

Pentagon calls up 10,000 National Guard for combat duty in Iraq

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4 October 2003

With its occupation of Iraq becoming a morass, the Bush administration has been forced into the largest call-up of part-time National Guard troops for front-line combat operations since the Vietnam War. On September 26, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld authorised the Army to mobilise two 5,000-strong brigades of National Guard infantrymen for deployment to Iraq.

The North Carolina-based 30th Infantry Brigade (Mechanised), supplemented by a battalion from New York, was mobilised as of October 1. The Arkansas-based, 39th Infantry Brigade (Light), supplemented by a battalion from Oregon, will be mobilised on October 12.

The guardsmen will be separated from their families and jobs for at least 18 months, including a 12-month period in Iraq itself. It is likely they will be deployed between January and April 2004, after a period of full-time training, to relieve brigades of the 101st Airborne Division in the unstable areas between Baghdad and Tikrit.

The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq have seen part-time National Guard and military reservists called up in large numbers, and for lengthy periods of time, but the deployment of the 30th and 39th for combat duty marks a new phase.

The National Guard was established as a state-based force and ostensibly exists for homeland defence and assisting civilian authorities in times of emergency. Under normal peacetime conditions, National Guard units are answerable to the governor of their home state. The website *Global Security*, for example, provides the following information about the Arkansas 39th Infantry: “The Brigade takes great pride in the fact that its units have provided personnel in response to state emergencies by request of the Governor. The officers and soldiers of the Brigade are prepared to respond to floods, tornadoes, forest fires, ice storms, and have participated in searches for missing persons....”

In times of war, control of the National Guard constitutionally reverts to the federal government but generally its troops were not deployed directly in an overseas combat role. In the 1990s, however, that began to change. In 1994, the Clinton administration designated 15 National Guard brigades as “enhanced separate” units, to be available for dispatch within 90 days to a war zone. The Pentagon sent National Guard units as part of NATO forces in Bosnia.

With the declaration of the “war on terror” following September 11, 2001, the Bush administration assumed command over the National Guard and has deployed it on a massive scale—but mainly

as support troops. Of the 170,000 National Guard and reservists currently on full-time active duty, most are military policemen, engineers, drivers, medical personnel, administration and logistic experts, pilots and skilled technicians. Less than 10,000 are in Iraq, with another 8,000 in Kuwait.

The wars of the last two years, however, have stretched the American military to the limit. The Pentagon’s claim that only 50,000 US troops would need to remain in Iraq following an invasion have proven to be just as false as the lies over “weapons of mass destruction”. Sixteen combat brigades of armored and infantry units are still there, as part of a 138,000-strong US occupation force, and are barely keeping control over the country, let alone suppressing the resistance. The Bush administration is being forced to call up the National Guard combat units simply to relieve the regular brigades that have been in Iraq for nearly 12 months.

Events of the past week have highlighted the dangerous conditions that the National Guard will confront. September 27 saw the first attack in Baghdad’s so-called “green zone,” the highly defended and allegedly impregnable area the US occupation authority has sealed off as its headquarters. Three rocket-propelled grenades were fired into the 14th floor of the Rashid Hotel.

Around the city of Tikrit, the 4th Infantry Division conducted over two dozen raids on homes and buildings last weekend. A military spokesman told the press the latest operation resulted in the detention of 92 people suspected of guerilla activities. It was intended to “break the back of the Fedayeen [resistance fighters]” in the area. A roadside bomb killed an American soldier close to the main US base in Tikrit on Wednesday, demonstrating the failure of the latest raids—and the hundreds of earlier raids and thousands of detentions.

Last Sunday, six paratroopers were wounded in an ambush near Fallujah. To the west of Baghdad, American forces fought an eight-hour pitched battle on Monday and were forced to call in air support after resistance fighters ambushed two US vehicle columns. At least one US soldier died and two were wounded. Another American soldier was killed Wednesday during a street patrol in Baghdad.

Over the past seven days, American troops or Iraqi police have also opened fire on angry crowds demonstrating against unemployment or repression in Baghdad and the northern cities of Kirkuk and Mosul.

In a belated admission the US is facing escalating unrest, Paul

Bremer, the head of the US authority in Iraq, told the US Senate last month: "The reality of foreign troops on the streets is starting to chafe. Some Iraqis are beginning to regard us as occupiers and not as liberators."

The commander of US forces in Iraq, General Ricardo Sanchez, told the press on October 2 that American troops were being killed at the rate of three to six per week, with another 40 per week being wounded.

