The Fort Carson Murder Spree

Soldiers returning from Iraq have been charged in at least 11 murders at America's third-largest Army base. Did the military's own negligence contribute to the slayings?

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It was just after closing time on Saturday night when the four soldiers staggered out of the Rum Bay nightclub ("Southern Colorado's largest supply of rum!"), piled into a gray Audi A4 and lit a blunt. Since they had returned from fighting in Iraq, where they had seen some of the bloodiest action of the war, nights like this had become common. There are more than 50 bars in downtown Colorado Springs, and on some nights thousands of people, many of them troops from nearby Fort Carson, pour out onto the streets after last call, looking for trouble. Rum Bay was one of the worst dives in town: Infamous for brawls involving drunken soldiers, locals called it "Fight Club." That night, the bar offered a special dispensed by shooter girls in denim cutoffs, who carried trays filled with test tubes of vodka mixed with apple schnapps. "We drank an ungodly amount," one of the men, Kenneth Eastridge, later recalled. "Like, hundreds of shots."

Eastridge and the others were members of the same Army unit, and they had all served together in Baghdad during the most volatile phase of the war. A 24-year-old specialist known as a "crazy bastard with no remorse," Eastridge had been court-martialed for stockpiling 463 pills of Valium in his barracks. Two of his buddies from Charlie Company carried equally sketchy reputations: Bruce Bastien, a 21-year-old medic who had been arrested for beating his wife while on leave, and Louis Bressler, a 24-year-old private who "started acting like King Kong," in the words of a fellow soldier, after being diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. Tucked beneath the driver's seat of the Audi was a .38 revolver registered to Bressler's wife.

The fourth soldier, a quiet specialist named Kevin Shields, wasn't really friends with the other men. A computer geek and *EverQuest* enthusiast, Shields had been shipped home after suffering multiple concussions in Iraq. He didn't go out much, tending to stay in with his wife, Svetlana, and their three-year-old son, but tonight was his 24th birthday. At a downtown bar, Shields ran into the three soldiers from Charlie Company and quickly ingratiated himself by buying everyone rounds of drinks.

Now, as Bastien steered his car through the middle-class neighborhood of Westside, just beyond the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, Bressler began to throw up. "Fucking great," Bastien said. "All over my car." Pulling over, he let Bressler out near a park on Cucharras Street. The sight of Bressler puking was hilarious to the other men: "Look at him! What a pussy!" But Bressler wasn't laughing. It was one thing for Bastien and Eastridge to hassle him. "We were his close friends," Bastien said later. "I guess you could say he was offended at being made fun of by Shields." Bressler walked up to Shields, who was smoking a cigarette near the curb, and swung at his head. Shields nimbly evaded the blow — then, according to Eastridge, he "kicked Bressler's ass."

Though much confusion remains about what happened over the next 30 minutes, this much is certain: In front of an old Victorian house on South 16th Street, Shields was shot "execution style" — twice in the head — from a distance of less than two feet. One bullet lodged in the base of his skull and severed his brain stem. At five that morning, a newspaper deliveryman discovered Shields' body sprawled across a sidewalk, blood pooling next to a white picket fence decorated with red ribbon for the Christmas holidays.

Five nights later, on December 5th, 2007, Bressler was surrounded by a SWAT team as he pulled his red Suzuki Forenza into a gas station. "It was like I was in Iraq," he recalls. "I look up and there are all these guys pointing machine guns at me." Bressler was charged with first-degree murder in the killing of Shields, as were Bastien and Eastridge. At first, investigators assumed the case was closed — until one of them, pursuing a hunch, learned that the three soldiers were responsible for a string of violent crimes that year in the area surrounding Fort Carson.

On July 28th, Bastien and Bressler had fired three shots at a man walking to get gas for his truck, hitting him once in the shoulder. A week later, on August 4th, they executed Robert James, a fellow private from Fort Carson, as he begged for his life in a parking lot. On October 27th, Bressler ran over a 19-year-old nursing student in his Suzuki; Bastien then stabbed her six times with a combat knife. A drive-by shooting in which no one was hurt rounded out the charges. "Those are just the attacks we know about," says Derek Graham, a homicide detective who served as a lead investigator on the case. "My gut feeling is that they were involved in more."

In the six years since combat operations began in Iraq, Fort Carson — the country's third-largest Army base, with 22,000 active soldiers on duty — has become its own kind of killing field. Before Kevin Shields was gunned down, at least three other Iraq War veterans from the base had been arrested for murder, and a fourth had committed suicide after killing his wife. Since then, at least five more GIs at Fort Carson have been arrested in connection with murders, attempted murders or manslaughter. All told, the military acknowledged this summer, 14 soldiers from the base have been charged or convicted in at least 11 slayings since 2005 — the largest killing spree involving soldiers at a single U.S. military installation in modern history.

