

Once branded a coward, he fights for PTSD victims



By PAULINE ARRILLAGA, AP National Writer
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COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. – They call him the angry guy now. Even his friends. And at this moment, on a snowy evening when he should be home, putting his son to bed, Andrew Pogany is, in fact, ticked off.

He sits with a soldier in a law office. The man has brought with him a pile of medical files, and another desperate story: Sent off to war to fight for his country. Diagnosed, now, with post-traumatic stress disorder. Yet the Army, the soldier tells Pogany, is drawing up papers to discharge him in a way that could mean no medical benefits.

The soldier confides he thinks about killing himself. All the time, he says.

Pogany makes sure he has his cell number. Then he copies the medical records, and recommends a book by a Vietnam veteran turned Zen monk. The man once helped Pogany through his own tough times. Maybe the monk's words will help this guy hang on.

Two hours behind closed doors, then a handshake and the soldier leaves. Pogany seethes.

"Disgusting," he fumes. "This is so disgusting."

Yes, Andrew Pogany is angry again. But he shrugs off such labels. Better to be called angry than to be branded a coward by the very military he signed up to serve, as the Army did to him back in 2003.

When the military tried to prosecute him, anger motivated Pogany to fight. When he began thinking about taking his own life, anger helped quiet the despair and kept him from getting a gun. When service members like this one started coming to him for help, anger drove him to fight on, for them.

He likes to say that the "anger monkey" saved him. He'll need that anger to have a shot at saving this soldier, too.

Nov. 6, 2003. Pogany sat in his old house in Colorado Springs, watching CNN. Suddenly his own face appeared on the screen alongside that of Jessica Lynch, as Paula Zahn asked the country a question:

"So what makes a hero a hero, and a coward a coward?"

Lynch, the former Army supply clerk rescued after being captured by Iraqi forces, was, of course, the hero.

Pogany was the man with the brand: the coward.

We were just eight months into the war in Iraq. The now-common stories of combat stress, soldiers committing suicide, guys coming home and getting into trouble with the law, the military grappling with how to deal with it all, weren't yet all over the news.

Pogany, the coward, was.

He deployed to Iraq in September 2003, a 32-year-old staff sergeant trained in intelligence and interrogation. Based at Fort Carson in Colorado Springs, he volunteered to go to war with a team of Green Berets when another soldier couldn't.

Then, only a few days in-country, Pogany saw the shredded body of a gunned-down Iraqi. He had what he thought was a panic attack — vomiting, hallucinations. A psychologist concluded he'd had a normal combat stress reaction and recommended rest, then back to duty.

Instead, Pogany's commanders shipped him back to Fort Carson, and he was charged with "cowardly conduct as a result of fear," a crime punishable by death under the Uniform Code of Military Justice. The last such conviction in the Army occurred during the Vietnam War.

Pogany wasn't convicted. He and his attorney produced findings that showed the breakdown was likely a reaction to the anti-malaria drug Lariam, which has side effects that may include paranoia and hallucinations. The Army eventually dropped all charges, finding Pogany had "a medical problem that requires care and treatment."

In April 2005, Pogany was medically retired from the Army, with full benefits.

He tells the story now, in 2010, in an almost bored voice. He's tired of telling it. That's obvious. Don't people know it by now?

Didn't his fiancée's relatives call him "the famous guy" when they met at a Christmas party? Wasn't his application for a police job once rejected because his "background" wasn't suitable?

for employment? He took "background" to mean: "where they falsely accused me of being a coward."

Borrowing from a Buddhist tenet, Pogany says he longer attaches to, or detaches from, his story. He's even somewhat thankful for it, because it — and all the stuff that came with that terrible brand — made him who he is today.

He remembers the Army coming to his house and confiscating his gun and then assigning him to sweep parking lots, pick up cigarette butts, and clean toilets. He endured by working with his lawyer to research military regulations and learn the medical retirement process inside and out. He studied the bible of psychiatry, the "Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders," which still sits within arm's reach of his desk at his home near downtown Denver.

He had to fight to clear his name even while trying to figure out what was wrong with him. There were medical tests, treatment for Lariam toxicity and, eventually, sessions with a therapist, yoga classes, studies in Buddhism.

"Life in itself became combat for me," he says. "I did exactly what they train us to do: Assess the enemy situation ... and figure out how I can outmaneuver" these guys.

He also learned what it meant to feel true despair, to sit alone in his bedroom, getting comfortable with the idea of shooting himself just to make it all end. And he discovered how vital it was to have someone to turn to in those times.

His lawyer, Richard Travis, remembers the phone calls, and the tears.

"He was just treated so poorly. It's kind of like when you've got the nice loyal dog and you start kicking him around and the dog looks at you like, 'What are you doing? What did I do to deserve this?'"

Eventually, that dog might bite.

Was there ever some deliberate pledge to not let it happen to anyone else? Not exactly; Pogany just needed a job.

Steve Robinson, the former executive director of the National Gulf War Resource Center, stepped in and asked Pogany to

work as an advocate on behalf of soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Robinson's instructions: Find people who need help. And help them.

"There's something very empowering about helping yourself and then turning around and using that energy to help other people. That," says Robinson, "is the story of Andrew."

