



Written by [Rebecca Terrell](#) on September 23, 2013

Did Psychiatric Meds Cause Navy Yard Tragedy?

Congress is investigating whether prescription medications played a role in last week's massacre at the Washington Navy Yard when former reservist-turned-military contractor Aaron Alexis killed 12 people and injured three. U.S. Representative Jeff Miller (R-Fla.), chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs told Washington, D.C.-area radio station [WTOP](#), "One of the medications that [Alexis] received does have a side effect that could in fact have been a problem." He said his committee has directed the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) to save all records relating to the 34-year-old mass murderer. "We want to make sure everything that could have been done was done, and that the VA does not do something to change the storyline."



The drug in question is apparently Trazodone, which the [New York Times](#) reported Alexis received for insomnia August 23 at a VA hospital in Providence, Rhode Island. He had the prescription refilled on August 28 at the VA in Washington, D.C. [Trazodone](#) is an antidepressant often used to treat insomnia but proven to cause suicidal thinking, panic attacks, mania, and aggressive behavior. This psychotherapeutic is directly linked with [several murder cases](#) in the past six years, including a 2011 mass shooting at a salon in Seal Beach, California, and a [2009 incident in Maine](#) that left a father dead and a mother injured after Perley Goodrich, Jr. was injected with Trazodone at a psychiatric hospital. Goodrich complained the medication was dangerous and made him feel violent.

Many media such as [USA Today](#) reacted to the Navy Yard tragedy with reports that Alexis suffered from post traumatic stress disorder, but the [Navy Times](#) said the VA issued a statement in response to these claims denying it ever diagnosed Alexis with or treated him for mental health issues. The September 18 statement confirmed he was treated twice in August for insomnia. "On both occasions, Mr. Alexis was alert and oriented," reads the report. It adds that he "was asked by VA doctors if he was struggling with anxiety or depression, or had thoughts about harming himself or others, which he denied."

However, further investigation into the case reveals doctors should have already known the answer to these questions. Less than three weeks before his VA treatment, Alexis had run into trouble in Newport, Rhode Island, where police say he started an argument with a stranger Alexis claimed had "sent 3 people to follow him and keep him awake by talking to him and sending vibrations into his body." The [August 7 police report](#) contains Alexis' description of his attempts to hide from these three individuals, moving to several different hotels in one night, where they nevertheless continued to speak to him "through the walls, floor and ceiling," and to use "some sort of microwave machine" to send vibrations through his body and keep him awake. He did not tell the officers what the three were saying but expressed fear they would harm him. When police asked about a history of family mental illness or personal mental episodes, Alexis denied both.



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Newport authorities didn't keep the incident secret. Lieutenant William Fitzgerald told the [Los Angeles Times](#) that police followed routine procedure by informing the Newport Naval Station. "We faxed [the report] to them that same day, an hour after we spoke to Mr. Alexis," Fitzgerald recounted. "They said they would look into it, that they would follow up on it."

Research conducted by the [National Institutes of Health](#) has shown hallucinations such as those Alexis suffered to be a common symptom of bipolar disorder, while the [Physician's Desk Reference](#) warns doctors that Trazodone is not approved for treatment of bipolar disorder. It also urges caution when combining the drug with other medications including anti-depressants.

It is unknown whether Alexis suffered from bipolar disorder or was taking other prescriptions that could adversely interact with Trazodone when VA doctors prescribed it August 23. Yet might they have exercised more caution considering Alexis' violent history which, along with the August 7 incident in Newport, included several run-ins with the law since 2004 and a discharge from the Navy for misconduct? This information should have thrown up red flags.

"Severe adverse drug reactions such as suicide and violence typically occur in this relatively short time span after starting an antidepressant," said psychiatrist [Peter Breggin, M.D.](#), an expert in the mental health field and an outspoken critic of psychiatric drug overuse. "Individuals with a known history of violence like Alexis are at even higher risk of being driven to more extreme violence by exposure to antidepressant drugs."

The mental health watchdog group Citizens Commission on Human Rights International (CCHRI), says drug-induced violence is no secret. In an [article](#) calling for official investigations into the link between psychiatric drug use and acts of mass violence, CCHRI points out:

The FDA's MedWatch system reveals that between 2004-2012, there were 14,656 reports of psychiatric drugs causing violent side effects — 1,415 cases of homicidal ideation/homicide, 3,287 cases of mania & 8,219 cases of aggression. The FDA admits that less than 1% of all serious events are ever reported to it, so the actual number of side effects occurring are most certainly higher.

CCHRI laments that a recent study by the Department of Defense (DOD) on military suicides completely omitted any discussion of psychiatric drug use though yearly increases of such use are recorded in other DOD data. Until now, there has been no federal investigation on the link between psychotropics and violence.

Since Alexis chose the Navy Yard for his rampage, the federal government is now forced to investigate, and it would seem that Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Miller plans a thorough inquiry. The [Navy Times](#) reports that he wants to question VA employees and expects to review all records related to Alexis. "To be clear, no such records shall be destroyed, modified, altered, deleted, removed, relocated or otherwise negligently or intentionally handled so as to make them inaccessible to the committee," wrote Miller in a September 18 letter to VA Secretary Eric Shinseki. "If the practice of the VA involves the routine destruction, deletion, recycling, relocation, alteration or removal of such materials, such practices should be halted immediately and all records preserved."

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