Spurred by public outrage, the Army conducted a six-month study into the Fort Carson killings, examining the medical

and combat histories of the 14 accused soldiers. Like Bressler, nine of the vets served in the 4th Brigade Combat Team, which suffered a casualty rate in Iraq eight times higher than other Fort Carson units. The Army's 126-page report, released in July, marked the first time the military has ever acknowledged the significance of combat in the behavior of returning veterans. There is, according to the report, a "possible association between increasing levels of combat exposure and risk for negative behavioral outcomes." But in classic bureaucratic language, the study fell short of calling for any real specific action beyond a need for more studies.

"We don't have enough data yet to determine any cause-and-effect relationships," Maj. Gen. Mark Graham told me before stepping down as commander of Fort Carson in August. "And even if you could identify high-risk soldiers, what are you going to do? Lock them up? What you have to do is watch their behavior."

In fact, that's exactly what Fort Carson failed to do. The story of how a once-promising infantryman like Louis Bressler wound up in prison for taking part in two murders reveals as much about the Army's negligence as it does about Bressler's mental decline. Despite the heavy fighting seen by their troops, the base's commanders were completely unprepared to treat and monitor soldiers suffering from severe combat trauma. A third of all staff positions in the behavioral-health unit at the post's medical center, Evans Army Community Hospital, were left unfilled in 2007, at a time when the base was experiencing an all-time high in PTSD cases. Soldiers suffering from serious delusions were often sent off with a handful of pills and never returned for additional treatment. In one case, a mentally disturbed vet who imagined himself to be an "alien dinosaur-like creature" allegedly raped and killed a teenager after reportedly being declared fit for duty by a Fort Carson psychiatrist.

"It's no surprise that these murders happened at Fort Carson, as opposed to another Army base," says Paul Rieckhoff, an Iraq War veteran and executive director of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. "The failures of leadership we've seen there border on dereliction of duty."

When Bressler enlisted in the Army in February 2003, right before the start of the Iraq War, he was looking for a way to make something of himself. Growing up in Charlotte, North Carolina, he had enjoyed a testosterone-fueled childhood, racing dirt bikes, snowboarding, surfing — "anything to get our adrenaline going," recalls his younger brother, Drew. Both boys idolized their father, a car salesman who had been a Marine in Vietnam. "Our dad was the biggest, baddest dude," says Drew. "We wanted to be just like him." Determined that his sons learn how to survive in the wilderness, Louis Sr. taught them to light fires, eat bugs and skin a snake. Believing that fighting builds character, he also encouraged them to settle their disputes with their fists. "They had some epic bouts," recalls Bressler's half brother, Ed. "They would be hitting each other in the face like perfect strangers."

Never a diligent student, Bressler was the laid-back goofball in the family, the kid who once put lizards on his ears as earrings — until the lizards bit him. He dropped out of high school and tried his hand selling cars — but quit after six months and eventually joined the Army. "All he really wanted was to please our father," says Ed. "He thought if he couldn't please him by working as a car dealer, he would please him by being in the military."

In August 2004, Bressler's unit was deployed to Iraq, where he ran missions along Route Michigan, a 4.5-mile stretch of highway west of Baghdad that soldiers called the "Corridor to Hell." Despite the ambushes and the constant threat of roadside bombs, Bressler loved being an infantryman. He thrived on the order and precision of the military, and proved himself to be a top marksman. "We had great hopes for Louis," Lt. Nate Stone, Bressler's platoon leader, later reported. "He had a future in the Army."

Like his father, Bressler didn't talk about the horrors of combat. "I did my job," he told his brother after one ambush, explaining how he was ordered by his sergeant to "take out anything that moves." Soldiers in Charlie Company saw it all: exploding trucks, severed limbs, men burned alive, their skin bubbling and sliding off their bones. One

day, a 19-year-old company medic blew his brains out with his sidearm in the Porta-John; another day the unit's beloved staff sergeant was killed by a car bomb. For Bressler, though, the worst moment came in January 2005, when his father died of skin cancer. He had been granted an emergency leave to visit his dad in North Carolina a month earlier, but now, unable to return home for the funeral, Bressler was so distraught he considered going AWOL. Instead, he tattooed his father's name on his back, one soldier's memorial to another.

That August, when Bressler returned home from his first tour, he seemed changed for the better. "He was a lot calmer, a lot more disciplined," Drew recalls. "He knew every detail about every Army regulation, every position, every weapon. Being a soldier just clicked with him." While many of his fellow soldiers had difficulty adjusting to life back home, Bressler seemed to take things in stride. "Everybody was drinking, getting into fights in bars," says David Nash, a private who served with Bressler in Iraq. "People were at the boiling point." Bressler would step in and play the mediator. "Calm down," he told his friends as they started training for a second tour of duty after only a month back home. "We'll all go back to Iraq, and we'll shine again."

