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Wounded

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and twisted his leg. "I thought it was just an ankle sprain," he said. "One day I woke up and just couldn't move."

He had twisted his spine. Now the soft-spoken soldier cannot sit or stand for too long, or lift anything over 10 pounds, which limits his work as a supply clerk.

He has spent two years at Walter Reed going through rehabilitation and waiting for his discharge, which means he hasn't lived with his wife of 10 years for more than three years.

"She's been talking about a divorce," he said. "I just signed [my rating] so I could go home and be with my family."

He said his physical evaluation board counselor was another private first class. "She didn't know what she was doing," he said. "Sometimes I had to tell her what was going on."

The Army awarded him 20 percent disability — no medical retirement for his war injuries, and no insurance for his family.

"It's frustrating when you know the love you used to have for the military, and then you lose that," he said. "This is their job: It shouldn't take months to give a person the same percentage you gave someone else with the same injury last week."

Buchanan said cases can take longer if a soldier presents new information about his case, or if he asks to continue on as a reservist, or if his rank changes. But those tasks, he said, are outside the Physical Disability Agency's realm.

"We're implementers of policy," he explained. "We walk a fine line, and we do make errors. But we have a fine quality assurance system that keeps the rates way down."

About 30 percent of all cases are reviewed, he said. He explained which cases: all general officers, anyone rated for PTSD and anyone who doesn't concur with his rating.

But that doesn't take into consideration the everyday soldier who signed his rating without realizing he could talk to a lawyer, without understanding that doctors make mistakes, and without having read the thousands of pages of policy that apply to medical disability evaluation boards.

Fewer resources

Part of the problem is that the system is understaffed.

On Feb. 17, 2005, Lt. Gen. Franklin Hagenbeck, former deputy chief of staff for personnel, told the House Committee on Government Reform that the Army did not have nearly the resources it had during the Vietnam War. He said the Army processed 15,000 cases in 2004 with three

BROKEN DISABILITY SYSTEM

A 2006 report by the Government Accountability Office highlights the growth in military medical evaluation cases and the continuing problems in resolving them within the 30-to-70-day limit.

ARMY	Total number of cases	Percentage processed				
		≥30 days	31-60 days	61-90 days	91-120 days	120+ days
FY2001 Active duty	6,627	1.6	13.6	41.3	20.1	23.4
Reserve component	591	4.1	14.5	24.2	15.9	41.3
FY2005 Active duty	9,322	16.0	37.1	21.3	12.3	13.2
Reserve component	4,426	5.5	21.8	20.3	16.3	36.0
NAVY/MARINE CORPS						
FY2001 Active duty	4,620	24	41	16	6	13
Reserve component	379	7	39	19	9	26
FY2005 Active duty	4,645	61	24	5	3	5
Reserve component	555	30	39	12	6	14
AIR FORCE						
FY2001 Active duty	2,376	89	7	3	1	0
Reserve component	441	85	9	5	2	0
FY2005 Active duty	3,610	55	23	9	5	8
Reserve component	758	44	20	12	8	16

Source: Government Accountability Office

JOHN BRETSCHNEIDER/STAFF

physical evaluation board systems and a total of 70 employees.

"The last time we had that many cases was in 1972, when [we] processed 19,000 cases," he said. "At that time, there were six [physical evaluation boards] across five states and the District with a total of 260 employees."

Buchanan said that number has grown to 95 employees since the hearing, though he is only authorized 61.

Opportunities for trouble

The wait can cause other problems.

On Christmas Day, six soldiers spent their time at Walter Reed picking up trash, mopping floors and emptying garbage.

"I was planning to go home for the holidays," said Spc. Ruben Villalpando, who dropped from sergeant rank when he came up hot for marijuana on a urinalysis while at Walter Reed. "There's a 100 percent urinalysis policy for med hold."

In other words, every soldier in the medical hold company is tested for drugs.

The other five soldiers also came up hot, he said. Not only did Villalpando lose his holiday, the reduction in rank means that if he does receive a disability payment, it will be lower than it would have been a month before.

Ray Parrish, director of the military counseling service for Vietnam Veterans Against the War, helps soldiers through the medical and physical evaluation boards and has worked as a counselor since his days as a soldier. The long wait can be a problem, he said, especially for soldiers suffering from PTSD. Those soldiers have a tendency to self-medicate, as well as act out in anger.

"During that six- to eight-month

wait, you're just sitting around," Parrish said. "It's quite literally an opportunity to get in trouble."

And soldiers discharged with other-than-honorable stamped on their DD214s can't get benefits from VA.

Randy Reese, national service director for Disabled American Veterans, also works with soldiers going through the process. He said he understands why they take the first rating they get: "They're in the hospital for a long time away from their friends," he said. "A lot of people will do whatever they have to do to get back home, and they're missing out on a whole world of retirement benefits that could be available to them."

Villalpando arrived at Walter Reed after forcing a fistful of antidepressants down his throat. While Villalpando was in Iraq in May 2005, his cousin, Marcos Omar Nolasco, was electrocuted in a faulty shower in Baghdad.

"He came back from a mission, and he took a shower, and he got electrocuted," Villalpando said, surrounded by his own artwork and a Morrissey poster at the barracks across the street from Walter Reed. "It did a good number on me. I was so close to him. I spent the remainder of my tour on antidepressants."

The 7th Field Artillery, 1st Infantry Division, soldier said he attempted suicide to try to get help after falling into a depression.

Now his end term of service date has passed — he was to get out in August — and still he sits at Walter Reed.

In his case, there have been clerical errors, such as a mistyped Social Security number that meant his paperwork had to be processed again, he said.

"This place gets so depressing," he said. "I'm frustrated. I'm tired. I'm angry. I want to go home." □



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