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**BROKEN BY WAR, AND ORDERED BACK -- Despite being diagnosed with PTSD and rated 70% disabled by the VA, Damian Fernandez has been called back to duty in Iraq.**



ARMY SPEC. DAMIAN FERNANDEZ, pictured here during his one-year deployment to Iraq, returned home to Waterbury in June 2005. Six months later he had a breakdown and was diagnosed with severe post-traumatic stress disorder. (photo: COURTESY OF FERNANDEZ FAMILY)

Story here... <http://www.courant.com/news/nationworld/hc-ptsdcallup1210.artdec10.0.1928399.story?coll=hc-big-headlines-breaking>

Story below:

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### **Broken By War, And Ordered Back**

**By LISA CHEDEKEL**  
**Courant Staff Writer**

**Nothing was stranger for Mary Jane Fernandez than the events of last Christmas, which had her 24-year-old**

<http://www.vawatchdog.org/nfDEC06/nf121106-2.htm>

son, newly returned from the war in Iraq, downing sedatives, ranting about how rich people were allowed to sit in recliners in church, and summoning the Waterbury police to come arrest him.

This Christmas may top that.

Despite being diagnosed with severe post-traumatic stress disorder and rated 70 percent disabled by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Damian Fernandez has been called back to duty and told to prepare for another deployment to Iraq.

Two weeks ago, Fernandez, who was discharged from active duty in the Army last year and was working to settle back into civilian life, abruptly received orders to report to Fort Benning, Ga., on Jan. 14.

When the FedEx letter from the Army arrived Nov. 28, he calmly told his mother and girlfriend, "I got my orders," staring hard at them with vacant eyes.

That night, he snapped. He told his girlfriend, Riella Darko, that he wanted to die and asked her to take him to the emergency room of St. Mary's Hospital, where he was placed on a suicide watch. He has since been transferred to a locked ward in the Northampton VA Medical Center in Massachusetts.

His callback orders have not yet been rescinded. Even if they are, his mother said, simply being told he must go back into combat has set back his recovery.

"I don't understand why the military would put him through this," Mary Jane Fernandez said. "He was just starting to come back to reality a little, and now he's lost again."

Fernandez is one of 8,262 soldiers who have left active duty but have been ordered back under a policy that allows the military to recall troops who have completed their service but have time remaining on their contracts. About 5,700 of those called up have already been mobilized, with Fernandez among about 2,500 ordered to report in the coming weeks.

The practice of recalling inactive soldiers involuntarily is itself controversial, with some members of Congress and veterans' advocates calling it a backdoor draft.

All soldiers have an eight-year military service obligation, but typically are released from duty after two to six years. The Army, strained by the war, announced in mid-2004 that it would begin tapping a pool of about 100,000 soldiers who had time left on their service obligations, to fill vacancies in Reserve and National Guard units.

The fact that some of those being summoned have been ruled disabled by the VA or the military, with service-connected PTSD and other medical problems, is raising alarm among veterans' advocates and families. In Fernandez's case, the 70 percent disability rating indicated the serious degree to which doctors had judged his mental state to be impaired.

Steve Robinson, director of government relations for Veterans of America, said he knew of a number of other war veterans with PTSD who had been called back to Iraq.

"If you have a war-related injury that you're being compensated for," he said, "to be sent back into a situation that might exacerbate the problem just doesn't make sense."

### Going Back

Paul Sinsigalli, 30, of Andover, was just starting the fall semester at Manchester Community College when he received a letter ordering him back to duty Nov. 5.

Two years ago, he served a rough tour in Baghdad, where he conducted house-to-house raids and witnessed a group of women and children being blown up by a suicide bomb. He has since been diagnosed with PTSD and a degenerative disk problem in his back.

After sending the Army his medical and college records, he was granted a two-month delay and now must report to Fort Jackson, S.C., by Jan. 7 or risk criminal prosecution, as the call-up orders warn.

"I've tried really hard to adjust to being out. I thought, 'They won't call me back - I'm disabled,'" said Sinsigalli, who receives compensation for his PTSD, which the VA has deemed 10 percent disabling.

"If I have to go back [to Iraq], obviously I'm going to do whatever it takes to get my head back into it. But it's hard - I'm pretty shook up," he said. "The thing that gets me is, if I tried to re-enlist, they wouldn't even take me unless I waived my disability."

Lt. Col. Bryan Hilferty, an Army spokesman, acknowledged that recalling inactive soldiers - many of whom have settled into jobs or college and have had no association with the military in recent years - was a last resort.

"We do look every other place" to fill combat slots, Hilferty said. "However, the nation's at war, and it's better for us, and the soldiers, to send fully manned units."

Hilferty said veterans can seek exemptions from being recalled and receive medical screenings before being deployed. But he said a physical or mental disability, including PTSD, was not "an automatic exemption" from serving.

"Clearly, many soldiers are disabled in some way after war," he said. "Many of them remain on active duty."

Hilferty said the Army does not have a system for checking every veteran's disability status before sending out the call-up orders. Soldiers are picked at random, based on the job specialties that are needed. They have the responsibility to provide documentation of their medical conditions, he said.

"You may request a delay or exemption only under circumstances of extreme hardship or physical inability," the recall notices say.

To date, about 24 percent of the 10,917 soldiers who have received mobilization orders have been granted exemptions, Army figures show.