That winter, while partying at the Rum Bay club, Bressler met a 22-year-old nursing student named Tira Brown. "I was a bitch to him, but he kept hanging around," says Tira, who grew up in a hardscrabble town in West Texas. "He would cook me dinner and rub my feet." They both loved guns, and often went on dates at a local shooting range. Tira even liked his friends, guys like Matt Baylis, an affable young private from Long Island whom Bressler had taken under his wing. "Louis was the type of boyfriend I always wanted," Tira says. The pair eloped — but not before Bressler asked for her parents' permission.

Though Bressler tried to shrug off the combat he saw in Iraq, he began to exhibit disturbing behavior that only worsened as his second deployment drew near. "He didn't want to go back," says Tira. One night, she awoke to find Bressler on the floor, shaking; he told her he'd been "fighting off a demon." The day his unit left for Iraq — a year after returning from their first tour — he told Tira not to bother seeing him off. "He said he didn't want me to miss my class," she says.

If Bressler's first tour of duty in Iraq made him a soldier, the second turned him into a casualty. This time around his unit was deployed to Dora, a ghost town of mud and trash and weeds in southwest Baghdad. Once a prosperous neighborhood that had been home to Sunni, Shiite and Christian families, it had been destroyed by the civil war that erupted in the spring of 2006. That summer, insurgent activity in the area had become so intense — 425 Iraqis were killed in Dora during a single week in July — that soldiers say the Army brigade in charge of the neighborhood quit running patrols through most of it.

Bressler arrived in October 2006, a few months before the start of the surge. "By the end of that first week, everyone realized it was going to be a lot tougher than our first tour," he says. Instead of hiding makeshift bombs under mounds of dirt, where they could be easily detected, Iraqi insurgents were now burying them deep beneath the roads. A sergeant in Bressler's unit was killed and nearly decapitated by an IED fashioned out of a 155mm artillery shell and 100 pounds of explosives. In June 2007, a Charlie Company patrol was hit by an IED so powerful that it killed five soldiers and wounded seven. It was the single deadliest attack of the war for soldiers from Fort Carson.

By that point, with its yearlong tour extended by another three months, Charlie Company was starting to fall apart. Two platoons — about 60 men — were running through hundreds of Army-issued sleeping pills every week, according to company medics. Bressler would call his wife, freaking out. "He was jittery all the time," Tira recalls. "I tried to calm him down, but a few hours later, he would call back in a total panic." Even so, that spring Bressler signed up for another four years in the military. However fucked up it was, he considered the Army home.

Then, on May 30th, Bressler's platoon was ordered to raid an insurgent hide-out in Iskan, a Sunni neighborhood that

served as a transit hub for Al Qaeda. "The place was terrifying," says Sgt. Frank Stepleton. "As soon as you went in there they would hit you with RPGs, grenades, IEDs. There were snipers everywhere." Around 11 that night, Bressler's squad took up positions on a hill above the neighborhood while other soldiers began filing into a courtyard on the street below. Suddenly, two men toward the rear of the unit were hit with rounds from a high-powered SK machine gun. One of them was Bressler's close friend Matt Baylis, who lay on the ground, severely wounded in the neck and chest. In the chaos that followed, company medics fought their way to Baylis, and, with Bressler's help, loaded him into the back of a Humvee. Taking the wheel, Bressler raced to the Combat Support Hospital in the Green Zone. "Hold on," Bressler kept telling his friend. "You're gonna make it."

Baylis died at the hospital the next morning. Bressler was devastated — and angry. Back at FOB Falcon, the brigade's sprawling base on the outskirts of Dora, he couldn't believe that his superiors had sent them right into an ambush. "I wish I had been in his place," Bressler thought. "He didn't deserve to die for something that stupid." As Baylis' death sunk in, Bressler was increasingly plagued by dark thoughts. He kept having the same nightmare, night after night: Baylis standing alone in an empty green tent in the middle of the desert. Each time, even though he knows what's coming next, Bressler walks into the tent and tells Baylis that he's dead. And each time, Baylis asks him why. "I don't know why," Bressler says. "I don't know what to tell him."

At the advice of one of his sergeants, Bressler saw a doctor with the unit's combat-stress team. Once there, he found himself talking for the first time about his father's death. He was soon diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder — and sent on his way with a pocketful of antidepressants and a sleeping medication called Remeron. "I took half of one of those sleeping pills," he recalls. "It knocked me out for a day and a half."

Over 20 months of combat, Bressler had always prided himself on keeping a strong mental attitude. "You hear a lot of people talking about how sometimes it sucks, being out in the field for two weeks at a time," he says. "But I loved the work — I never got bored with it." He tried to hide his symptoms — the mounting panic, the recurring nightmare — but other soldiers began to notice. "It looked like he had tears welling up in his eyes all the time," says Ryan Krebbs, a company medic. "He seemed really distant. Like he was just gone." One night, as Bressler was getting drunk with Krebbs and Eastridge on base, another soldier challenged him to a fight. "Louis got his face smashed in bad," Krebbs recalls. "He lost a fair fight, but afterward he was steaming. He wanted to find the guy and fuck him up."

