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HEADLINE: Exclusive: Green Beret's strange suicide

BYLINE: By MARK BENJAMIN AND DAN OLMSTED

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BODY:

Early one Sunday evening in March, Army Special Forces soldier Bill Howell fed his 7-month-old daughter a bottle and fell asleep with her for half an hour on the couch. It was a minor moment of domestic tranquility, a contrast to his most recent five-month deployment in Iraq. Home just three weeks, Bill was settling back into the family life he shared with his wife, Laura, and three children near Fort Carson.

But by 9:27 p.m., things had gone horribly wrong. That is when a 911 dispatcher received a call from Laura Howell:

"My husband just hit me, and he's going downstairs to get his gun."

Laura Howell hung up and slipped out a door, but her husband cornered her between the garage and their truck parked in front of it. He took a .357-caliber revolver from his waistband and pointed it in her face. "You are going to watch this. You are going to watch this," Bill said to his wife -- meaning watch as he shot her in the face.

Police were approaching through a neighbor's yard. Bill was left-handed. Laura wondered later whether from their angle the police could see the high-powered handgun. "It was huge. Huge," she said of the gun. As the police drew near, she knocked his hand up and away.

In the next moment, Bill Howell put the gun to his temple and pulled the trigger. The bullet went up and back through his head. A policeman simultaneously shot him in the arm, but it was his own gun that killed Chief Warrant Officer Bill Howell.

"I thought, 'Did I just see this?'" Laura Howell, 36, recalled as she sat at her dining room table a few weeks later, a dark spring sky beginning to spit icy snow onto the barren ground of the cul-de-sac in her subdivision, where many of the houses are unfinished.

Laura Howell is trying to make sense of the incomprehensible -- a 36-year-old Special Forces veteran who went ballistic in front of her eyes. "He was a good officer and a good dad," Howell said of her husband.

Laura Howell said her husband had what seemed like a complete mental breakdown.

"The guy standing in that door that night was not my husband. He in no way resembled him," Howell said. "The look in his eyes was, 'Who are you?' It was death."

Howell's sudden outburst of homicidal-suicidal rage could be consistent with an extreme case of post-traumatic stress disorder, or combat stress. By all accounts, his last deployment to Iraq from October into February involved relatively constant and extreme duress, including frequent combat. His Special Forces A-Team, usually around 12 soldiers, was deployed in and around Samarra, a Sunni stronghold. An improvised explosive device killed one member of Bill's team. In one controversial battle in Samarra in December, the military at first claimed more than 50 of the enemy were killed. Press reports highlighted what appeared to be civilian casualties.

But according to Food and Drug Administration warnings, Bill's symptoms also appear to match the side effects from Lariam, an anti-malaria drug invented by the Army that Howell took during his last deployment to Iraq. Lariam is a quinolone, a family of drugs with known mental side effects. Lariam can cross the "blood-brain barrier" and dissolve in the fatty tissue of the brain. The FDA says Lariam can cause suicidal thinking, aggression, delusions and psychosis. The FDA also says that for some people, the side effects have been reported to last long after taking the drug.

During the war on terrorism five Special Forces soldiers -- among the most elite soldiers in the world -- have committed suicide. According to the Army, four of the five suicides, including Howell's, were by soldiers who took Lariam during deployments just prior to their deaths.

For Laura Howell, Bill's use of Lariam during his last deployment is pivotal. Bill had been in the Special Forces for 10 years, including work as a sniper and counter-sniper. Among his deployments, Howell had worked in Haiti, Kosovo, Bosnia and Iraq.

"He has been in the Army for 17 years and 10 years in the Special Forces," she said. Although Bill never seemed to have mental problems after previous action, "He is no stranger to deaths -- American deaths or enemy deaths," she said.

"I have to be careful. I do not want to sound like the widow pointing the finger," said Howell. "But I do think it was the Lariam. Nothing else makes sense. I think chemically, something went wrong. SF guys compartmentalize their lives. His compartments just broke."

The Howell incident also evokes stark echoes of the domestic murder-suicides at Fort Bragg, N.C., in the summer of 2002, when three special operations soldiers who had served in Afghanistan allegedly killed their wives and subsequently killed themselves. At least two of those soldiers had taken Lariam in Afghanistan.

At Fort Bragg, Army investigators blamed marital problems, and dismissed the idea that Lariam had been a factor. In that investigation, the Army did not talk to the soldiers' family or friends.

Laura Howell said Army officials investigating Bill's death have not contacted her even though she was the last person with her husband in his final hours. She says she now fears that she -- or rather, their marriage -- may end up taking the blame. "They want to blame it on marital problems. The guy running the investigation did not call and did not talk to me," Howell said.

"Doesn't that just make your radar go 'beep, beep, beep'?"

Fort Carson did not respond to phone calls and written requests for comment. The Army has said that Lariam does not cause suicide. The Pentagon this year launched a study on possible Lariam side effects, including a look at suicide. The Department of Veterans Affairs announced it will study possible long-term effects of the drug on veterans.

Howell's suicide made national headlines, but until now Laura Howell has not spoken publicly about the night that devastated her life. She said she still can't quite believe what happened. A relative committed suicide several years ago and Bill condemned the act, she said. "He was absolutely the last person you would think would ever do that," she said.

Laura Howell said she hopes the Army will consider the facts surrounding Bill's death with an open mind. "I really hope that some lesson is learned and that Lariam will at least be considered. I would hate for another family to go through this."

