

Fort Hood shooter was Iraq vet being treated for mental health issues

By Ray Sanchez and Ben Brumfield, CNN
updated 6:14 PM EDT, Thu April 3, 2014

CNN.com

(CNN) -- Ivan Lopez's friendly smile apparently gave no hint of a history of depression, anxiety and other psychiatric disorders.

The Iraq war veteran was being evaluated for post-traumatic stress disorder before he opened fire at the Fort Hood Army post in Texas on Wednesday.

Lopez took his own .45-caliber handgun onto the sprawling facility and killed three people and wounded 16 more before taking his own life. His death left authorities to piece together what in his background and medical treatment could have triggered a new round of bloodshed at the same Killeen post where an officer killed 13 people in 2009.

In Guayanilla, a tight knit municipality on the southern coast of Puerto Rico, the shooting by a member of one of the town's best-known families shocked the seaside community of 22,000. Lopez hailed from a family of music-lovers and church-goers, played in a popular marching band and once served on the island's police force.

"They understand that this not only their loss, but that many other families have also been hurt by this tragedy," Gledden Lopez Torres, a spokesman for the family but who is not related, told CNN.

Lopez, a 34-year-old specialist, served four months in Iraq and was undergoing treatment for mental health issues. His history of instability and psychiatric issues are believed "to be the fundamental underlying factor" in the shootings, Lt. Gen. Mark Milley, the post's commanding general, told reporters Thursday.

He was married with a young child and moved to the post in Killeen in February from Fort Bliss, according to a Pentagon official. He moved into an apartment there with his wife and their daughter a little more than a week before the shooting.



Fort Hood's families



Lt. General: Don't know shooter's motive

They appeared to be a normal couple, said neighbor Xanderia Morris. "They would smile whenever

they'd see someone," she said.

There aren't indications that this was a terrorist act, but officials said they won't rule anything out until the investigation is over.

Milley said there were reports of an argument.

Authorities "are looking at what the trigger event was" that led to the incident, including a possible altercation with a fellow soldier "that immediately preceded the shooting," Milley said.

Based on publicly released details, interviews with neighbors and conversations with law enforcement and other sources, this is what is known so far about Lopez:

Combat history:

He served for four months as a truck driver in Iraq in 2011, Army Secretary John McHugh told the Senate Armed Services Committee on Thursday. His records "show no wounds, no direct involvement in combat ... or any injury that might lead us to further investigate battle-related TBI (traumatic brain injury)," McHugh said, without identifying Lopez by name.

Lopez enlisted in the Army in April 2010 as an infantry soldier, later becoming a truck driver.

Milley said, "He was not wounded, according to our records." However, Lopez "self-reported" suffering a traumatic brain injury while deployed, Milley said.

Medical history:

Lopez was undergoing a variety of treatments for conditions including depression, anxiety and sleep disturbances, officials said. He was prescribed drugs that included Ambien, a sleep aid. Lopez was fully examined last month by a psychiatrist.

"We have very strong evidence that he had a medical history that indicates an unstable psychiatric or psychological condition. (We're) going through all records to ensure that is, in fact, correct. But we believe that to be the fundamental underlying causal factor," Milley told reporters Thursday.

There was no record of any sign he was likely to commit violence against himself or others, according to McHugh. "So the plan (going) forward was just to continue to monitor and treat him as deemed appropriate," he said.

He was going through the process required to diagnose post-traumatic stress disorder. "He was not diagnosed, as of today, with PTSD," Milley said. That process takes time. Milley said Lopez was also taking antidepressants.



Fort Hood's families



Life inside Fort Hood

"He was not a wounded warrior, no Purple Heart, not wounded in action in that regard," Milley said.

Work history:

Lopez was transferred to Fort Hood from Fort Bliss in El Paso in February. From April 2010 to February, he was stationed at Fort Bliss.

At Fort Hood, he was assigned to the 13th Sustainment Command, which deals with the logistical responsibilities for the post. (It was one of two unit buildings where Lopez opened fire.)

Retired Army Maj. Gen. James "Spider" Marks expressed surprise about the transfer. Lopez should have remained at the other base for continuity of care, he said.

Lopez was not in the process of being transitioned out of the military, Milley said.

At one time, he was part of the National Guard in Puerto Rico, but he left the Guard to join the Army, National Guard spokeswoman Ruth Diaz said Thursday.