One afternoon a few days later, as he was returning from patrol, Bressler felt even more disoriented than usual. He couldn't concentrate on basic tasks; he couldn't remember what he had just done. He approached his sergeant and told him that something was seriously wrong.

"Get your head out of your ass," the sergeant said.

"I went crazy," Bressler told a fellow soldier. Screaming and yelling, he threw a punch at the sergeant before several soldiers rushed in and tackled him. He was zip-cuffed, confined to the medical clinic on base for several days, then medevaced to an Army hospital in Germany. In June 2007, he was sent home to Fort Carson, where Tira picked him up at the airport. They went to a restaurant, but Bressler was so twitchy that he couldn't sit through dinner. For the next few weeks he holed up in their one-bedroom apartment, unable to do much more than sleep and eat. Tira would return from work and find him sitting on the couch, staring into space. In an attempt to get him out of the house one afternoon, she took Louis to Walmart, but the crowds sent him into a panic, and he rushed out of the store.

By the time Bressler was ordered to report to the hospital at Fort Carson in June, mental-health casualties had begun pouring into the base from the war. That year, the behavioral-health unit at Evans diagnosed 750 soldiers with PTSD, up from just 26 in 2002, and each month the department's fourth-floor reception area was packed with some 1,200 patients. Wounded veterans often waited three hours for a 20-minute visit with doctors, who invariably prescribed the antidepressant Zoloft. Soldiers called it "cookie-cutter treatment."

The unit was operating with just two-thirds of its required staff, leaving its handful of psychiatrists and social workers to deal with a full-blown crisis. "We were seeing guys who were so angry that they had cut their dog's throat out because he was barking at two in the morning," says Justin Cole, the hospital's former chief of social work. "But we didn't have enough staff to treat them." On more than one occasion, doctors sent a patient in need of serious treatment off with Zoloft on a Friday, only to receive a call from the morgue on Monday: The soldier had committed suicide.

Despite his condition, Bressler hoped to rejoin his unit in Iraq. But only three days after he arrived at Fort Carson, during his first psychiatric visit, the doctor informed him that he was being processed out of the Army. "There was no choice," Bressler recalls. "He said, 'You're going to be medically discharged whether you agree with me or not.'" The decision had little to do with Bressler's condition and more to do with a new base policy: In a memo written shortly before Bressler returned to Fort Carson, Dr. Stephen Knorr, the then-chief of mental health at Evans, had instructed the staff to discharge vets suffering from mental injuries as quickly as possible. Troubled soldiers bring down platoons, Knorr believed, and units should not be left short of manpower while waiting for seriously ill soldiers to receive treatment. As Knorr put it in the memo, "Get rid of dead wood."

Over the next few weeks, as Bressler was prescribed an assortment of medications that did little but knock him out, he remained racked with guilt over Baylis' death. But he refused to talk about the war with his psychiatrist, an Army officer who had never seen combat. "I tried to once, but it was like I was speaking in a foreign language," Bressler recalls. "He didn't understand what the hell I was saying."

During the five months it took for the paperwork to go through on his medical discharge, Bressler rarely visited the battalion he was assigned to at Fort Carson. One minute he had been in Iraq, surrounded by men he considered brothers; the next he was back at home, drugged up and with nothing to do. "The military shapes kids in ways they wouldn't otherwise have been shaped," says Stephen Xenakis, a retired brigadier general and clinical psychiatrist who serves as medical adviser to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "All of a sudden that experience, that support group, that entire identity is ripped out of them. How are they going to handle that?" At the moment Bressler needed the order and stability of the military the most, he suddenly found himself an outcast. "I felt worthless," he says. "I wasn't allowed to do anything, and all those guys were in Dora without me."

Not long after he returned to Fort Carson, Bressler ran into Bruce Bastien. The two knew each other from Dora, where they had engaged in epic *Halo* battles at FOB Falcon. A scrawny kid, Bastien claimed to be from the South Bronx and bragged about getting "jumped" into the notorious Latin Kings street gang. He threw hand signs, called his platoon mates "dawg" and liked to quote gangsta rap. But it was all an act. Bastien grew up in Fairfield, Connecticut, a wealthy suburb north of New York. His father, a computer expert at a small liberal-arts college, shipped him elaborate care packages in Iraq, including a set of 1,000-thread-count Egyptian cotton sheets that Bastien lovingly wrapped around the ratty foam chunks that soldiers picked up off the street and used as mattresses. "It was obvious he was a poseur," says Robert Forsythe, Bastien's roommate.

Trained as an Army medic, Bastien expected he would wind up "chilling in a hospital somewhere." Instead, he was assigned to Charlie Company and shipped to Dora, where he had a tough time adjusting to the rigors of combat. On patrol, he complained that his medic's bag was too heavy; sometimes he simply forgot to bring it along. Once, he patched up a sergeant while sitting on his wounded leg. Even though medics tend to command respect in the military, Bastien's fellow soldiers didn't think much of him. "I wouldn't trust Bastien to put a Band-Aid on someone," says Sgt. Michael Cardenaz, who served in Charlie Company.

