

## Fort Hood has felt the strain of repeated deployments

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Fort Hood, the Texas military base that was the scene of a mass shooting Thursday, has been hard hit by the growing strain on the Army from multiple combat deployments -- with its personnel suffering the highest number of suicides among Army installations since the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, according to official data.

After more than eight years of lengthy war zone rotations in Iraq and Afghanistan, Army personnel are experiencing record rates of suicide, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and other mental health problems, as well as worsening alcohol and drug abuse.

The psychological toll on the all-volunteer force today is unprecedented, Army officials say, acknowledging that they do not know how much the Army can sustain before it breaks -- making the health of the force a major consideration in President Obama's current deliberations over how many more U.S. troops to send to Afghanistan.

It's unclear what motivated the Army psychiatrist who is thought to have opened fire on fellow soldiers Thursday, although it's clear he had worked in settings where the effects of combat stress were pervasive.

A small but increasing number of soldiers undergoing the mental strain of repeated combat deployments are taking lives - often their own.

This year, 117 active-duty Army soldiers were reported to have committed suicide, with 81 of those cases confirmed -- up from 103 suicides during the same period last year. Ten suicides have been reported at Fort Hood this year; more than 75 of its personnel have committed suicide since 2003. Fort Hood's high number of suicides is also linked to the fact that it is the Army's largest base, with more than 53,000 soldiers.

An estimated 30 percent of those returning from combat suffer mental health symptoms such as depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress. Such problems grow worse with repeated deployments and the constant exposure to danger and the sights, smells and emotions of seeing others killed or wounded, according to Army mental health surveys.

Those who treat the mentally wounded, including doctors such as Hasan, are not immune from the symptoms. It is not uncommon for therapists who treat patients for post-traumatic stress disorder to experience some symptoms vicariously after hearing account after account of the horrors of the battlefield.

Hasan was a psychiatry intern at Walter Reed Army Medical Center from June 2003 to July 2009, army officials said. In that position, he likely treated soldiers with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Violent outbursts such as shootings by soldiers at Army bases have occurred in recent years, including at Fort Hood, where several killings were reported over the past two years.

Historically, one of the worst shooting incidents involving soldiers took place Oct. 27, 1995, at Towle Stadium at Fort Bragg, N.C., when a soldier opened fire on paratroopers in a formation, killing one Army officer and wounding 18 others.