



Friends say man who fired shots has stress disorder

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This story originally ran Oct. 8, 2005 in the El Paso Times.

A Fort Bliss soldier who gained national attention two years ago when he was photographed carrying a wounded Iraqi boy to safety is the same man behind a shooting that terrified an East Side apartment complex Thursday, police and friends said.

Spc. Joseph Dwyer, 29, repeatedly fired a 9-mm handgun inside his second-floor apartment starting around 9:15 p.m. Thursday in a more-than-three-hour standoff friends described as a violent episode brought on by drug abuse and post-traumatic stress disorder due to the war in Iraq.

No one was injured in the incident at the Vista Village apartments, 10535 Montwood. Dwyer surrendered just before 1 a.m. Friday.

He was jailed in lieu of a \$10,000 bond on a Class-A misdemeanor charge of discharging a firearm inside the city limits, police said.

"I'm angry because Joseph, when he came back from Iraq, he was a hero, and now when he needs help, nobody is helping him," said friend Dionne Knapp, a former Army medic who served with Dwyer at Fort Bliss.

"We gave (military and mental-health authorities) warning after warning after warning. ... All this could have been prevented," Knapp said.

"Joseph is the sweetest, most good-hearted man I've ever met in my life," said Angela Barraza, who worked with Knapp and Dwyer. Both Barraza, now living in New York, and Knapp of El Paso left the Army in April.

Dwyer, a native of Mount Sinai, N.Y., joined the Army as a medic two days after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, according to news accounts.

When the war began in Iraq, Dwyer, a newlywed, volunteered to take Knapp's spot in a deployment of medics because she was a single mother, Knapp said. Dwyer served four months in Iraq attached to the 3rd Squadron of the 7th Cavalry Regiment, Fort Bliss officials said.

March 23, 2003, Dwyer was among soldiers who rushed to help an Iraqi family caught in the crossfire in a fierce battle near the village of Al Faysaliyah.

An Army Times photographer captured the moment Dwyer carried a young boy to safety. The photo was published around the world, including in the El Paso Times.

But friends said Dwyer returned from the war a changed man. He came back "very religious," but problems slowly emerged. Nightmares, drinking and sniffing inhalants, they said.



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"He basically saw the ugliest part of the war," Barraza said.

Earlier this year, Dwyer crashed his car. "He (said he) saw a box on the street and thought it was a bomb and he swerved," she said.

A Fort Bliss spokeswoman said Dwyer had no disciplinary issues but confirmed he had seen mental-health experts. Dwyer's friends said they were disappointed with the mental help he was receiving, saying he lacked supervision. Last Wednesday, Barraza, Knapp and other friends met with Dwyer, whose condition they say had worsened since April when their close-knit group was broken up as individuals left the Army. They said they tried but failed to take away three handguns Dwyer had in the home. He was paranoid people would attack him. He answers his door with his weapon," Knapp said.

Thursday night, Dwyer's wife told his friends he became angry when he was told he had to return to the hospital. His wife left before Dwyer allegedly began shooting in the apartment. "He started shooting and calling for backup (while talking to his wife on the phone) and that he needed direct fire and other things you hear in combat," Knapp said.

Yessika Varela and her two children, ages 2 and 8, were among the dozens of residents in surrounding apartments who heard volley upon volley of gunfire. "Each (burst) was like five shots. You could hear tah-tah-tah-tah. I wouldn't even look out the window. I was very scared," Varela said.

Friday afternoon, children at the complex walked up to see a broken window and a bullet hole in the front door of the Dwyers' apartment, which management said had suffered ceiling damage. Dwyer is no longer allowed on the property. El Paso police spokesman Javier Sambrano would not confirm whether Dwyer's service in Iraq was a factor in the shooting. Dwyer's friends hope the publicity of the shooting will prompt the military to provide improved mental-health treatment for Dwyer and other troops returning from combat.

"If he doesn't get help -- I'm afraid he will end up in the streets selling Pixy Stix (candy) on corners," Barraza said. " ... And this is going on around the nation, not just at Fort Bliss."

Some symptoms associated with post- traumatic stress disorder:

- Difficulty falling or staying asleep.
- Irritability or outbursts of anger.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Hyper-vigilance.
- Exaggerated startle response.

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