Last summer, the Marines also began recalling some inactive reservists to fill critical jobs.

Mary Jane Fernandez said she already has notified the Army about Damian's chronic PTSD, and is stunned that he has not been excused. She said a friend of Damian's, who also has severe PTSD, has opted to go back to Iraq because "he misses killing people," the friend told her. A veterans' counselor familiar with the case confirmed that account.

Mary Jane said she cannot picture Damian, whose symptoms include paranoia and hallucinations, back in a war zone.

"I don't trust him taking out the garbage, let alone watching someone's back on the battlefield," she said.

Army and Defense Department officials acknowledged to The Courant earlier this year that they were redeploying soldiers with PTSD - even though medical standards for enlistment in the armed forces disqualify recruits who suffer from PTSD. The practice of recycling troops with PTSD into war has drawn criticism from some combat-stress experts, who say that re-exposure to trauma increases the risk of serious psychiatric problems.

Last month, Assistant Secretary of Defense William Winkenwerder Jr. issued a new policy that steps up psychological screening of troops, after a Courant series detailing gaps in mental health care brought pressure from Congress for improvements. Among other things, the policy deems PTSD a "treatable" condition, but directs that troops with psychiatric disorders should be sent to war only if they are stable and "without significant symptoms" for at least three months prior to deployment.

Because the policy is new and still allows military clinicians broad discretion in deciding which mental conditions should preclude deployment, its impact is uncertain.

#### A Broken Son

Before he received his recall orders, Damian Fernandez's PTSD symptoms had just begun to subside, his mother and girlfriend said.

Riella Darko, 24, recently learned that she was pregnant, and Damian's outlook had brightened slightly at the prospect of becoming a father. At a baby shower last month, "He actually looked a little happy," Riella said.

"Happy" hasn't been in Damian's emotional repertoire since he arrived home in June 2005 from a year in Iraq, Riella and Mary Jane said. The once-upbeat soldier who went club-hopping with friends, enjoyed writing and drawing and talked of becoming a state cop never made it back from Iraq. The man who returned in his place, they barely recognized.

"I used to have to track him down on his cell all the time," said Mary Jane, who shares a two-family house with her son. "Now, I never have to call him because I know where he is - upstairs."

Damian had spent most of the last 18 months upstairs, playing video games or drinking himself to sleep, Mary Jane and Riella said. He attended community college classes for a few weeks, but abruptly quit after an incident in which he mistook a noise outside for a gunshot and flew into a panic because he could not find his gun, they said.

A simple "What do you want for dinner?" can ignite his temper.

"He throws things a lot. We have holes in just about every wall," Riella said.

Mary Jane, who is widowed, said she worries that the war has "broken" her only child. When he first came home from Iraq, his car stereo - a prized possession - was stolen. He was despondent for weeks, she said.

"He asked me, 'These are the people I fought for?'" she recounted, choking up.

Although Damian has not spoken much about his experiences in Iraq, he told Mary Jane and Riella about a day a school bus exploded on a bridge, and children's body parts fell from the sky.

"He said he accidentally stepped on a kid's insides - the liver or something," Riella said.

After Damian fell apart last Christmas, Mary Jane said she convinced him to go to the VA to get help. He was diagnosed with PTSD and placed on an antidepressant. This September, he was admitted to a three-week inpatient program at the Northampton VA. His discharge records say: "Suicidal ruminations resolved. Otherwise unchanged from admission."

The recall orders drove him back to the same facility.

Mary Jane and Riella said that while Damian had worried about being sent back to Iraq someday, he had begun to relax in recent months. That changed when the letter arrived.

"He feels guilty that if doesn't go back, he'll be deserting his buddies," Mary Jane said of her son, who received commendations for prior tours in Korea and Africa. "But if he does go back, he's afraid he won't be able to do his part.

"He's all torn up now."

#### Non-Assurances

Because the Army has no policy exempting soldiers with PTSD from returning to war, counselors at the New Haven Vet Center have been unable to offer Damian assurances he will be excused. Mary Jane said one counselor suggested that Damian's best bet might be to stay "locked up" in the hospital through January.

Still, Donna Hryb, team leader at the Hartford Vet Center, said she would be surprised if the Army deploys a soldier as severely impaired as Damian.

"It would be counterproductive for the unit and for him," she said.

Hilferty, the Army spokesman, acknowledged that redeploying soldiers with "severe" psychological problems could jeopardize other troops' safety. He noted that the Army is not calling back soldiers who have served in combat within the last 12 months, to allow them time between deployments. Hilferty also said

**officials are working to better monitor soldiers' "readiness."**

**Robinson and other veterans' advocates said the Defense Department and the VA should be sharing medical records, so that the call-ups are targeted to healthy soldiers, not those with psychiatric disorders. Because many veterans are not even aware that they can be summoned to active duty, the orders alone can cause panic, the advocates said.**

**Paul Sinsigalli said he has had trouble sleeping and concentrating since his orders arrived. Only recently had he gotten comfortable driving again, without worrying that every stray object on the side of a road might be a bomb. Now, he wonders if he ever should have let down his guard.**

**He has put off plans to apply to the University of Connecticut's nursing program and he has moved up his wedding date.**

**"I'm going to go down there [to Fort Jackson] with all my medical records, but I know when I get there, they're going to try to get me to go over," he said. "It's pretty simple: They need bodies."**

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*Larry Scott*