That spring, Bastien hatched a plan to get shipped home early: He would get injured in a way that would make it impossible for him to work as a medic. On a late-night patrol, he snuck off into a field with Eastridge, who was known as the best shot in all of Charlie Company. Eastridge steadied a .380-caliber pistol he'd stolen from a dead Iraqi, fired at Bastien's arm — and missed. "The bullet went through his uniform just above his bicep," says Forsythe. "If he had gotten hit, he could have been killed, or lost the use of his arm completely. Bastien came back to the barracks laughing about it." In May 2007, Bastien flew home to Fort Carson for a scheduled two-week leave, and promptly got himself arrested for beating up his wife. Though the charge was later dropped, it kept him from returning to battle. "We knew he wasn't coming back to Iraq," Cardenaz says.

Other than a love for *Halo*, Bressler and Bastien had little in common. "They didn't even like each other in Iraq," says Eastridge, who recalls the two men getting into a fight in their barracks. But now, unable to rejoin his buddies, Bressler was desperate to hang out with anyone he could connect with over Iraq. "I'd get lonely while Tira was at work," he says. "I felt like I knew the guy. I was like, 'Hey, wanna get a drink?'"

Within a week, the soldiers would forge a bond that ran deeper than video games: getting wasted. Though Bressler had been only an occasional drinker and smoker before his second tour, he was now downing almost a fifth of Jack Daniel's a day, and burning through $20 bags of weed with Bastien at almost the same clip. "He would call me at work to say he was staying out all night with Bastien," says Tira. "Then he would come home so drunk, he just passed out."

Tira hated Bastien on sight. "He was really cold and secretive," she says. "He was always whispering something in Louis' ear." She told Bressler to stay away from him. "If ever there was a moment she was right, that was it," Bressler says now. "Everybody knew he was a bad guy, but somehow I didn't."

Bressler, twitchy and unable to sleep more than two hours a night, began carrying Tira's .38 revolver with him whenever he left the house. He stopped going to his weekly required appointments with his psychiatrist — but, according to Bressler, no one from the base bothered to follow up with him. "As soon as he stopped showing up at Evans, someone should have been knocking on that guy's door and escorting him to the hospital," says Cole, the former chief of social work. "That's what commanders get taught to do." (Officials at Fort Carson, citing patient confidentiality, declined to discuss Bressler's medical care.)

A month after Bressler returned from Iraq, he phoned his friend David Nash, who had left the Army before the unit's second tour and was living in Texas. Nash asked why Bressler was home early: "He told me he went crazy. I thought he was kidding." But the more Bressler talked, the more Nash recognized the change. Bressler, the guy who once played the mediator, calming his fellow soldiers, was now acting like some kind of badass. "He was hella volatile," says Nash. "He seemed like a blasting cap. He said to me, 'Hey, man, come up here. We'll go knock some motherfuckers out.'"

For the past several years, David Foy, a psychology professor at Pepperdine University, has been engaged in a study on the "spiritual consequence" of participating in war. Until now, surprisingly, very few researchers have examined how war affects a soldier's sense of morality or tried to quantify it. What Foy and his colleagues have found is that specific kinds of wartime experiences — notably the unintentional killing of civilians and the failure to save others from being killed — can cause "moral injury" to a soldier, as well as psychological trauma. The complex manifestations of PTSD — jumpiness, rage, sadness — are compounded by what Foy calls "changes in one's ability to perceive themselves as capable of acting in a morally appropriate way." Men who return from combat, he says, often see themselves as "damaged goods."

By the time Bressler returned home, he had lost the moral guideposts that defined his identity as a soldier. His rage became obsessive, only intensified by drugs, alcohol and little, if any, sleep. One of the defining elements of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is wide-scale sleep deprivation,

which can last for months after soldiers return home — particularly for those who suffer from PTSD. "Nightmares or intrusive memories get them all wound up, and this can be self-sustaining," says Dr. Jonathan Shay, one of the nation's foremost experts on post-traumatic stress. "As a result, you see these kids become moral morons. A lot of the bad behavior — the violence, the anger — is due to the shutting down of the frontal lobe. Add alcohol, and they become functionally sociopathic."

On the last Friday of July 2007, Bressler and Bastien spent the night as they often did, getting stoned and drunk at Bastien's apartment. Then, around 3 a.m., Bastien's wife came home, clearly shaken up. She told them a group of men had chased her home. "I wanted to beat them up," Bastien says. "I turned to Louis and said, 'Come on, let's go find them.'" He and Bressler set out in Bastien's Audi. Near the entrance to the apartment complex, they pulled up next to the first guy they saw, Matthew Orrenmaa, a fellow soldier who was on his way to get gas for his truck.

