

Rainier Shooting Suspect's Army Discharge Does Not Bar VA Benefits

The former soldier who allegedly killed a ranger at Mount Rainier National Park Sunday likely was eligible for veterans benefits, according to documents that explain how soldiers with misconduct discharges like him can obtain services at Veterans Administration hospitals.

Shooting suspect Benjamin Colton Barnes was given a "general, under honorable discharge" for misconduct in September 2009. That kind of discharge qualifies for VA benefits, according to this summary.

Here's another helpful summary from a lawyer who wrote a piece in Army Times explaining how administrative discharges can impact benefits.

"A general discharge under honorable conditions is meant for those who generally performed honorably but had some problems," attorney Mathew Tully wrote in Army Times. "The most common reasons for a general discharge that I've seen are alcohol or drug abuse, excessive absences, Article 15

reasons and, occasionally, mental health problems."

Another Army defense attorney calls the kind of discharge Barnes received "good paper" for obtaining VA benefits.

Barnes, 24, was discharged following his arrests on suspicion of driving while under the influence of alcohol and improperly transporting a weapon, Army Maj. Chris Ophardt said this week. Barnes has a lengthy record in Pierce and King County courts, including DUI

arrests, a child custody dispute

and other infractions. Here's our summary of those cases from Monday's newspaper.

"Benjamin has many guns and knives in his home," Nicole Santos, the mother of Barnes' daughter, wrote in a May petition for a restraining order. "The threats I have received from him and his vindictive personality makes me feel unsafe."

Barnes' eligibility for VA benefits meant he could have accessed counseling for the post-traumatic stress disorder Santos suspected Barnes developed following his November 2007 to June 2008 deployment to Iraq. Her description of Barnes' behavior is consistent with other characterizations of PTSD. He appeared impatient, moody and controlling to her.

But eligibility for services does not mean Barnes would have taken steps to get care for his temper.

The Army today released more detailed information about Barnes' service record. He joined the Army on Feb. 8, 2007 and cited Temecula, Calif. as his home of record. He served at Fort Lewis with the 4th Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division during its deployment during the Iraq surge. Barnes was a signal support specialist in the brigade's cavalry squadron. That's a

communications assignment that generally centers on work on forward bases.