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Almost Home, but Facing More Delays at Walter Reed

Errors Slow Disabled Soldier's Retirement

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After nearly three years as an outpatient at Walter Reed Medical Center, Staff Sgt. John Daniel Shannon had begun the wrenching process of turning himself into a civilian.

He no longer wore the uniform he loved so much. He sported a short beard and traded his black beret for a baseball cap. Granted a 30-day leave to prepare for retirement as his disability case finally made it through the system, he moved his family to Suffolk, Va., and began to babysit his two kids, clean the house and grow vegetables. Given what had happened to him in Iraq -- the traumatic brain injury from an AK-47 round that shattered one eye and half his skull -- and the chronic post-traumatic stress disorder that followed, that was about all he could handle.



"I don't even know what 'going on with my life' means," said Staff Sgt. John Daniel Shannon, after being told that paperwork glitches would delay his release from Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

Last week, Shannon, 43, was back at Walter Reed, but not to say goodbye. The doctors' signatures on two time-sensitive forms in his disability file had expired. He would have to be reexamined by his doctors, he was told, and his medical summaries would have to be written all over again. Unfortunately, the sergeant in charge of his disability paperwork had not stayed on top of his case.

"There was a failure of paying attention to the currency of his paperwork," a Walter Reed spokesman, Charles Dasey, said last night.

The bottom line: No one could tell Shannon when he might go back to his family, transfer into the Veterans Affairs medical system and move on with his life.

After a *Washington Post* story in February described the conditions that Shannon and other wounded soldiers at Walter Reed endured after returning from Iraq, Shannon became something of a spokesman for his fellow patients.

He testified before a congressional hearing about the Army's obligation to care for its

wounded. Members of Congress and generals shook Shannon's hand and thanked him for his courage, while President Bush and Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates promised swift changes. Three panels were set up to study not only Walter Reed's failures, but the entire overburdened military medical-care system for returning soldiers and Marines five years into war.

But none of that kept Shannon from getting caught up again in military bureaucracy.

"It's like being kicked in the teeth by a horse," Shannon said this week in a phone interview, alone in his room at Walter Reed. "I've been sitting here for three years. I don't even know what 'going on with my life' means. I want to scream at the top of my lungs. I'm at the end of my rope."

While Shannon, a senior sniper in Iraq, began speaking at public events and counseling other soldiers about the cumbersome Army disability process, he was quietly fighting his own battles.

The case manager assigned to shepherd him through the system was hard to reach. He couldn't get straight answers about his future. Appointments were still difficult to make. Finally, as his discharge seemed imminent, a cascading set of errors and inattention ensured the delay of his release. "It's been 33 months," he said. "What kind of beer are they drinking?"

After *The Post's* stories in February, the Army moved swiftly to fix the outpatient system. It created a new brigade structure to oversee the wounded and brought in combat infantry officers to run it. More platoon sergeants and case managers were added to give more individual service. Building 18, the moldy and mouse-ridden barracks for wounded outpatients, was closed, and soldiers moved into new living quarters with flat-panel TVs and computers.

But some soldiers still complain of lost paperwork and delays in appointments. In June, one dorm was without air conditioning. Up and down a sweltering hallway, soldiers used fans and kept their doorways open to ease the summer heat.

At a town hall meeting in July, soldiers vented their frustration over a variety of issues to Maj. Gen. Eric B. Schoomaker, Walter Reed's commander. One mother said that her son had been given discharge papers to sign with no explanation of his options. Other soldiers complained about an orthopedic surgeon, saying the doctor had been repeatedly "abusive and demeaning to patients" during the medical disability process and should be fired.

This week Shannon praised the new brigade; his company commander, Capt. Steven Gventer; and the medical and psychological care he has received. For Shannon and others, including some commanders, the disability process remains the largest source of anger. A presidential commission suggested doing away with the Army's long evaluation process -- which must essentially be redone by the Department of Veterans Affairs before any VA benefits can be calculated. But that has not happened.

In his time at Walter Reed, Shannon has had six different disability case managers assigned to him.

His latest round of bad news involved his current disability case manager. In August, the manager called Shannon in Suffolk to say that one important document was missing Shannon's signature. This would delay his retirement date.

Shannon was livid. It had been two months since his final surgery, and the process should have been close to completion.

"The files just sat there," he said. "When it got ready to go to the [evaluation] board, he noticed they weren't signed. Why was it so hard for him to do this job?"

The case manager informed Shannon that he himself was in the process of retiring and would be hard to reach, but he said he would fax Shannon the Army Form 3947 for his signature. The fax never arrived. Shannon said he could not reach the counselor, Sgt. 1st Class Allen Domingo, the next dozen times he tried.

Shannon and his wife were plunged into despair. Torry Shannon, who had spent two years caring for her husband and children at Walter Reed, had just started a house-cleaning business in Suffolk.

The delay and sense of neglect seemed an echo of their early days at Walter Reed, when Shannon, with a bandaged head from surgery and on heavy pain medications, was released from the hospital with nothing more than a map and told to find his room across post by himself. He had sat for weeks without appointments and without anyone to check on him.

The family had almost gone broke. At one point they lived five to a tiny room.

Shannon, struggling with post-traumatic stress, was so angry that he broke things around the house, including his new Bluetooth earphone, which he smashed just thinking about all the new obstacles. His PTSD had been triggered, as it had been before, by the thought of soldiers treated disrespectfully. "It's about whether we're important enough," he said.

Last Friday, Domingo phoned Shannon with even worse news. Some of the doctors' signatures on some key paperwork -- narrative medical evaluations of his disabilities -- had expired. Shannon would have to make new appointments, get new signatures and be reevaluated.

Shannon checked back into a room at Walter Reed.

"I'm going to lose it. He's going to lose it," Torry Shannon said Tuesday morning. "He's cycling up again, and I've become a single parent in a 24-hour period. I just opened up a business. There's no one to watch the kids... I want my husband home."

When Shannon tried to reach Domingo again for some explanation, the voice mail message told him what Domingo had not: "I will be out of the office from 10 to 14 September. I will be involved in transitional, retirement... training... please leave number and message... Have a fine Army day."

Dasey, the Walter Reed spokesman, said Domingo was kept on the case for the sake of continuity. "Sergeant Domingo already has established a relationship with Sergeant Shannon," he said.

Domingo could not be reached for comment.

Dasey said Army officials determined last night that Shannon's paperwork is still valid and they would send his case on to the medical evaluation board, the last step in determining Army disability pay and benefits, on Monday. He said additional appointments with doctors would not be necessary. He could not explain how Domingo had made such a mistake.

Shannon said he would like to take over his case manager's job. He wants to make sure that other soldiers at Walter Reed, all younger and less outspoken, get the treatment they deserve. "I wish I could take his job so I could kick some doors in and say, 'Hey! What's going on here!'"

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