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Alcohol is Factor in Accused G.I.'s Actions

The American staff sergeant suspected of killing 16 Afghan villagers had been drinking alcohol — a violation of military rules in combat zones — and suffering from the stress related to his fourth combat tour and tensions with his wife about the deployments on the night of the massacre, a senior American official said .

"When it all comes out, it will be a combination of stress, alcohol and domestic issues — he just snapped," said the official, who has been briefed on the investigation and who spoke on condition of anonymity because the soldier has not yet been formally charged.

As new details emerged about possible reasons behind the shootings, the American official said the military was preparing to move the sergeant to a prison in the United States as early as Friday, most likely to Fort Leavenworth, Kan., just a day after he was flown to a detention site in Kuwait from Afghanistan.

The sergeant's sudden transfer to the United States is the result of a behind-the-scenes diplomatic uproar with Kuwait, which learned of the sergeant's move to an American base on Kuwaiti territory from news reports before the United States government could alert the Kuwaitis about the move, the senior American official said.

The account by the American official, confirmed by a senior official at the Pentagon, is the most detailed description so far of the state of mind of the sergeant, a 38-year-old married father of two who was on his first combat tour in Afghanistan but his fourth over all, including three in Iraq, since he enlisted in 2001.

The Army still has not named the soldier, but on Thursday a lawyer who said he had been retained by the soldier's family offered some information. The lawyer, John Henry Browne of Seattle, said the man is a decorated soldier who grew up in the Midwest and enlisted within a week of the terrorist attacks of 2001.

"He felt it was his duty to stand up for the United States," said Mr. Browne, who has handled many high-profile cases in the Northwest, including the recent defense of the teenage fugitive known as the Barefoot Bandit, Colton Harris-Moore.

Mr. Browne, who said he met with "a very large group of family members" on Wednesday and spoke with the soldier by phone on Thursday, said the man had "been decorated many, many times. He's been to Iraq twice. He was injured twice and he was deployed back to Afghanistan. He is a career military man." He added, "He was injured in Iraq in two places on his body, so he wasn't certain he was healthy enough to go back, physically." He confirmed that the soldier, part of the Third Stryker Brigade, Second Infantry, had served three tours in Iraq with that unit. He declined to say whether the sergeant might have psychological or mental health issues, and he also would not say whether the soldier had confessed. Mr. Browne said he would wait for the government to release the man's name.

"I've specifically asked him not to talk about anything about the case until I can sit down with him face to face," Mr. Browne said.

Mr. Browne, unaware of the accounts by officials on Thursday, said reports that the soldier and his wife had marital troubles were "a bunch of nonsense." He said that the soldier and his wife had "a very healthy marriage." Their two children are ages 3 and 4.

Mr. Browne said that his client had been based at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, just south of Tacoma, Wash., "for years." He said that many of his family members had moved from the Midwest to western Washington, but that some also remained in the Midwest. He said the soldier did "blue collar" work in the Midwest before he enlisted. The soldier's wife had "a very good job," he said, noting that he was being paid, not working on the case pro bono.

The account of the sergeant's state of mind came from two other soldiers with whom he was drinking alcohol the night of the shootings, the American official said, and those soldiers face disciplinary action. The sergeant has refused to speak to investigators, invoking his right to a lawyer immediately after he surrendered to authorities after returning to his base after the shootings.

The soldier's wife and children have been moved from their home at Joint Base Lewis-McChord for their protection in anticipation of the release of the sergeant's name, the American official said. Among the reasons for initially withholding the sergeant's identity, the official said, was that the military wanted to protect his family from possible reprisal.

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