Diaz said Lopez was active in the National Guard from 1999 to 2010. He was first assigned to the infantry battalion and later deployed, in 2007, to the Sinai Peninsula for 13 months. He joined the active duty Army in 2010.

Puerto Rico National Guard Command Sgt. Maj. Nelson Bigas, who served with Lopez for 17 months during training at Fort Hood and later in the Sinai, described Lopez as "one of the best soldiers we had in our infantry."

He told CNN that Lopez displayed no signs of mental issues or PTSD after completing his mission and returning to the island. "During, before, and after the mission, he never showed any signs of distress," said Bigas, adding that Lopez worked hard and demonstrated leadership within his team.

Bigas said the Fort Hood shooting was a "big surprise to me."

Family history:

Lopez Torres, the family spokesman, said Lopez' mother Carmen, a emergency room nurse in their hometown, died of a heart attack in November. A month earlier, Lopez' grandfather had died in Guayanilla. The spokesman said Lopez attended the funeral but was disappointed that it took about five days for his 24-hour leave to be approved by the military.

"The reality is that the death of his mother was unexpected and soldiers are usually given permission to travel home to the family," Lopez Torres said. "But the process in Ivan's case took some time. He arrived five days after his mother died... He was a little disappointed that it took so long for him to be granted a leave."

Asked about the leave, Milley said Thursday: "I don't have details on that right now."

At Immaculate Conception church in Guayanilla, Lucy Caraballo said the Lopez family was active in church affairs and in the choir.

"Ivan was a good person, with a lot of values," she said. "What happened? We don't know what went through his head or what he went through recently in the Army. But he came from a good family. This is a very painful thing for us."

Edgardo Arlequin, Guayanilla's mayor, said he directed the school band where Lopez was a percussionist.

"I never had problems with him," he said. "He was talented and came from an extraordinary

home... He was extraordinary human being."

Lopez was married and had a daughter, around 3 years old. Just over a week ago, the family moved into an apartment complex close to the base.

Neighbor Xanderia Morris described the Lopez family as a "typical, average family."

After first news of a shooting broke on television, Lopez' wife came out crying. "She said, 'I'm just worried, I'm just worried,' " Morris said. "I tried to console her and comfort her, let her know everything was OK."

When television reports identified the shooter as Lopez, the wife became "hysterical," the neighbor said.

She was taken from the apartment by law enforcement officials, and was cooperating, an FBI source told CNN.

Gun used:

Lopez used a .45-caliber Smith & Wesson semiautomatic pistol that he had recently purchased, Milley said. He didn't know how much ammunition Lopez was carrying.

"If you have weapons and you're on base, it's supposed to be registered on base," Milley said. "This weapon was not registered on base."

Lopez passed a background check when he bought a .45-caliber Smith & Wesson handgun at Guns Galore near Killeen, Texas, according to U.S. law enforcement officials. He was found to have no criminal history that would disqualify him from the purchase, and the gun store did what was required, according to law enforcement officials who reviewed the records.

It appears that military doctors treating Lopez had not declared him mentally unfit in ways that would require reporting him to the FBI-run National Instant Criminal Background Check System, known as NICS.

The federal background check system relies on state and federal authorities to provide data on people who are mentally ineligible to buy firearms. Texas law sets a high bar to deny firearms purchases, including having been diagnosed by a licensed physician as suffering from a psychiatric disorder that is likely to cause substantial impairment in judgment and intellectual ability.

Motive:

That's the big unknown.

"There's no indication that this incident is related to terrorism, although we are not ruling anything out and the investigation continues," Milley said.

Could it have been an argument? "There are initial reports there may have been an argument in one of the unit areas, but no indication of an argument at the WTU," Milley said. WTU is the acronym for the Warrior Transition Command, where wounded, ill and injured soldiers are taught resilience skills.

Authorities have "no indication at this time that (the Fort Hood shooter) was targeting specific soldiers" when he opened fire on the Army base, Milley said.

READ: Four dead, including shooter, at Fort Hood

READ: Obama: 'We're going to get to the bottom of exactly what happened'

CNN's Evan Perez, Ed Lavandera, Pam Brown, Josh Rubin, Meredith Edwards, Dania Alexandrino and Barbara Starr contributed to this report.

© 2014 Cable News Network. Turner Broadcasting System, Inc. All Rights Reserved.