

Motive Remains a Mystery

Like thousands of other American soldiers, Robert Bales joined the army after the September 11th attacks. And like many of those troops, he found himself serving multiple deployments in two different wars while he dealt with injuries both physical and emotional. But unlike those other soldiers, Bales allegedly slaughtered 16 innocent men, women and children in an Afghan village for no apparent reason. His civilian lawyers are indicating that brain trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder – or PTSD – could be part of the defense, and outside experts like military defense attorney Greg Rinckey think that seems likely.

“This is a soldier that has been deployed multiple times. There’s indication that he had suffered from a traumatic brain injury, had lost part of his foot.”

Bales was on his fourth deployment – he had already served in Iraq three times – and his family said he was upset about being sent to Afghanistan. Bales also was dealing with a traumatic incident that took place hours before the massacre.

“There’ve been comments that he saw a body have a leg brown off, so clearly there is going to be a mental capacity defense put on by his Defense Counsel.”

Medical experts also believe PTSD is likely to play a major role in the defense strategy. Dr. Roger Pitman is a professor of psychiatry at Harvard University.

“If a soldier sustain posttraumatic stress disorder and he services their country, and apparently it’s the case of this sergeant who had deployments in combat areas then I think it would be a gross injustice not to at least consider possible extenuating circumstances.”

It appears Sgt. Bales was also dealing with financial strain. His wife put their Seattle-area home on the market as a short sale just three days before the murders. Neighbors say a second home had basically been abandoned by the family. And there were also legal issues. Court records show Bales was accused of assaulting a woman back in 2002 and of hit and run in 2008... But countless other soldiers successfully have dealt with those kinds of situations before – PTSD, re-deployments, problems at home. For those who knew Robert Bales, the massacre doesn’t make sense. Steve Berling grew up with Bales in Norwood, Ohio where he remembers him as a friendly, caring person.

“He by all means was not psychotic guy. If anything he was very intelligent, and very personable, and had the biggest heart that you’ve ever seen.”

Berling also says Bales was known for his compassion.

“He took care of this autistic boy that you’d always see mock around Norwood with them just to give him like some exercise and things, and to me it takes different type of person just to be able to handle someone with a disability like that.”

He says the whole situation seems unreal.

“It’s mind-blowing if it is true and if he did snap and whatever. I hope that’s not the case and

my heart gives out for innocent civilians in Afghanistan too.”

As for Afghanistan, there is mounting pressure to remove more American forces. But U.S. officials say pulling more troops out would be a mistake. Ryan Crocker, the U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, spoke on PBS’s “Newshour”.

“The same people who brought us 9/11 are more than ready to retake a country if we decide to retire, if we decide we don’t want to do it anymore, if we get out before the Afghans can assume full control, Taliban will be back and al-Qaeda will be right behind them and we will be back in a pre-9/11 situation.”

Republican Senator John McCain largely agrees. He tells NBC’s “Meet the Press” that the U.S. policy in Afghanistan is working.

“The irony here as far as Afghanistan is concerned, general plan is succeeding. We have succeeded on the ground. We have made dramatic gains.”

But McCain – himself a veteran who suffered the horrors of war – is also quick to point out that soldiers like Sgt. Bales and the people he allegedly killed are part of the cost of war.

“All I can say is that we will continue to do everything we can to try to bring about as much treatment and care for those who have suffered the wounds of war both visible and invisible.”

Right now, Sgt. Bales is being held in a military jail at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas awaiting formal charges for the murder of 16 people. He’s expected to meet with his attorney sometime today.