

Thousands of US troops evacuated from Iraq for unexplained medical reasons

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Citing the US military Central Command as its source, the *Washington Post* reported on September 2 that “more than 6,000 service members” had been medically evacuated from Iraq since the launch of the war. At the time, the number of combat wounded stood at 1,124. A further 301 personnel had been injured in non-combat incidents such as vehicle accidents. The figure of “more than 6,000” supplied to the *Post* therefore implies that over 4,500 US troops have required evacuation from Iraq for medical reasons *other* than combat or non-combat injuries.

The *Washington Post* article did not include any further information on what is a staggering admission by the military. At no point in the last six months have the American people been told that for every soldier who has been killed in Iraq, at least another 15 have fallen so ill that they had to be flown back to the United States. The *Post* described the unexplained evacuations simply as the “thousands who became physically or mentally ill”.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A12096-2003Sep1.html>

The obvious questions that must be answered are: what were they diagnosed with; what units are they from; what duties were they performing; what long-term effects have they suffered; and what treatment are they receiving?

While large numbers of the evacuations may well be for routine medical reasons, such a detailed breakdown is essential. Apart from providing an insight into the true impact of the war on the American troops, it may provide evidence that supports the concerns among military personnel and their families that service in Iraq is exposing them to long-term and potentially fatal medical problems. In particular, there are fears that soldiers have already died or are falling ill due to their

exposure to depleted uranium (DU) or the anthrax vaccine they have been compelled to take.

On July 31, the Army Surgeon General announced an investigation into the deaths of two soldiers, Michael Tosta and Josh Neusche, and the hospitalisation of another 100, diagnosed with severe pneumonia. It has been established that inhaling large concentrations of DU-contaminated particles damages the lungs and kidneys and can cause respiratory illness. There are also recorded medical suspicions that the US military’s anthrax vaccine can trigger pneumonia. In August 2002, three military doctors noted in the *Cardiopulmonary and Critical Care Journal* that a case of pneumonia in a healthy 39-year-old soldier “may be due to the anthrax vaccine”.

The US Department of Defense has only made public one progress report on the pneumonia investigation. On August 22 it announced that it was “making significant progress” in eliminating SARS and vaccines as a possible cause. It revealed that 10 alleged pneumonia cases showed a higher than normal number of the white blood cell eosinophils. It also reported that none of the 19 most severe cases belonged to the same units, that 13 had fallen ill in Iraq and that the remaining six fell ill in Kuwait, Qatar, Uzbekistan, and Djibouti. The Office of the Armed Forces Medical Examiner was reportedly investigating the “specific cause or causes of death” of Tosta and Neusche.

Since July 31, however, another soldier, Zeferino Colunga, has died allegedly from pneumonia while Sergeant Richard Eaton has died from a pulmonary edema or fluid in the lungs. Two other soldiers have been found dead in their beds for as yet unexplained reasons.

Such is the distrust of the military that the families of both Josh Neusche and Colunga have demanded access

to their loved ones' medical records, personal effects and blood and tissue samples, so that independent medical opinions can be sought on the cause of death. The families sent letters on August 12 to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld stating: "We as a family are concerned that we are not being told the truth."

Stephanie Tosta, the 22-year-old widow of Michael Tosta, has publicly speculated the military is lying about the cause of her husband's death. She told United Press International last month: "More and more I think it was the [anthrax] shots. I think they [the Army] might be lying about this stuff. I really feel like it. Nobody can tell me anything. If it is the shots, then of course they are lying. We just want to know what happened and we have a right to know. But the Army is acting like they are trying to hide something, and that just makes it harder."

The family of Rachael Lacy, a young soldier who died in the US on April 4 from a "pneumonia-like illness" but whose death is not included in the military investigation, is also alleging her death was due to the anthrax vaccine. Connecticut congressman Chris Shays, who chaired hearings last year on the possible side-effects of the anthrax vaccination program, is reportedly monitoring the investigation into the death of Sergeant Richard Eaton.

The website of "Bring Them Home Now"—an organisation of military families demanding the immediate withdrawal of US forces from the Middle East—bluntly warns soldiers that the only guaranteed way to limit the medical consequences from exposure to DU is to "get out of Iraq or Afghanistan".

The groups' statement of purpose declares: "Not one more troop killed in action. Not one more troop wounded in action. Not one more troop psychologically damaged by the act of terrifying, humiliating, injuring or killing innocent people. Not one more troop spending one more day inhaling depleted uranium. Not one more troop separated from spouse and children. This is the only way to truly support these troops, and the families who are just as much part of the military as they are." (<http://www.bringthemhomenow.org/>)

The National Gulf War Resource Center (NGWRC), an advocacy organisation for veterans of the first 1991 US war on Iraq, is assisting the military families who believe they are being lied to. Among the suspected causes of a range of illnesses commonly referred to as

"Gulf War syndrome" are DU exposure and complications triggered by vaccinations. By 1999, as many as 110,000 Gulf War veterans had reported health problems that they believe are due to their service in Iraq.

The sensitivity of the military hierarchy to the suspicions among rank-and-file troops, families and veterans is demonstrated by the reassurances on the official Army medical website that neither DU nor the anthrax vaccine pose a health risk. (<http://www.armymedicine.army.mil/default2.htm>) The US government also rejects any link between "Gulf War syndrome", DU and vaccines. In 1998 however, the US military did finally admit that at least 436,000 American troops entered into areas during the first Gulf War that were contaminated to some extent by DU radioactive dust.



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