

Broken soldier or safety threat? Ex-GI faces prison

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By Bridget Murphy

As a U.S. soldier in Iraq, part of Jason Snodgrass' job was to raid villages, capture suspected terrorists and bring them to an American base for questioning.

But the retired Army sergeant soon will go from a history of acting as a guard to being among the guarded. On Tuesday, the 33-year-old is due to surrender at the Duval County Courthouse so he can head off to serve a three-year prison sentence.

The arrangement comes after Snodgrass recently pleaded guilty to a charge of aggravated assault involving a deadly weapon. His arrest report shows last May he fired one gunshot into the air during an argument with neighbors at his apartment complex in Jacksonville.

No one was hurt, and Snodgrass handed over two guns after a witness called police to the complex at 11247 San Jose Blvd. in Mandarin. Police arrested the ex-soldier and his father Jeffry, 52, who was part of the confrontation.

It started when two neighbors on a third-floor balcony complained the Snodgrasses were squealing tires in the parking lot. There was an exchange of words, during which Snodgrass said the neighbors accused them of possibly hitting one of their cars.

That's when Snodgrass said he saw one man reach into his pants and pull out something he believed was a gun. He said it was his combat service, and the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) he's suffered in the aftermath, that made him act as he did.

"The first thing that popped in my head, 'I should react like I would if I were in Iraq,'" he said. "This is a person who's trying to engage me."

Snodgrass went inside his ground-floor apartment, got two handguns, and gave one to his father. Later on, two witnesses told police they saw both men point guns at the neighbors on the balcony.

Snodgrass said he wasn't paying attention to his father, just the threat. He said the neighbors went inside after the shot.

Police didn't find a gun when they searched the neighbors' apartment later. They told police Snodgrass shot in the air, not at them.

But the gun charge meant the ex-soldier faced a minimum mandatory of 20 years behind bars, a sentence his lawyer said only the State Attorney's Office could waive. Veterans' advocates believed prison wasn't a place where Snodgrass could get treatment he needed.

What went wrong

In February 2003, Snodgrass deployed to Iraq with the Army's 101st Pathfinder Company out of Fort Campbell, Ky. He was a sergeant for the combat search-and-rescue team, whose duties put them in constant contact with Iraqi people. They dropped from helicopters to raid compounds for weapons and enemies, patrolled for improvised explosive devices, and set up checkpoints where they would stop and search cars.

Sometimes, they met objectives without gunfire. Other times, they witnessed trauma or its aftermath. In a mission with the FBI, Snodgrass' unit went to an old Iraqi prison. The soldiers had to look for Arabic documents with a specific stamp. But they saw a lot more.

"There was blood on the walls. You could see where people literally had tried to claw their way out of it," Snodgrass said.

Next, they escorted FBI agents to a suspected mass grave. Snodgrass' team left before work finished at that site. But before he would finish his deployment in January 2004, he would witness more violence. Snodgrass also would pay a physical price before his war service ended.

In May 2003, his team took cover on a roof across from a Baghdad mosque after getting intelligence about gun-running. After an order to advance, the soldiers scrambled down a ladder, up a tree and over a wall. But when the sergeant made the 5- or 6-foot jump from the wall, his right leg went numb. He ignored the injury then but learned later that he crushed a disc in his back. He said he spent months trying to forget his pain, not wanting to leave his team. Two months later, he got hurt again.

The soldiers were doing surveillance along the Syrian border and took cover in an old TV station. While doing knee lifts, Snodgrass said a bar he was hanging from gave way. He fell 10 or 12 feet and hit his head.

The Army airlifted him from the area, and a scan showed his skull was intact. But years after he came home, Snodgrass said a test showed brain damage. He struggled with severe headaches and couldn't concentrate. He also needed four spinal surgeries, including one to implant devices under his skin to mask his back pain.

'In constant fear'

Snodgrass married a few months after coming home, but his wife, an Army specialist who served in Afghanistan, found him quick to anger. He also struggled with paranoia.

In 2005, the Army gave Snodgrass a medical discharge. In 2007, the couple moved to Jacksonville to work in recruitment and financial aid for a private college. They divorced shortly after the arrest.

His ex-wife, Rachael Maguire, said he had become a different man. He might lock himself in a mall bathroom when the crowds got to him, or pull off the road when a stray tire on the shoulder made him flash back to IED patrols.

"I think one of the big things that got to me was being in constant fear of my life every single day from the time I woke up 'til the time I went to sleep ... Would someone pull a weapon, detonate a suicide bomb?" Snodgrass said. "... It's always there and people bring that home with you."

Getting help

Late last year, Snodgrass got PTSD treatment at a veterans' hospital in Houston. By then, he also had moved back to Oklahoma, where his family lives. Maguire stayed in the Jacksonville area.

But as his mind started to heal, Snodgrass also mended ties with Maguire. She became one of his advocates when it came to lobbying authorities to consider mental-health treatment instead of incarceration. Letters to State Attorney Angela Corey flooded in from family and friends, as the defense asked the prosecution to consider alternatives.

Snodgrass' lawyer Shannon Padgett said her client had no criminal history and had won several Army commendations. He had concealed weapons permits for the guns from the 2010 incident and had medical diagnoses to back up his health claims, she said.

David Herman, general counsel of Florida's Department of Veterans' Affairs, told Corey in a letter that the Florida Senate had voted to create veterans courts that could divert veterans into treatment programs instead of prison. The bill didn't come to a vote in the House.

Public Defender Matt Shirk, who has been lobbying for such a court, also spoke up for Snodgrass after hearing about him through a social worker with the Veterans Justice Outreach Initiative. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs program is meant to help veterans facing criminal charges get mental health treatment.

"After learning the facts and what this guy went through, I just wanted to help him. I just didn't think he deserved to go to prison," Shirk said.

The lobbying didn't have the hoped-for effect. On April 19, Snodgrass' father pleaded guilty to a reduced charge of improper exhibition of a weapon. A judge sentenced him to a year's probation and a gun safety class. The same day, his son accepted the three-year deal, 17 years less than the state could have sought. He faces sentencing Tuesday.

"We've exhausted this through the State Attorney's Office," Padgett said. "They said they respected the military, but for whatever reason, they didn't want to waive the three years."

Padgett said she would have presented a self-defense case based on PTSD but advised her client to avoid trial because he'd risk two decades in prison.

"This was very difficult to tell him to plea," she said. "This is kind of an example of why we need the veterans court."

'I am different'

"He's the one who fired a shot that might have killed one or more people," Corey said Wednesday.

The state attorney's phone interview with the Times-Union included her chief assistant, Dan McCarthy, once Jacksonville's military affairs chief. Both said they are sensitive to military cases and make an effort to measure the impact of service.

"That mitigation was all greatly considered," Corey said of Snodgrass.

Corey said it was telling that father and son acted together -- a convincing factor in her decision to seek a prison sentence.

"This is not an action done in isolation by someone who served. Because then what's his father's excuse?" she said.

Corey said she doesn't favor a veterans court because her prosecutors are trained to consider all kinds of mitigation. She said she also believes Snodgrass can get some counseling in prison.

With few days of freedom to go, the thought of prison terrifies him.

"I'm not saying that I'm better than anybody ... but when faced with the facts I am different," he said. "... Things happened to me that caused me to react different than other people. ... Did I go and fight for this country with every breath I had? Absolutely."

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