

W A S H I N G T O N, Aug. 23, 2002 -- The Pentagon is sending a special team to Fort Bragg this weekend to look for a possible link in the deaths of four Army wives. The women were all allegedly killed by their husbands, some of whom took an anti-malaria drug that can have side effects.

On June 11, two days after returning from Afghanistan, Sgt. 1st Class Rigoberto Nieves allegedly shot his wife Teresa and then himself. Over the next five weeks there were three more spouse killings.

Sgt. 1st Class Brandon Floyd, of the elite Delta Force, allegedly shot and killed his wife Andrea and then himself.

Master Sgt. William Wright allegedly strangled his wife Jennifer.

Sgt. Cedric Griffin, the only one who had not been to Afghanistan, allegedly stabbed his estranged wife, Marilyn.

Three of the four Fort Bragg soldiers were special operations servicemen who had recently returned home after tours of duty in Afghanistan.

An Army medical team is now investigating why these crimes happened. One thing they are considering is a possible link between the anti-malaria drug Lariam and the murders.

'Suicidal Behavior, Psychotic Actions'

Jeanne Lese, co-director of Lariam Action USA, says the drug is dangerous. "The most recent study shows that Lariam causes side effects in one-third of the cases," Lese said. "And these side effects can be paranoia, suicidal behavior, psychotic actions."

The Army is skeptical of a connection between the killings and the drug. Army officials say they'll check into a Lariam link but there has been no evidence so far that it might be linked to the Fort Bragg killings.

Colonel Robert DeFraités of the Army Surgeon General's office helped put together the epidemiological consultation team — EPICON — that's going to Fort Bragg on Sunday.

He told ABCNEWS' Good Morning America that the consultation team would be looking for any common thread in the killings, including the drug, but he didn't expect Lariam to be the key.

"Lariam has been used very successfully by the Army and others, many others around the world for the 10 years that its been licensed by the FDA," DeFraités said. "Our experience, in particular, in this case, it really doesn't seem to add up to be that common theme or common thread that we're looking for," he said.

The drug's manufacturer, Roche Laboratories, acknowledges reports of suicide and suicidal thoughts attributed to Lariam, also known as mefloquine. But company spokesman Terence Hurley said this week they were extremely rare, "only a small percentage of the more than 25 million people that have successfully used Lariam."

At Fort Bragg, shocked military families are hoping the Army will come up with some answers and do something to prevent such tragedies from happening ever again.

Tanya Biank, a military affairs reporter for the Fayetteville Observer, has been in close touch with Fort Bragg soldiers and their families. Biank said she was receiving phone calls and e-mails from soldiers asking if these men had taken Lariam while deployed to Afghanistan.

"Some people that I have spoken with here are very glad that the Army is looking into the Lariam link with these murders," Biank said. "But many people also believe that this might be

some kind of a smokescreen, and that the issue should really stay on domestic violence in the military," she said.

Fort Bragg, near Fayetteville, N.C., is home to the 82nd Airborne Division and U.S.Army commando units.

In another case, Joan Shannon, 35, was charged last month with first-degree murder and conspiracy to commit murder in the July 23 fatal shooting of Maj. David Shannon, 40. Police say financial gain, involving insurance policies, was a primary motive.

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