

Alarming rise in suicides among US troops in Iraq

Jeff Riley

5 December 2003

One grim indicator of the sinking morale of US occupation forces in Iraq is the alarming number of suicides among American soldiers.

The deaths of at least 17 US troops in Iraq—15 Army personnel and two Marines—have been confirmed as suicides over the past seven months, according to a recent Associated Press review of Army casualty reports. Nearly all of the suicides have occurred since May 1, when the Bush administration declared an end to major combat operations.

This number represents more than 10 percent of non-combat deaths there. According to one estimate, US troops in Iraq are committing suicide at three times the usual rate.

Dozens of other deaths are currently under investigation, and the real number of suicides could be significantly higher. Over 500 soldiers have recently been evacuated from Iraq for mental health reasons. The Army has sent a team of mental health specialists to Iraq to assess what is perceived as a growing problem of both depression and suicide.

The 130,000 US troops in Iraq are facing extended yearlong deployments under the harshest of living conditions combined with daily guerrilla-style attacks from an increasingly aggressive Iraqi resistance.

As of December 3, there have been 441 soldiers killed, 302 since May 1, when President Bush announced that “major combat” had ended in Iraq. Of these deaths, 154 are being categorized as “non-hostile.” The Pentagon has released the figure of just over 2,145 wounded, 351 of them in “non-hostile” incidents. Out of these injuries, 20 percent have suffered severe brain injuries, and many are left with disabling and disfiguring wounds, including amputations.

It is also widely acknowledged that this is a small

portion of the troops suffering serious medical problems in Iraq. As of November 20, the Landstuhl Army Medical Center in Germany had received 8,093 injured or sick troops for treatment, many for mental health problems.

There is evidence that some of the suicides may have occurred accidentally as soldiers, desperate to get out of Iraq, attempted to injure themselves. Reports include that of one soldier who shot himself in the leg after being told that he could not go home. The bullet hit an artery and he bled to death.

In another incident, a woman fatally shot herself in the stomach, also in an apparent attempt to inflict a wound that would result in her evacuation from the country. Captain Justin Cole, a military stress officer working out of Tikrit, said he believed the two soldiers hadn’t meant to kill themselves.

Other cases clearly involve unbearable mental and emotional stress. Army Private Corey Small, 20, of East Berlin, Pa., was married and the father of a 4-year-old boy. Small and his family were living in Fort Polk, La., where he was stationed. He was deployed to Iraq last May, and by July he was encamped in an abandoned hospital in Baghdad with no running water or electricity.

He died on July 3 from what Army officials called a “non-combat cause.” Fellow soldiers later reported that after calling home to the US he shot himself in front of other troops waiting to use the phone.

There is also the case of Army Specialist Joseph D. Suell, 24, of Lufkin, Tex., who reportedly took his own life in June by swallowing an entire bottle of Tylenol while deployed in the desert. His widow, Rebecca Suell, reached for answers while speaking with the Associated Press. Why, she wondered, would her husband—as sad and tired of Iraq as he was—kill himself

when she had just told him how much she loved him and how much their children missed him and needed him?

Joseph Suell wrote to his family that he suffered through sleepless nights “where all he heard were gunshots and people screaming.” According to his aunt, Deborah McCay, he also wrote that he feared he would lose his life to snipers, and said that even Iraqi children were carrying bombs and grenades to use against US troops.

He was so desperate to come home that he asked his wife to plead with his commanding officer—which she did. She explained the difficulties of life without her husband, but to no avail.

Attending nursing school and working at Wal-Mart while trying to raise three children was proving to be more than she could bear alone. She explained that their youngest daughter did not even know her father, who was stationed in Iraq the day she was born, and that all he wanted was to be home with his family for Christmas.

As US troops face their first Christmas in Iraq, some mental health professionals have warned that the suicide rate normally peaks during the holiday season.

In September, *Stars and Stripes*, a semi-official newspaper for soldiers and government civilians abroad, conducted a survey and found that morale of soldiers in Iraq had become a serious problem. Depression, mild and severe, is plaguing troops with increasingly fatal consequences.

Of the 2,000 US troops surveyed, nearly half rated their morale as low or very low. One-third reported that their mission was “not clearly defined” or “not at all defined,” while close to one-third of those polled stated that the war in Iraq was of “little value” or of “no value at all.” The study also revealed that many of the troops viewed themselves as “sitting ducks” rather than as soldiers engaged in war.

Commenting on the survey, David Segal, a military sociologist with the University of Maryland, told the *Washington Post*: “I am getting a sense that there is a high and increasing level of demoralization and a growing sense of being in something they don’t understand and aren’t sure the American people understand.”

Daily attacks against US troops, with often fatal results, have increased to an average of more than 30 a

day. Many soldiers see no end in sight and are beginning to suffer both physically and mentally from the stress of combat combined with harsh living conditions.

Army spokeswoman Martha Rudd described the uniqueness of the current situation in a statement to the press—“In most previous conflicts you went, you fought, you came home. In this one they went, they fought, they’re still there.”

The violence being employed against the Iraqi people has also begun to take its toll on the mental stability of American troops. In one recently reported case, Army Special Forces Staff Sergeant Georg-Andreas Pogany began shaking and throwing up after witnessing an Iraqi man severed in half by heavy machine-gun fire.

Pogany could not sleep and suffered from what he described as panic attacks. He reported to his superiors asking for help. Instead, he was charged with “cowardice,” a charge that was subsequently reduced to “dereliction of duty.”

The collapse in troop morale and the alarming increase in soldier suicides have coincided with the continuing exposure of the lies told by the Bush administration in dragging the American people into the war in Iraq. The growing realization in the ranks of the US military that they were sent into an unprovoked war on false pretenses may have a more profound impact on morale than the considerable physical dangers and hardships facing soldiers there.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact