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Prescription drug abuse hits Mo. Army unit hard

By Gregg Zoroya, USA TODAY

Spc. Jeremy Thompson and one of his friends in their barracks spent hours crushing and snorting painkillers prescribed by Army doctors, and then, he said in interviews and court-martial documents, the two combat veterans would stare at the Discovery Channel in a haze.

Roughly a third of the soldiers in the 509th Engineer Company at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri were also abusing prescription narcotics, court records say. Like Thompson and his buddy, Spc. Jason Pellet, many suffered orthopedic injuries from training and war, and their drug source was the Army pharmacy.

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All of this ended in January, when Army authorities uncovered the abuse and launched investigations. Thompson and 12 other soldiers were charged with illegally using and distributing prescription drugs. Several others were punished in lesser proceedings.

Thompson, 26, pleaded guilty at a court-martial in May to illegally using and distributing prescription drugs, which he shared with 11 other soldiers. An installation spokeswoman, Tiffany Wood, said six soldiers have been convicted of drug charges and seven await trial.

The cases show the hazards of a military system in which narcotic painkillers are easily available, said Thompson's attorney, Capt. Elizabeth Turner. "It just highlighted to me what an immense problem that is," she said.

Thompson was sentenced to six months in jail and reduced in rank to private. The judge, Lt. Col. John Saunders, wrote in a clemency request that Thompson was "a capable, compelling soldier who had, unfortunately, become addicted to pain killers."

Thompson's addiction grew slowly over time after he dislocated his right shoulder during hand-to-hand combat training in 2003. Then, he used his Army-prescribed painkillers only as directed, Thompson later testified.

During his first tour in Iraq from 2003 to 2004, Thompson said in an interview, his shoulder would slip out of place whenever he tried to move something heavy. Once, a medic gave him morphine before placing his foot against Thompson's shoulder and twisting his arm to pop it back in place, he said.

When he returned to Fort Leonard Wood, he said, doctors recommended physical therapy and continued giving him painkillers until he deployed to Iraq again in 2005, Thompson said in interviews and testimony.

By the time he returned home in 2006, Thompson was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. An MRI also showed he needed shoulder surgery, he said, but that was delayed.

Thompson said he had become physically dependent on the narcotics. He also liked how they made him feel. His first Percocet prescription was for 30 pills a month, and doctors eventually raised that to 240 pills for 30 days. "It was just like an instant pain relief in my shoulder, and after that, it started getting a highness in my head. ... It felt good all the time," Thompson said in an interview.

Thompson knew it was wrong, he said, and asked his squad leader about enrolling in the Army Substance Abuse Program. The sergeant, he said, told him that admitting his dependence would ruin his career.

"I'm ashamed and embarrassed that I actually got addicted to this crap," Thompson later testified.

Before the investigation began in January, Thompson and his friends would trade drugs in what the Army calls "buddy sharing," he testified. When a soldier would refill his drug prescription, he would either give away some of his painkillers to friends or sell them for \$3 or \$4 a pill, records show.

Some of the soldiers turned to more serious drugs: cocaine and even heroin, according to reports by Army criminal investigators.

Thompson had shoulder surgery in January but still had pain, according to medical records provided by his attorney. He kept abusing drugs.

The prosecutions gutted the 509th Engineer Company.

"It took almost half the company," Staff Sgt. James Gregory testified. Many are combat veterans. Some are married with children. One, Spc. Kenneth White, became addicted to medication after he suffered blast-related wounds, according to his lawyer, Anita Gorecki. A recent seizure delayed his trial, she says.

Capt. Kyle Van De Water, the Army prosecutor, argued at Thompson's court-martial that authorities had to "send a message" to soldiers abusing prescriptions.

"That is a crime, and it must be punished," he said.

Thompson was released Friday from jail at Fort Sill in Oklahoma. The 2003 shoulder injury that led to his drug abuse has yet to be fixed. Thompson said he hopes Veterans Affairs hospital doctors will finally end that pain.

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