The truth about Bill Howell's death could be critical to the health and well-being of thousands of soldiers returning from war and their families. Interviews by UPI at Fort Carson and six other bases show that a wave of mental problems and troubling behavior is accompanying returning soldiers. Many mental problems among soldiers seem unrelated to Lariam; not all took the drug, and many soldiers blame the stress of war.

At least 32 soldiers have committed suicide in Iraq or after returning home, according to Army data. UPI has confirmed that at least two Fort Carson soldiers who apparently committed suicide in Iraq served in units given Lariam.

Mental problems caused by Lariam often accompany a laundry list of physical problems also cited by the FDA.

Another Fort Carson soldier who took Lariam in Iraq described an incident this spring that occurred after having several glasses of wine one Saturday night. At home near Fort Carson, she hallucinated that someone was trying to stomp her to death. Fearing her husband would do the same, she attacked him and bit him before running to a neighbor's home and banging on windows. In addition to her aggression, psychotic reactions and paranoia, she has also experienced unexplained weight loss, ringing ears, dizziness, tremors, chest pain, weakness, diarrhea and abdominal pain. All

are listed as possible side effects of Lariam, which is also called mefloquine. She and her husband believe Lariam is to blame.

Staff Sgt. Georg-Andreas Pogany was briefly attached to Howell's 10th Special Forces Team in Iraq. The Army charged him with cowardice last year after he apparently asked his chain of command for help with what he has said was a panic attack there. That charge was dropped, and his legal status, career and medical care remain in limbo.

Military doctors are still trying to determine what might have caused Pogany's panic attack and a cluster of physical problems that have followed. On March 26, an Air Force doctor wrote in Pogany's medical records, "Based on the patient's historical account of the anxiety symptoms that occurred in Iraq, it is very plausible that the symptoms that he experienced could be related to his use of mefloquine," the generic name for Lariam.

Bill Howell did not appear to have vertigo -- he shot a 23 out of 25 at skeet after returning from Iraq. He did develop a skin rash on his hip, shin and upper arm during his last deployment. He also had diarrhea and suffered panic attacks after returning. All are listed as possible Lariam side effects.

"You can't exclude PTSD as a factor, but I'd say Lariam appears to be the major trigger," said Susan G. Rose, legal adviser to Lariam Action, a group that advocates for people who believe Lariam has harmed them. "If he hadn't taken Lariam, I think he'd be alive. And it looks just like Fort Bragg to me."

Laura Howell says Bill told her he had stopped taking Lariam before Christmas, after the malaria season ended. The Army has told her that no traces of the drug were found in his system, a possibly irrelevant fact given side effects may last long after taking it.

Laura and Bill Howell had been together for six years and married two years. Bill had a daughter by a previous marriage who lives with her mother, and Laura has a 14-year-old son who lives in their house in Monument along with their two children, ages 7 months and 22 months.

The marriage had the ups and downs that all marriages do, heightened by Bill's frequent deployments and the need to renegotiate family patterns when he returned. She said the marriage was happy, marred by one previous incident of domestic violence.

In October 2001 Bill Howell decided to take anabolic steroids to bulk up. He quickly lost control of his temper and hit Laura, and then stopped taking the steroids. That was the only other time he struck her.

"He was very sensitive to chemicals. Anything that had a side effect to it, he would get it," Laura says. She said his two or three "Jack and Cokes" at night never before provoked out-of-control behavior.

The afternoon of his death, March 14, Howell went to the grocery store, where he ran into his ex-wife, an unpleasant experience for him. He got home about 6:30 p.m., fed the baby, and then got on the phone with an Army buddy about 8 p.m. He had four drinks by 9 p.m., Laura Howell says. A medical examiner later put his blood alcohol level at .137, in excess of the legal driving limit.

After the phone call, which sounded like ordinary talk between Army buddies, Bill then sat on the sofa and tried to start a confrontation. He tried to trip Laura with his leg several times when she passed by the living room. At one point he stood in front of the refrigerator and stared at her. She tried to avoid the conflict. She said she did not feel like arguing -- it was late and she had to work the next day.

"All of a sudden I hear, 'Take out the f-- trash.' He never speaks to me like that. Never, ever, ever. Then he hit me, and I hit him back."

He then beat her up. "It was probably four or five more punches to the side of the head.

"I told him, 'You can't bring violence into this house.'"

"He was so irrational." He began accusing her of cheating on him. He said she did not love him. "I thought he was just drunk."

She gave him 10 minutes to cool down and offered to call friends or a cab to take him wherever he needed to go, but he needed to cool down or get out of the house. She said he could not cool down.

Sometime around 9:25 p.m. he said to her, "I am gonna make a mess of your f-- house.' Then I heard the basement door click. The only stuff down there is his Army stuff and his guns."

That is when she made the 911 call, saying that he had beat her and gone for his gun. She quickly hung up because she thought he might hear, and she then went out to the yard.

Laura said she fled the house because she knew a Special Forces soldier could do a house search fast and efficiently -- that is in part what Bill was doing in Iraq. She thought she would do better in the darkness of the yard. "You know, 'Never reveal your position.'"

Meanwhile, the sheriff's office had redialed the Howells' number. Bill answered. He denied that anything was wrong. "Is everything OK there?" the voice from the sheriff's office asks on the tape of the call. "I think it's fine," Bill responded. Bill told the caller to "hold on" and the line went dead.

Laura Howell said she thought he was going to go upstairs and kill the kids. "I was really waiting for three shots."

Instead, he circled around the house and confronted her in the driveway. In an instant, he was dead.

Since then, Laura Howell has listened to the 911 tape. "It was not him on the phone. It was empty. It was very un-emotional," she said.

"It was ghost-like."

mberjamin@upi.com; dolmsted@upi.com

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