Based on the present casualty rate, it can be expected that between 30 and 50 of the 10,000 National Guardsmen leaving to occupy Iraq will die over their period of active service. Several hundred more are likely to be maimed and several hundred others likely to fall seriously ill.

It is possible, however, that the part-time Guard units will suffer a higher rate of casualties than the regular Army units they are replacing.

According to a report in the October 6 edition of the *Nation* magazine, a National Guard unit that was called up last December and has been in Iraq since the war began—the 3rd battalion of the 124th Florida-based National Guard Infantry—is ill-equipped compared to regular units and is being treated as cannon-fodder by Army commanders. Sixty-five percent of some companies of the 124th are college students from poorer areas of the state who signed up to get tuition at the Florida State University.

According to the *Nation*, the 124th's rifles are retooled Vietnam-era M16s and its radios were so inadequate the guardsmen bought their own walkie-talkies. They have also purchased, from civilian contractors, their own night-vision equipment, flashlights, satellite phones and air-conditioners. The soldiers complain of lack of water and lack of fresh food.

The *Nation* reports: "The third [battalion] of the 124th is now attached to the newly arrived First Armored Division and when its time to raid suspected resistance cells it's the Guardsmen who have to kick in the doors and clear the apartments." A sergeant told the magazine: "The First AD wants us to catch bullets for them but won't give us enough water, doesn't let us wear do-rags [type of bandana] and makes us roll down our shirt sleeves so we look proper! Can you believe this s**t?"

Such animosity stems from a particularly low level of morale among the Guardsmen and reservists. Over the past several months, some have used the letters page of the military's *Stars & Stripes* newspaper to vent their frustration at the Bush administration's use of part-time soldiers for foreign occupations. (See: <http://www.stripesonline.com/>, Letter section, for an archive of letters since June 2003).

Their letters reveal pervasive bitterness over the length of time that the part-time soldiers are being forced to spend on active duty. They show growing anger at the Title 10 executive order issued on September 14, 2001, which has allowed the Department of Defense to prevent personnel leaving the military when their term of service expires.

A California National Guardsmen serving in Kuwait wrote: "My expiration, term of service date was June 28. But since I'm in the Guard I was automatically extended. Apparently no one told the finance department, because I was kicked out of the system. So I haven't been paid since. It will be two months on Sept. 1 since

I've received any money from the Army. I have a family. What am I supposed to tell my creditors?... We're all on Title 10 orders. I've even been told I have to re-enlist. Does anyone really think I'm going to re-enlist after being treated like this? If I can't be put back into the system, then I should be sent home."

In a letter published on September 11, an Army reservist in Kuwait wrote: "It's already hard to focus on being here for six more months. They told us that they were working on a window of six months or a little more to get us home. But once again that turned out to be just another rug pulled out from under us. So now we're stuck here until January 2004 or thereafter. By then, of course, I'll be unemployed. So how can we keep up the good work like everyone is telling us?"

A National Guard sergeant, who was told her unit was going home in June only to have the date changed to December, wrote: "The knocks on our morale are devastating. We're physically able, but mentally and spiritually we're dying. If Army National Guard retention is anything of importance, we need to have faith in our government and leaders. But we can't see anyone taking a stand for soldiers... We're slowly becoming frantic. I hear people say that they're going to begin hurting themselves or others if they can't go home. The helplessness our soldiers are feeling is indescribable..."

In response to the complaints, other soldiers, particularly professional NCOs and officers, are writing in with denunciations and demands that the soldiers "suck it up and drive on". There is an instinctive concern among those who defend the Bush administration that such grievances reflect growing doubts within the broader American population about the legitimacy of the war. No "weapons of mass destruction" have been found and the Iraqi resistance is ongoing. Aggravating popular concerns about a Vietnam-style quagmire is the Bush administration's refusal to give a timeline for ending the occupation of Iraq or reducing the number of troops in the country.

At present, there are 23,000 troops in Iraq from Britain, Poland, Spain, Italy, the Ukraine and an assortment of smaller states. If the Bush administration is unable to convince, bribe or browbeat other countries to send an additional 10,000 to 15,000 troops, the US military will be compelled to call up more National Guard brigades to send to Iraq by mid-2004. The only alternative would be to reduce troop numbers or bring back to Iraq regular brigades that only recently returned from an overseas deployment.

In a clear signal that more National Guard will soon be Iraq-bound, the 5,000-strong 81st Infantry Brigade from Washington has been placed on notice for possible activation later in the year.



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