"Hey, man," Bressler shouted at him. Pulling a .45-caliber semiautomatic out of Bastien's glove compartment, he pointed at Orrenmaa and fired. As Bastien slammed his foot on the gas, Bressler, according to police, squeezed off two more rounds, wounding Orrenmaa in the shoulder.

The following Saturday, after another night of drinking and smoking weed, the two friends left Bastien's apartment at one in the morning to buy a pack of cigarettes. At a stoplight, they came across a drunken young soldier named Robert James, who explained that he had gotten lost trying to get back to Fort Carson. Bressler and Bastien offered to give him a ride.

Before long, they were driving through Broadmoor, an upscale neighborhood of Colorado Springs. As they rolled along the winding streets, Bastien blasted Disturbed and Slaves on Dope while Bressler lit up a joint. Then Bressler pulled out his wife's .38 and began waving it in James' face.

"How much money you got?" Bressler demanded.

"I don't want any problems. Here," James said, throwing $20 over the front seat. "Take my money."

Spotting a bank, Bastien pulled into the parking lot, where the friends apparently planned to make James withdraw more money from the ATM. "Just leave me here," James pleaded. "I won't say anything."

"Fuck that," Bressler said, forcing James out of the back seat. According to police, Bressler then shot James point-blank in the neck. After James fell, Bressler stood over the body and emptied three more bullets into his face and neck.

The next morning, not long after detectives arrived at the scene of the murder, police showed up at Bastien's apartment a few miles away, responding to a domestic-disturbance call. After the shooting, Bastien had come home in a rage and thrown his wife into a wall. When Bastien made bail that afternoon, he and Bressler bought pot with the money stolen from James, then spent the rest of the day at Bastien's place playing *Call of Duty*.

On August 6th, two days after the James murder, Bressler took Tira out to celebrate their first wedding anniversary. He drank heavily through dinner, then insisted they go to PT's Showclub, a high-end strip joint near their apartment. By the time they got into the car to go home, Bressler was too drunk to drive. When Tira tried to take the keys, he snapped. "He grabbed my hair and slammed my head against the car door," she says. "I was terrified. At our apartment I went straight to the bathroom and locked the door behind me. But Louis broke in."

In his hand, Tira says, was the .38. "He put the gun to my temple and said that if I didn't kill him right then, he was

going to kill me. He kept shoving the gun toward me, saying, 'Here, do it.'" Tira grabbed the revolver out of his hand and emptied the chamber. Then she pushed Bressler out of the bathroom and locked the door again.

Tira was asleep on the couch when, a few hours later, she woke to the sound of her husband vomiting and coughing up blood all over the living room. He had downed nearly 100 pills of Depakote and Remeron — medications to treat his depression and insomnia — and chased them with a fifth of Jack Daniel's. Rushed to the hospital, he fell into an unconscious state that would last a week. While Bressler lay in a coma, his brother Drew flew in from North Carolina to keep vigil at his bedside. But almost no one from Charlie Company stopped by, even after Bressler recovered. For the most part, his superiors no longer considered him a soldier. "I knew he was in the hospital," says Tim Stricklin, the sergeant who had recommended that Bressler see a psychiatrist in Dora. "But after what he pulled in Iraq, I had no desire to talk to him."

Once his condition stabilized, Bressler was transferred to a locked psychiatric ward at Cedar Springs, a private hospital in Colorado Springs. By that point, Fort Carson was shipping its most troubled vets to private facilities at a rate 700 times greater than the average for Army hospitals. "We would send guys to places like Cedar Springs because we couldn't take care of them ourselves," says Cole.

"And then we often wouldn't see any records regarding their treatment. They would just disappear."

At Cedar Springs, according to a nurse's summary, Bressler was "demanding, uncooperative and unpleasant." The hospital released him after just three days, when Bastien walked up to the nurse's station and brazenly claimed to be Bressler's sergeant. "He said he was taking Louis to the hospital at Fort Carson," says Tira. "The nurse gave him an attitude, but she eventually let Louis go with him." Bressler's commanders at Fort Carson apparently failed to investigate his release — and Bressler says doctors at the base never inquired about his hospital stay. When Bressler paid a surprise visit to Evans, his psychiatrist readily prescribed refills for Depakote and Remeron — the drugs he had run out of because of the overdose.

Not long after Bressler left the psychiatric ward, he and Drew went trout fishing just below Pikes Peak. As they cast Jitterbugs into the clear, calm water, Drew asked his brother if he really wanted to kill himself. "Louis told me he wasn't a pill popper," Drew recalls. "He was still recovering, but he was a good 90 percent. When I went back to North Carolina, I absolutely thought he would be OK." But at the airport a few days later, as Louis saw Drew off, he was terrified. "There goes my best friend," he thought. "What do I do now?"

