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VIETNAM WAR TO BLAME FOR MAN'S ACTIONS, JURORS DECIDE POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS LED BEACH HUSBAND TO SEEK REVENGE ON HIS WIFE'S LOVER, JURY SAYS.

The only top military decoration Denver Owens didn't win during his tour in Vietnam was the Congressional Medal of Honor.

In April 1968, the Marine corporal was awarded the Navy Cross when he single-handedly killed 24 North Vietnamese Army regulars outside An Hoa, according to testimony in Circuit Court this week.

The next year, Owens won the Silver Star when he killed a North Vietnamese Army captain who reportedly was carrying battle plans for a second Tet Offensive, according to testimony. By the time he left the Marine Corps in 1969, Owens also had won the Bronze Star and three Purple Hearts for battlefield injuries.

But Vietnam left Owens with more than physical wounds and an impressive array of battlefield medals. On Thursday, a jury decided that Owens was temporarily insane last June because of a delayed bout of post-traumatic stress syndrome caused by his Vietnam experience.

The jury, after deliberating for nearly three hours, found him not guilty by reason of insanity on charges of abduction and use of a firearm for actions he took in seeking revenge against his wife's lover. Owens, who has no criminal record, could have been sentenced to 13 years in prison if convicted on both charges.

After thanking the jurors, Judge Alan E. Rosenblatt told them, "This is one of the most difficult cases I've ever presided over."

Prosecutor Kathleen Prichard had argued that it was jealous rage that caused Owens, 48, to go after his wife's lover with a gun last summer.

In an unusual use of the post-traumatic stress syndrome defense, Owens' lawyer, Moody E. "Sonny" Stallings Jr., urged jurors to believe that Owens' wife's infidelity pierced the armor that had protected the ex-Marine from his memories of Vietnam for more than a quarter century.

Once the armor was pierced, Stallings maintained, Owens began to act as he had 28 years ago in the jungles of Southeast Asia.

``That's what it took to rip this scar open and cause this man to think in irrational terms," Stallings told the jury.

Until last summer, Owens appeared to be a Vietnam vet who had adjusted well to civilian life. He had been married to his wife for more than 20 years. The couple had two children. With a top security clearance, he was working as a troubleshooter on Navy ships.

Owens also was busy in community activities, especially those involving young people, according to testimony Thursday.

``Denver, in our community, was the person all the kids flocked to," testified Linda Hutchinson, a family friend.

Stallings argued that Owens' temporary bout of insanity was triggered when his wife admitted on June 22, 1995, to having a recent affair with a man with whom she had had an affair 20 years earlier.

After a sleepless night, Owens admitted, he took a gun from his Chesapeake home to seek revenge on the lover. Upon arriving at the man's home on Darby Run in Virginia Beach, Owens discovered that the man was not there, but his 21-year-old stepson was. He convinced the stepson to let him in the house.

After a short discussion, Owens pulled the gun and explained that he was there to seek revenge. He then tied up the stepson with bedsheets and forced him into an upstairs closet, according to testimony.

When his wife's lover arrived home about an hour later, the two men engaged in a short shouting match before Owens inexplicably calmed down, according to testimony.

Stallings told the jury that Owens apparently began to calm down when his wife's lover explained that the affair was over.

``He wanted to believe it was over with, and that gave him the out he was looking for," Stallings told the jury.

In the meantime, the stepson had escaped from the upstairs closet, left the house and called police. Owens later turned himself in to police.

During the two-day trial, Stallings produced two mental-health experts who testified that Owens suffered from an irresistible impulse stemming from post-traumatic stress syndrome.

The syndrome gained widespread attention in the years following the Vietnam War.

But Dr. Paul Mansheim, a psychiatrist who testified for the prosecution on Thursday, claimed that the condition was unlikely to surface after such a lengthy delay.

``In my experience, that would be extremely rare," he testified.

Mansheim said he found no evidence of the disorder when he examined Owens.

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