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After Charging 8, Army Is Scrutinized on Hazing

By **KIRK SEMPLE**

Under Army rules, a superior is allowed to subject a soldier to certain kinds of “corrective measures,” including “verbal reprimands and a reasonable number of repetitions of authorized physical exercises.”

But in light of charges filed this week against eight soldiers in connection with the death of Pvt. [Danny Chen](#), a fellow soldier in Afghanistan, the line separating acceptable activities from hazing, which is forbidden, has come under renewed scrutiny both inside and outside the military.

“It’s important to know that Army training is rigorous and demanding and it’s often associated with violent action, but we’re very careful and very attentive to crossing that line,” George Wright, an Army spokesman at the Pentagon, said Thursday. “While we want to make our soldiers tough and resilient, we want to make sure that our training is not abusive.”

To that end, officials explained, all officers, both commissioned and noncommissioned, are trained in the distinctions during basic training and during refresher courses throughout their careers.

On Thursday, Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said on [his Facebook page](#) that military officials were investigating several other allegations of hazing. “These appear to be isolated instances of misconduct,” he said. “We are duty bound to protect one another from hazing in any form.”

[Private Chen’s body](#) was found on Oct. 3 in a guard tower on his base in southern Afghanistan. He had suffered what the military called “an apparent self-inflicted gunshot wound.” The eight service members — one officer and seven enlisted soldiers — were charged with a range of crimes, including manslaughter and negligent homicide, officials announced on Wednesday.

One suspect, Specialist Ryan J. Offutt, 32, of Greenville, Pa., was sentenced to jail in 2002 after pleading guilty to charges of simple assault and indecent assault after attacking a woman in his house in 2001, according to court records and a 2002 account in a local newspaper.

In the Chen case, Specialist Offutt was charged with multiple counts, including involuntary manslaughter, assault consummated by battery, negligent homicide and reckless endangerment.

The authorities have revealed little about the circumstances surrounding the death, which remains under investigation. But Private Chen's parents insisted that their son displayed no suicidal or depressive tendencies. They said Army officials had told them that in the hours before his death, Private Chen was harassed by fellow soldiers, who dragged him out of bed, pelted him with rocks and made him do painful exercises when he failed to turn off a water heater after showering.

According to the family, the soldiers used ethnic slurs against Private Chen, which are also prohibited by Army rules.

Private Chen's parents, Su Zhen Chen and Yan Tao Chen, Chinese immigrants who live in the East Village, said they did not know if their son had done anything else that the other soldiers might have taken as a provocation. But in October, military officials gave the Chens a photocopy of a page from Private Chen's personal journal that included a list, apparently in his handwriting, describing procedural failures: "Didn't clear weapon," "Didn't hydrate," and "No attention to detail (little things)."

Army rules define hazing as conduct whereby a service member causes another service member "to suffer or be exposed to an activity that is cruel, abusive, oppressive or harmful."

Advocates for the family, while pressing for a full investigation, have also been lobbying the Army to crack down on hazing and to improve conditions for minorities, particularly soldiers of Asian descent, who enlist at lower rates than other minorities. Military officials said members of the Army — soldiers and civilian employees alike — undergo "equal-opportunity training" annually.



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