt. 1st Class **James K. Pitts**, 32, drowned his wife, **Tara Pitts**, 28, in the bathtub of their Lakewood home, a few weeks after returning from a year's duty in Iraq. The couple, who had a son, 10, was involved in a domestic dispute after she gave his commander copies of letters revealing Pitts' affair with a fellow soldier in Iraq. Pitts confessed to killing his wife and two weeks ago was sentenced to 20 years for second-degree murder. Pitts' father said after his son returned from Iraq, "All he could talk about was how many people he killed over there and how easy he could do it."

March 18, 2004—Army Reserve Sgt. **Matthew Denni**, 39, shot his wife, **Kimberly Denni**, 37, at their home in Battle Ground, Clark County. The couple had a 7-year-old daughter. His wife had just told Dennis she was leaving him for another man when he shot her. Denni, who buried her body in a footlocker, later confessed. He served as a supply sergeant in the Iraq war zone and was accidentally wounded by gunfire. Four months ago, Denni got 20 years for second-degree murder, escaping a first-degree sentence after the jury was given evidence that Denni was affected by post-traumatic stress disorder.

July 17, 2003—Army Spc. **Jeremy L. Meyers**, 22, and friend, Spc. **Christopher R. Baber**, 21,

both Fort Lewis soldiers, strangled to death Meyers' wife, **Jessica Meyers**, 21, who had a five-week-old son. She had been lured to a Tacoma site on the bizarre pretense of faking her death because, her husband convinced her, a paramilitary group wanted to kill her. In fact, the soldier hoped to collect a life insurance payoff and run away with his girlfriend, who was 15. Meyers was sentenced to 41 years. Baber got eight years for manslaughter. Neither had served in Iraq.

April 4, 2003—Army Spc. **Thomas R. Stroh**, 21, strangled his wife, **Brittany Stroh**, 17, and son **Dylan Stroh**, 2, at their Fort Lewis home. He later committed suicide driving head-on into a semi truck in Oregon. The Army would reveal little about Stroh's record, insisting he'd been a good soldier. Pierce County detectives, however, learned he was about to be confined to barracks for abusing his wife and being drunk on duty. The Army was unaware of the murders until after they went to clear out Stroh's base belongings. They assumed Brittany and Dylan had departed for parts unknown, then found their bodies hidden in a closet.

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