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Nevada National Guard soldier says she reported no prisoner abuse

By BRENDAN RILEY

ASSOCIATED PRESS

YERINGTON, Nev. (AP) - A Nevada National Guard soldier said she complained after a prisoner at Iraq's notorious Abu Ghraib prison was shot and killed during a riot last year, but denied she documented abuse of inmates by her fellow soldiers.

Spc. Donna Menesini, 49, told The Associated Press on Friday that she was the "older female soldier" who was mentioned during an Article 32 hearing into prisoner abuses at Abu Ghraib.

During the hearing, a special agent with the U.S. Army's criminal investigation command testified he was told about a Nevada National Guard member who was "afraid of her chain of command" and sent documentation of prisoner abuse to her relatives, according to transcripts obtained by various media outlets.

In an interview at her home, Menesini said she never documented abuses, but did keep a personal journal about her experiences in Iraq.

"There was nothing to document," Menesini said. "They made it sound like I knew something horrible. If I did know something horrible, I know I would have told the commander and he would have straightened it out."

"The journals I wrote are the journals of what I did



during the day," she said. "It had nothing to do with documentation because there was nothing to document ... It kind of kept me sane."

"I never got in trouble for keeping a journal."

Menesini, a grandmother of seven, was deployed to Iraq as part of the 72nd Military Police Company, based in Henderson, Nev. The unit was stationed at Abu Ghraib from mid-May to early November 2003.

Menesini told AP that during her time in Iraq she was going through menopause, which triggered an emotional outburst after a June 2003 riot and escape attempt in which an inmate was killed and several others were wounded. Soldiers have said the slain inmate was about to attack another soldier with a tent pole.

"I had never seen bodies. It was really hard. I felt bad. I called them murderers," Menesini said in describing her outburst at fellow U.S. soldiers who quelled the riot. "After I calmed down and saw ... like the psychiatrist said, it was a flight-or-fight reaction on my part."

Menesini saw two military psychiatrists who wanted to ensure she was fit for duty. She said she was cleared for continued service, but was shifted from the prison to the Baghdad airport and later helped to guard military convoys until returning home.

Menesini emphasized the difficulty of going through menopause during a six-month deployment in Iraq, where she encountered temperatures as high as 120 degrees.

"I don't want people to think I'm nuts," she said. "I'm not nuts. Menopause is a very difficult thing to go through."

Menesini said she never saw anything similar to the humiliating photographs of Iraqi prisoners that have prompted international outrage.

Abuses of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers at Abu Ghraib - notorious as the site of executions and torture during Saddam Hussein's regime - have caused a major scandal and damaged the credibility of the U.S.-led coalition.

In all, seven soldiers with the 372nd Military Police Company - the unit that replaced Menesini's company at Abu Ghraib - face criminal charges. An additional six have received official reprimands, which will effectively end their Army careers, and one was given an official admonishment.

"We weren't there to hurt people," Menesini said. "They were people that never had any power before in their life. And now they got power, and they went overboard."

The top general with the Nevada National Guard confirmed that Menesini had seen some "disturbing" incidents, but that they did not rise to the level of abuse.

"It's been way overblown," Air Force Maj. Gen. Giles Vanderhoof said. "Was there prisoner abuse? Did she try to report it? And was she reprimanded? None of those things are true."

The Nevada National Guard has received no inquiry into any of the state's guardsmen who served at Abu Ghraib, he said.

"(Menesini) considers the matter closed. From everything I have, I consider it closed," Vanderhoof said.

Menesini, a Yerington resident, remains with the guard as supply clerk assigned to a Carson City unit.

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AP newswoman Christina Almeida contributed to this report from Las Vegas.

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