

Stars & Stripes poll reveals

Growing anger among US troops in Iraq

James Conachy
24 October 2003

An in-depth investigative report published over the past two weeks by the military newspaper *Stars & Stripes* provides an insight into the disintegrating state of morale among US troops in Iraq. Moreover, it indicates that the military is wracked with tensions and divisions, not only over the foreign policy of the Bush administration, but between different branches of the armed forces and between officers and enlisted men.

From August 10 to August 31, three teams of *Stars & Stripes* reporters surveyed 1,935 military personnel in Iraq, observed first-hand the conditions they were living under, and conducted a number of interviews. The paper, which is independently edited, though partially funded by the Pentagon, was given unparalleled access to US troops. Its reporters visited nearly 50 camps, ranging from major bases to relatively isolated outposts.

The survey consisted of 17 questions, which asked troops to assess their living conditions, quality of health care, commanders and morale. It also asked for written responses to questions on whether their mission had changed since arriving in Iraq, how they felt the Iraq war compared to previous US conflicts, and what, short of sending them home, could commanders do to improve their morale. The final question was whether they felt the complaints by rank-and-file soldiers about morale were justified. Many American soldiers have publicly criticized the length of their deployment to Iraq or the war itself.

While the survey's sample was not considered scientific by the standards of official opinion polls, its results are nonetheless revealing. They indicate that large numbers of soldiers feel the US has no business being in Iraq and that the Bush administration lied to them about the reasons for the war.

In response to the question, "How worthwhile do you think fighting this war was for America?," 50 percent indicated doubts over the justifications for the invasion. Nineteen percent selected the conditional answer that the war was "probably worthwhile" and 20 percent of troops answered that the war was of "little value," while 11 percent damned it as "not worthwhile at all." Only 28 percent responded that it was "very worthwhile" and another 20 percent that it was "worthwhile."

Thirty-five percent answered that they were either "mostly unclear" or "not clear at all" about why they were in Iraq. A National Guardsman wrote: "In past wars...it seemed as though everyone had a 'known' mission. We're in the dark." A 21-year-old regular Army infantryman told the reporters: "A lot of the stuff we're doing here doesn't make any sense at all. Now that we've been lied to, we don't trust anyone." One soldier, whose friend was killed, referred to the failure to find any weapons of mass destruction and said: "I just don't see what we're doing here that would justify losing someone like

Herbert."

With the White House claiming that the US has liberated Iraq and that things are going well, only 16 percent of troops rated their unit's morale as "very high" or "high." Forty-nine percent rated it as "low" or "very low." Citing military sociologist Charles Moskos, *Stars & Stripes* noted that "belief in the cause for which one is fighting is one of the most overlooked aspects of morale."

To the question, "How do you rate your personal morale?," 15 percent answered "very low" and 19 percent "low." Just 8 percent chose "very high" and 19 percent "high," with 37 percent choosing "average." Soldiers consistently ranked their personal morale as higher than the ranking they chose for their unit. *Stars & Stripes* commented: "Troops may wish to report what they perceive to be the true morale situation without getting themselves into trouble, a way of saying 'I'm OK, but the unit's not.'"

The morale results diverged markedly between different types of troops. Nearly 50 percent of part-time reservists and National Guard ranked their morale as "low" or "very low," compared with one third of regular Army troops, 14 percent of Marines, and just 6 percent of the few Air Force personnel who were surveyed.

An Army Reserve sergeant wrote: "We are second-class soldiers. We are away longer from our families. We are assigned to jobs we're not trained to do. Our equipment is lacking." Fifty-five percent of the part-time soldiers surveyed stated that it was "unlikely" or "very unlikely" they would re-enlist when their time was up.

Another Army reservist wrote on his survey: "I strongly believe that the current administration is more concerned with re-election politics and less on doing the right thing. After this whole ordeal is over, I think you'll see the ranks of the Army Reserve decimated." The Defense Department has already been forced to admit that reserve recruitment and re-enlistment is "soft."

Overall, 49 percent of the respondents in Iraq indicated they intended to leave the military as soon as possible. Only 18 percent said it was "very likely" they would remain.

Some soldiers, however, particularly non-commissioned officers and skilled technicians, are re-enlisting in order to *get out* of Iraq. One Army helicopter pilot signed up for another term after he was offered an \$11,000 bonus and 18 months in Korea, because "at least I'm getting out of here." An Army sergeant re-enlisted as a recruiter, because in that position he could not be deployed overseas for three years and would leave Iraq before the end of the year. Another signed up for a four-year, guaranteed assignment in Alaska, where he was "hoping for a little bit of a breather."

The lack of ideological commitment among US soldiers, to either the occupation of Iraq or the Bush administration, is fueling bitterness

over the harsh conditions under which they are forced to live.

