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Opinion

Tragedies are born of wartime's atrocities

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WE need to comprehend the seemingly incomprehensible. Why would Army Sgt. John Russell kill five of his fellow soldiers in a combat stress clinic at Camp Liberty in Iraq?

While a shocking act, it is the predictable outcome of a conflict soaked in atrocities.

After the United States invaded Afghanistan and Iraq, U.S. troops and their enemies have engaged in a cycle of brutality. Both have engaged in acts of terror that have caused widespread trauma and psychological desensitization.

We bombed their mosques, and they drove cars laden with explosives into American patrols. We humiliated, tortured and photographed detainees, and they kidnapped, tortured and executed soldiers and journalists on video. There were incidents in which we killed or raped unarmed civilians. The enemies created a landscape of lawlessness, with high-level assassinations and bombings that created mass casualties.

These atrocities from both sides haunt our veterans. It's why soldiers like Russell crack and open fire on seemingly random targets. It's why the military's suicide rate continues to escalate. It's why incidence of violent crime and domestic abuse are rising in American towns and cities where there are military bases.

In Washington, politicians and generals have begun to talk about the stress of repeated deployments and the lack of available mental health care as causes of these incidents. Nearly 800,000 service members have served at least two tours — and the nonpartisan Rand Corp. estimates more than 300,000 suffer from either post-traumatic stress disorder or major depression, while only half of those afflicted get the care they need.

But though the stress of multiple tours is central to these crimes, it isn't the only culprit.

Standard operating procedures that instruct our soldiers and Marines to perform morally questionable tactics such as reconnaissance-by-fire (where soldiers fire their guns in an attempt to locate the source of incoming fire), the constant searches of homes without probable cause, massive and questionable round-ups of military-age men and the not-standard but too common brutal interrogations take their toll.

They induce guilt and shame, which pushes some soldiers toward violence or suicide. Consider the life and death of Alyssa Peterson, an army interrogator who killed herself in September 2003. Peterson had been assigned to the U.S. prison at Tal Afar in Iraq.

Three years later, KNAU radio reported on the Army's investigation of her death. It noted that Peterson had been reprimanded for showing "empathy" for the prisoners and that she had refused to participate in torture. "She said that she did not know how to be two people," the report read. "She ... could not be one person in

the cage and another outside the wire.”

Carl Jung, the analytical psychiatrist, said, “The healthy man does not torture others — generally it is the tortured who turn into torturers.”

If Adm. Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, is serious about “the need for us to redouble our efforts in terms of dealing with the stress” of combat, then he, Defense Secretary Robert Gates and President Barack Obama should think about the vicious cycle of torment.

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