

Letters from US troops exposed as Pentagon fraud

Kate Randall
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Gannett News Service (GNS) reported Saturday that identical form letters signed by different US soldiers in Iraq have appeared in hometown newspapers across the country. The letters paint a rosy picture of troop morale and improving conditions for the population in war-torn Iraq. However, the soldiers whose names appear at the bottom of the letters didn't compose them, and many say they signed their names under false pretenses, or not at all.

The "letter-writing" blitz appears to be part of the Bush administration's efforts to boost US support for the Iraq occupation in line with its campaign against what it calls "negative" media coverage—that is, any news that doesn't toe the White House line.

Speaking Thursday at a fundraiser in Kentucky, Bush commented on the situation in Iraq, "We're making great progress—I don't care what you read about." This week, the administration also launched an effort to reach regional broadcasting companies, granting a series of exclusive interviews to regional news organizations that don't regularly cover the White House, hoping for more favorable reporting.

Facing sagging public support for the war at home—A *USA Today*/CNN/Gallup Poll released September 23 found only 50 percent of Americans thought the Iraq situation was worth going to war over—the White House and the military have now resorted to outright fabrication in an effort to rehabilitate the war effort. The letters from soldiers that appeared in hometown papers across the country last month—some of the only "good news" to come out of Iraq in recent weeks—were in fact bogus.

A search by GNS, *USA Today*'s parent company, found 11 identical letters that had appeared in different papers signed by soldiers with the 2nd Battalion of the 503rd Airborne Infantry Regiment. The letters appeared

in large metropolitan dailies, such as the *Boston Globe*, as well as smaller publications such as the Beckley (W.Va.) *Register-Herald* and the *Tulare* (Calif.) *Advance-Register*.

The letters read in part, "Things have changed tremendously for our battalion since those first cold, wet weeks spent in the mountain city of Bashur. On April 10, our battalion conducted an attack south into the oil rich town of Kirkuk, the city that has since become our home away from home and the focus of our security and development efforts. Kirkuk is a hot and dusty city of just over a million people. The majority of the city has welcomed our presence with open arms."

"The quality of life and security for the citizens has been largely restored and we are a large part of why that has happened," the letters added. "The fruits of all our soldiers' efforts are clearly visible in the streets of Kirkuk today. There is very little trash in the streets, many more people in the markets and shops, and children have returned to school. This is all evidence that the work we are doing as a battalion and as American soldiers is bettering the lives of Kirkuk's citizens. I am proud of the work we are doing here in Iraq and I hope all of your readers are as well."

In fact, the northern city of Kirkuk has been the scene in recent weeks of angry demonstrations of Iraqis protesting unemployment, poor conditions and repression by US forces. US soldiers around Kirkuk and across Iraq have been continually targeted by sniper fire, ambushes and remote-controlled explosions. Suicide car bombings have become a regular occurrence.

At least 19 US soldiers have been killed in Iraq so far this month, with five killed on October 13 alone. A total of 387 have been killed since the invasion, 216 of these since Bush declared the end of "major combat"

on May 1. With this bogus letter-writing campaign, these same men and women—who face death on a daily basis as a consequence of Bush’s military policy—are being cynically exploited to advance the administration’s propaganda.

Pfc. Nick Deaconson of Beckley, W.Va., told GNS that he didn’t know about the letter until his father congratulated him by phone after it appeared in the *Register-Herald*. His father, Timothy Deaconson, said, “When I told him he wrote such a good letter, he said, ‘What letter?’”

Sgt. Christopher Shelton said his platoon sergeant had passed out the letter to the soldiers and asked them to sign it if they agreed with it. They were then asked for the names of their hometown newspapers.

Sgt. Todd Oliver told GNS, “Someone, somewhere along the way, took it upon themselves to mail it to the various editors of newspaper across the country.” He said he had been told a soldier wrote the letter, but didn’t know who it was.

Sgt. Shawn Grueser of Poca, W.Va., said he had spoken with a military public affairs officer about his experience in Iraq, and thought the information was to be used for a news release to be sent to his hometown paper. Grueser said he never signed the letter, and although he agreed with the letter’s content, “It makes it look like you cheated on a test, and everybody got the same grade.”

At this point, it is not known who wrote the letter and organized sending it out in multiple copies, although they were apparently distributed to the soldiers by someone in the 2nd Battalion staff. Pentagon spokeswoman Lt. Col. Cindy Scott-Johnson said that the Pentagon had raised no objection “that I know of” to the letters, and that they were in fact in line with the US military’s “hometown news release program.”

What is clear is that this fake letter-writing episode is symptomatic of the Bush administration’s non-stop campaign of lies and deception in support of its criminal war policy, which it is moving to escalate in the face of growing opposition—both at home and within the ranks of the military itself.



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