Over the next few months, Bressler descended even further into drinking and drugs — and his criminal schemes grew even bolder. "Here's what we do," he told his friend David Nash, describing how they could knock over a bank in Colorado Springs. "We do it tactical, like when we searched a house in Iraq. Bust in the door. Two guys stay in the line of the door, two guys go to the right, at a 90-degree angle. So we have the entire room covered. We hit the tellers, and then we're out. It would take no more than two and a half minutes."

Nash laughed off the suggestion. "I figured he was drunk or high," he says. "Never for a minute did I think he was serious." Actually, Bressler had already started sketching out robberies with Bastien and Kenneth Eastridge, who had returned to Colorado Springs in September, a few weeks after Bressler had been released from the mental hospital. A hard soldier from a hard neighborhood in Louisville, Kentucky, Eastridge had slit stoner eyes and a pair of Nazi-style S.S. thunderbolts tattooed on his arm. Women seemed to love the guy, and Bastien wanted to be just like him. "You could tell that he really looked up to him," says Forsythe, Bastien's roommate. "He would pretend to be a badass whenever Eastridge was around."

At the age of 12, Eastridge had shot and killed his best friend while playing a video game and pleaded guilty to reckless homicide. His juvenile record should have disqualified him from service, but the Army — hard-pressed for new recruits to fight in Iraq — issued him a waiver in 2003. According to Cardenaz, Eastridge went on to become one of Charlie Company's top combat soldiers. "I could trust Kenny to lead a squad through a house full of insurgents," he says.

In Dora, however, Eastridge confessed that he was "losing it," becoming consumed with homicidal rage. "He went on missions with one objective," Forsythe recalls. "To find someone to kill." Not long before he was sent home, Eastridge was sitting in the gunner's turret of a Humvee, manning an M240 machine gun, which shoots 600 rounds per minute. He had been ordered to guard a street while the rest of the squad searched a building. Looking out at Iraqi families playing soccer and barbecuing, Eastridge says, he began shooting indiscriminately. He estimates that he fired some 1,700 rounds and claims to have killed maybe a dozen people. The Army later investigated charges that Eastridge had killed Iraqi civilians, but concluded that the allegations had no merit.

Eastridge wound up being court-martialed for far more benign infractions. He was found having sex in his barracks with his girlfriend, and a subsequent search turned up 463 pills of Valium. Around the same time, he lashed out at a sergeant, threatening to kill him and drink his blood. Eastridge was diagnosed with PTSD and sent home.

Eastridge was enthusiastic about Bressler and Bastien's plans regarding a series of robberies. Early on the morning of October 27th, the three men were heading to a pot dealer's house on the north side of Colorado Springs when they saw a young woman walking near an intersection. "Let's rob that bitch," Bastien said.

Bressler swerved and hit the woman with the front end of the Suzuki, and Bastien jumped out, punching the woman in the face before stabbing her with a combat knife. The three friends then took off with the backpack she'd been carrying. When it turned out to contain no money, they burned it in the fireplace at Bressler's apartment. The victim, a 19-year-old student named Erica Ham, lay in the road for 20 minutes before police discovered her, a cellphone pressed to her ear. She had been stabbed six times, and required multiple surgeries for a punctured lung and one huge laceration across her left eye.

Later, on the phone with David Nash, Bressler seemed as if he wanted to tell him something. Then he stopped himself. "Nah, I'll tell you when we all get together," Bressler said. It seemed to Nash as though Bressler were saying, "Just ask me, motherfucking ask me what's going on." But Nash never did. "You've got to be careful sometimes what you ask people," he says. "They might tell you the truth."

By this point, Eastridge was broke. He had been selling off sporting goods he had bought with his Army credit card at Fort Carson's enormous PX, but now he was homeless and camping out on Bressler's couch. On the evening of November 30th, he and Bressler left the apartment to discuss plans for a heist. The idea was Eastridge's: They would ram a truck through the cement wall of a sporting-goods store and make off with whatever money they could find. The three men had bought the necessary supplies a few days earlier: Gerber combat knives, three pairs of black leather gloves, three black ski masks, a black plastic flashlight and a blue camouflage-colored gym bag, all purchased with Bastien's Army credit card at the PX. It would be their first real score.

But six hours later, after the murder of Kevin Shields, the three friends were more worried about staying out of jail than breaking into banks. According to Bastien and Eastridge, upon returning home after the killing, Bressler had discovered that his white sweater and jeans were splattered with blood. He stripped and threw his clothes into the fireplace, then stared blankly as they went up in flames.

Eastridge looked over from the couch. Bressler was sitting in front of the fire wearing only his boxers and a single yellow suede sneaker.

"Are you going to burn the other fucking shoe," Eastridge asked, "or are you going to buy another one just like it?"

"Oh, fuck," Bressler said, then threw the remaining sneaker into the fire.