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The soldier isn't five minutes out of the law office when Pogany begins formulating a battle plan.

First step: an e-mail to the top commander at Fort Carson. "'Request emergency meeting with you because your commanders ... are actively engaged in causing suicides.' Or something like that. See how he responds," Pogany says.

He's in mission mode again. It began the moment he spoke with the soldier by phone a few days earlier. A counselor in Colorado Springs apparently gave the man Pogany's name.

"The coward" has become the one to call if a service member may be getting the shaft.

By now, Pogany can't even count how many cases he's worked or soldiers he's met. Hundreds, he estimates. A few guys he advised while going through his own medical retirement started referring people to him. And the calls and e-mails kept coming.

There were mothers begging for help for sons back from war. Wives wondering what was wrong with their husbands, and not sure how to get military commanders to listen.

People like Teresa Mischke, who says her husband, Darren, came back from his second deployment to Iraq in 2006 a changed man. In March 2007, Darren was arrested in Colorado Springs on a domestic violence charge after jumping on top of Teresa's car. He pleaded guilty, and suddenly faced an Army discharge.

Teresa says she went to Darren's commanders for help, to no avail. Then she got Pogany's number.

"He would go to the general," she recalls. " He would downright say, 'Hey, you cannot do this. If you do this, we'll do a, b, c.'"

Doctors eventually diagnosed Darren with PTSD and a brain injury. Pogany's old lawyer took on the domestic abuse charge, and the case was dismissed. He remains in the Army, assigned now to Fort Carson's Warrior Transition Battalion, which aims to rehabilitate wounded soldiers. Instead of a discharge without benefits, Darren is going through the medical retirement process as he continues both cognitive behavioral therapy and counseling.

Teresa's heard others criticize Pogany for "throwing rocks at Fort Carson." She says: "If somebody didn't throw rocks, where would these guys be? What if there weren't people like Andrew?"

Justin Taylor, who served three tours in Iraq and was medically retired from the Army after Pogany intervened, explains it this way: "As soldiers, you have the chain of command. You have to watch what you say. Andrew, he can play the mean cop all he wants. He was the spokesman for soldiers who were scared to say anything."

It's true that Pogany's style hasn't won him many fans at his old Army base, where he has done most of his advocacy work — first with Robinson's organization, then as an investigator with Veterans for America and the National Veterans Legal Services Program.

Col. George Brandt, the senior behavioral health officer at the base hospital at Fort Carson, questioned whether Pogany goes too far — to the point of exaggerating the facts of a case — to get action.

"I respect Andy. He has brought things to my attention where we've made a difference," Brandt said. "My issue with Mr. Pogany is a systematic misrepresentation of facts. He needs to not sacrifice his integrity to make points."

Brandt said he couldn't cite specifics or comment on individual cases, because of base policies.

Pogany is, undoubtedly, persistent. He'll e-mail not only top commanders at Carson, but Peter Chiarelli, vice chief of staff of the Army. He'll shop soldiers' stories to the media.

Robert Alvarez, a Colorado Springs therapist who has worked dozens of cases with Pogany, defends Pogany's work ethic. Alvarez says they've both walked away from cases after finding soldiers were bending the truth.

If Pogany is politically incorrect or irate, even, it's because of the stakes, Alvarez says.

"We're dealing with life or death matters. ... Let me tell you: That guy cares about soldiers. Bottom line."

On Pogany's night stand at home sits a carving given to him by the mother of a soldier he once helped. It's the Hindu deity Ganesha, "Lord of success and destroyer of evils and obstacles."

The Mischkes and Justin Taylor — they are success stories. And there've been others, notably a court ruling this year that allows thousands of Iraq and Afghanistan war vets to join a class-action lawsuit alleging the military denied appropriate benefits to those suffering from PTSD. Pogany helped push for the case, brought by the National Veterans Legal Services Program.

But there have also been too many tragedies, including the suicide of a soldier with whom Pogany served.

The stories become too much after a while. His blood boils because of them, because seven years after his own fight with the military brought so many issues to light, other problems remain — and others soldiers still struggle.

It's never been about payback, he says, but rather the very thing the military preaches: Duty.

"Those of us who have come home and have survived this war ... we have an obligation to help those who come home and struggle. We must help them, because if we don't ... not only are we breaking a sacred promise we've made to them, we're also dishonoring the memory of those who have not come home," Pogany says.

Last November, Pogany was hired as director of military outreach and education for the organization Give an Hour, which enlists volunteers to provide counseling to soldiers returning from war.

The advocacy work is all on the side now.

With his latest case, Pogany got that meeting with the base commander. Fort Carson doctors reviewed the soldier's case, and he's in the process of being transferred into the Warrior Transition Battalion for help and, most likely, a medical retirement.

Maybe he'll be a success story, too.

Pogany would like to step back, and focus on life and his fiancée and his baby, a smiling blue-eyed boy named Charlie. He is training another ex-military man to take on his advocacy work. And yet every time he tries to say he's "done," another sad story draws him back in.

And then he finds himself back in Colorado Springs, reviewing medical files, missing Charlie's bedtime and hoping another soldier can hang on, the way he somehow managed to hang on. By fighting.

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