The *Stars & Stripes* survey indicates widespread dissatisfaction over existing conditions of personal hygiene and sanitation, recreation, communication with the outside world, and the lack of leave. Sixty-four percent ranked their living conditions as average or worse. Health care services were rated as average or worse by 63 percent. Sixteen percent—nearly one in eight—assessed their personal health as “not good” or “poor” since they arrived in the Middle East.

On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest, over 50 percent ranked their toilet and hand-washing facilities, telephone, television and newspaper access, and gym and amusement facilities as “1” or “2.” More than two thirds of the respondents ranked the quality of their morale trips—time out of Iraq—as “1.” *Stars & Stripes* noted that a response of “1” often indicated that the service was not available to those troops.

According to *Stars & Stripes*, while most soldiers are now living in buildings of some sort, there are few facilities and often no more than one hot meal per day. Air conditioning and electric lights are often unavailable due to power shortages or lack of generators. Soldiers sleep outside on hot nights. Just 41 percent of the respondents rated their commanders as having an “excellent” or “good” ability to make improvements. Sixteen percent of troops believe their commanders are “not concerned” about their living conditions.

Infantry personnel expressed open resentment over the superior conditions they believe are being enjoyed by senior officers, non-combat units and the Air Force. One infantryman stated: “The leaders live in air conditioning, the lower enlisted live with swamp coolers if they’re lucky.” Another said: “They live in palaces and we live in the sand.” An Army sergeant near Nasiriyah wrote: “Are we fighting the same war as the Air Force or did I miss something? Every day my soldiers wake up covered in sweat with their cots just inches apart, and they know that less than half-a-mile away the Air Force has literally the comforts of home.”

Most Air Force personnel rarely leave their well-provisioned and relatively secure bases, which are generally off-limits to the Army and provide fast-food restaurants, gyms, recreation rooms, fully-equipped shower units and air-conditioned tents. A senior commander at the palace headquarters of the 101st Airborne Division in Mosul confessed: “I don’t want my soldiers coming up here. I don’t want them to see how good the division staff has it.”

The most disgruntled troops are the rank-and-file Army personnel doing most of the fighting—and dying—in Iraq. For the front line infantry units, the threat of attack is constant. A soldier in Tikrit reported: “There is no front line here—you walk out of the gate and you’re in the front lines. Even inside the gates, we’re getting mortared every day.”

Units that never expected to be in combat are being shot at regularly. The commanding general of the California National Guard, Paul Monroe, told *Stars & Stripes* that military planners had underestimated the resistance, and non-combat units, such as his National Guard transport units, were sent to Iraq unprepared: “Transportation companies are no longer just transportation companies. They’ve converted 5-ton trucks to gun trucks, welding 50-caliber guns and welding metal siding to provide protection for that crew. We weren’t prepared for that kind of thing.”

US troops now suffer 25 or more attacks per day and are dying at the rate of 30 to 50 per month, with another 250 to 300 wounded. Hundreds more are falling ill.

The *Stars & Stripes* investigation thoroughly documents the

existence of a serious morale crisis among the troops in Iraq. At the very least, its findings will embolden disaffected soldiers with the knowledge they are not alone. The question arises as to why it has been published by a newspaper that is partly funded by the Defense Department and circulated en masse among the US military.

To some extent, the answer is contained in the final of seven reports on the investigation, published on October 21. It amounts to a blunt warning to the Bush administration that the Army is in a quagmire and measures must be taken to get it out.

Before the invasion of Iraq, a number of leading Army generals, basing themselves on intelligence assessments that resistance would be fierce, warned that an occupation of Iraq would require several hundred thousand troops for a number of years. The Pentagon’s civilian leadership under Donald Rumsfeld dismissed the advice and stated as few as 50,000 would be needed.

Six months after the war, *Stars & Stripes* warns that soldiers are “worried about an operational tempo that threatens to keep them at war more than at home for years to come...” The initial “good-natured griping” about poor food and no showers, it warns, is giving way to “edgier complaints about inequality among the forces and lack of confidence in their leaders.”

The Army, the paper states, “is stretched to its limit” and “even the greenest soldier can figure out he or she is likely to spend every other year in Iraq until things stabilize and forces can be reduced, a prospect that seems far away...”

Brookings Institution military analyst Michael O’Hanlon states: “Definitely the Pentagon is assuming they’ll suck it up and drive on. If the assumption proves wrong, then you’ve broken the finest volunteer Army in history.”

Stars & Stripes concludes: “Until more foreign troops can be found or the country turns peaceful enough for the American forces to leave, US commanders must do their best to keep their lonely, listless troops motivated. How well they meet that challenge will determine if the Army can weather the war on terror.”

In other words, sections of the US military are approaching a state of mutiny.

The entire *Stars & Stripes* series can be found at:
<http://www.stripes.com/morale>



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wws.org/contact