The next afternoon, after discarding the .38 in a ravine, the three friends scrubbed the blood from Bastien's car. It was the last bit of physical evidence linking them to Shields' murder, but they couldn't erase the fact that they had been seen drinking with him that night, so they came up with a story to tell police: After they left Rum Bay, Shields called a girl and asked to be dropped off at her house in Westside. Then they drove straight home. Bastien, ever the schemer, suggested they alter details slightly in their accounts. "When you make up a story, you can't all tell them exactly the same thing," he said later. "Then they know you're lying."

To detectives, their accounts seemed plausible enough. But after Shields' cellphone was found on a Westside street a few days later, police saw the only call he had made that night was to Bastien, who was promptly brought in again for questioning. He soon rolled over on his best friend, fingering Bressler as the triggerman. During an interview with Detective Derek Graham, who thought the Shields murder looked remarkably similar to one he investigated in August, Bastien also confessed his role in the killing of Robert James.

"I thought, 'Shit, what else did you do?'" Graham recalls. "I started listing other cold cases that happened near his apartment, like the Orrenmaa shooting. Then I threw the Ham stabbing at him as well. He's like, 'Oh, yeah, we did that.' He was very cold and matter-of-fact." Bastien not only failed to show remorse for the crimes, he failed to grasp the punishment he faced for having committed them. "What are my chances of getting away with this?" he asked detectives, just before he was locked up in jail.

After admitting their roles in the Shields murder, Bastien and Eastridge cut deals on the other charges they faced. Bastien received a 60-year sentence, while Eastridge got 10 years. Bressler, who refused to speak with police after his arrest, opted to stand trial. No one from the Army spoke as a character witness on his behalf, and his combat trauma was never mentioned in court. "PTSD doesn't work as a reason to escape culpability," says Ed Farry, a former Air Force officer who represented Bressler. "Jurors don't buy it." Farry instead relied on forensic experts to suggest that Bastien, not Bressler, had been the shooter.

The prosecution planned to pin its case on testimony from Bastien and Eastridge; it seemed like a slam-dunk. But last November, just days before he was scheduled to take the stand, Bastien reneged on his promise to testify. Facing life in prison for first-degree murder, Bressler was found guilty only of conspiracy to commit murder. He later pleaded guilty to being an accessory in the slaying of Robert James, and to aggravated robbery in the stabbing of Erica Ham. At a hearing last March, Judge Theresa Cisneros told Bressler he had "caused unimaginable destruction," then delivered his sentence: 60 years — the same as Bastien's.

Sitting at a cafeteria-style table in the visitation room at the Buena Vista Correctional Complex, in the high desert of central Colorado, Bressler no longer resembles the proud, muscled young infantryman who returned from Iraq two years ago. Dressed in a green prison jumpsuit, his face drawn and his blue eyes bloodshot, he nervously chews on a ratty goatee and hunches over, as if he's intensely interested in something on his shoes. On his left bicep is a tattoo of the same musket found on the badge that he was awarded as a combat veteran, a constant reminder of his time in Iraq.

Bressler speaks in the same quiet, calm voice whether he's talking about learning handball in prison or the stabbing of Erica Ham, an assault he claims he did not even participate in. "I was pressured into pleading guilty to that as part of the deal," he says. "I wanted to take that case to trial." He devotes the few hours he's allowed out of his cell each day to working on his appeal in the case, and he continues to insist that he was not the one responsible for murdering either Kevin Shields or Robert James. What pains him most, though, is the way his combat duty, the defining experience of his life, has become evidence of his criminality. "People think, 'He's an infantryman — he was trained to kill, he must be a killer,'" he says. "But if they could still see me in my Army uniform, they would think I'm a good guy."

Above all, he feels betrayed by the institution he sacrificed everything to serve. It's no secret that the military has sorely neglected the health of returning soldiers like Bressler: In February 2007, at the very moment he was experiencing the worst of the war in Iraq, a scandal was unfolding back home over inadequate treatment of veterans at Walter Reed, the Army's flagship medical center. Top commanding generals and the secretary of the Army were fired or forced to resign, but the military still fails to provide the kind of careful monitoring and long-term treatment needed by the more than 300,000 veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan who suffered mental injuries in the line of duty. And the problem will likely escalate next year, when some 3,700 troops will begin to rotate back to Fort Carson from tours in Afghanistan. "The post-deployment scenario from that war is going to look very similar to post-deployment Iraq," says Cole. "The trends in violence will continue. Evans Hospital is a ticking time bomb. It's going to be the next Walter Reed."

Even in prison, Louis Bressler hasn't given up on the military — but somewhere along the line, the military gave up on him. Asking for help, he believes, shouldn't mean losing the only job you ever wanted. "The Army can't do anything for me — they let me down," he says. "If I had never spoken with those psychiatrists, I would be with my unit right now in Afghanistan, instead of talking to you in here. They say I had a mental-health problem. I say I did my job."

He shakes his head. "I should have died over there in Iraq," he says, his voice faltering. "I would be a lot better off."

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- Closing Guantanamo
- The Troubled Homecoming of the Marlboro Marine
- The War in Iraq: The *Rolling Stone* Reports