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Greg Rinckey discusses the Fort Lee suicide with the Richmond Times Dispatch

Fort Lee: Soldier dies after self-inflicted shooting By John Ramsey

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FORT LEE - A Fort Lee soldier fatally shot herself in a headquarters office on post Monday less than an hour after her arrival with a gun prompted a lockdown of the installation just south of Richmond. The soldier barricaded herself in a third-floor office in the Combined Arms Support Command headquarters and went on "a bit of a rampage" angrily throwing items while police outside the office door tried to convince her to end the incident peacefully, Fort Lee and CASCOM commander Maj. Gen. Stephen R. Lyons said Monday during a news conference. "When I talked to the law enforcement on the scene, they thought they had achieved a calm level of negotiation, only to find out that was not the case," said Lyons, who was one of approximately 1,100 people inside the headquarters building at 8:45 a.m. when the first reports came of a potential shooter on post. "We are sad for our soldier in arms that she faced those kinds of challenges that she thought she had to resort to those type of actions. At the same time, we're equally grateful because this situation could've been worse."

Fort Lee was locked down for about an hour as the initial reports of an "active shooter" raised fears of shooting rampages at other military installations in recent years.

Sirens sounded on the installation and its website advised personnel on the installation to "enact active shooter protocols immediately."

Multiple law enforcement agencies including the FBI responded to the initial threat, Lyons said.

Lyons said the only shot the soldier fired was the one that took her own life.

The post was back to normal operations Monday morning except for the Lee Avenue gate and the CASCOM headquarters, which remained closed as the Army Criminal Investigation Command pored over the scene.

The soldier, whose name the military won't release until 24 hours after notifying her family, was taken to VCU Medical Center where she was later pronounced dead.

Lyons described her as a sergeant first class with 14 years of military service, including a 15-month deployment to Iraq in 2007. She had been assigned to Fort Lee for about three years, he said.

Military officials have not released a motive for the suicide and declined to say whether the soldier had been seeing anyone for mental health issues.

"Obviously she was upset and enraged. I can't speculate or speak to what may have caused that," Lyons said.

Suicide rates in the Army have spiked in the past decade, rising above the civilian rate in 2008 and continuing to grow annually until last year. The Army reported 325 suicides in 2012 and 301 in 2013.

The suicide rate for full-time soldiers peaked at 29.7 deaths per 100,000 in 2012, according to a Pentagon report. The rate for civilians in the same age group was 25.1 per 100,000 in 2010, the latest year figures are available.

Monday's incident is at least the fourth time since 2011 that a Fort Lee soldier has publicly committed suicide. In two of the instances, the suicides followed domestic homicides.

The Army has launched new suicide prevention programs and partnered with the National Institute of Mental Health to study risk factors.

Greg Rinckey, a Washington lawyer who focuses on military law and served in the Army JAG Corps, said those efforts are admirable, but many soldiers are still worried about seeing mental health professionals.

"It's harder for a sergeant first class to ask for help I think, because they know that their troops are going to look at them differently," Rinckey said. "I think it's gotten better, but I still think there's a stigma associated with it."

Lyons, the commanding general, praised law enforcement's quick response, noting that Fort Lee police arrived on the scene within two minutes.

Fort Lee's website on Monday morning displayed the words "Shooter on Post" behind a red background. But the headline referred to a recent story in the installation's newspaper about a new threat alert system that is being installed but that was not used Monday.

Fort Lee is the Army's third-largest training base. Its programs train 36 percent of all enlisted soldiers and 40 percent of all warrant officers in the Army, not including the airmen, sailors and Marines who also cycle through some of its schools. With students included, Fort Lee's daily population averages about 34,000.

"I ask you for prayers for our soldier, and we're grateful that it was resolved without any greater injury," said Lyons, who took command of Fort Lee and CASCOM on Friday. "We will, I assure you, thoroughly investigate this."