

Washington conceals US casualties in Iraq

David Walsh
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The Bush administration is deliberately concealing from the American people the number and condition of US military personnel who have been wounded in Iraq. The efforts by those few politicians and media figures who have pursued the issue make this clear.

Estimates on the number of US soldiers, sailors and Marines medically evacuated from Iraq by the end of 2003 because of battlefield wounds, illness or other reasons range from 11,000 to 22,000, a staggering figure by any standard. Thousands of these young men and women have been physically or psychologically damaged for life, in turn affecting the lives of tens of thousands of family members and others. And the war in Iraq is less than one year old.

A recent piece by Daniel Zwerdling on National Public Radio (January 7) highlighted some of the difficulties in establishing the truth about US casualties. Zwerdling began by noting that few Americans seemed aware of the large number of US wounded in Iraq. He questioned a few dozen people on the street about the total number of American soldiers who had died in Iraq, and most answered more or less correctly. However, when the NPR correspondent asked about the number of US military personnel who have had to be evacuated with wounds, no one was close to the actual figure. The answers ranged from a few hundred to a thousand.

Zwerdling set about finding the actual number by contacting the appropriate government and military offices. A spokesman for Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld told him to call US Central Command in Tampa, Florida. A spokesman there informed him that only Rumsfeld's office had such information. A spokesman for the Army provided with him the number of its personnel wounded seriously enough to be evacuated out of Iraq by the end of 2003—8,848—but he had no figures on Marines, Navy Seals or other forces. The United States Medical Command told Zwerdling they were still searching for the numbers.

Zwerdling contacted Sen. Chuck Hagel (Republican-Nebraska), a Vietnam veteran and former deputy administrator of the Veterans Administration. Hagel explained that he had been trying to obtain certain information from Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, including the "total number of American battlefield casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq. What is the official Pentagon definition of wounded in action? What is the procedure for releasing this information in a timely way to the public and the criteria for awarding a Purple Heart [awarded to those wounded in combat or posthumously to the next of kin of those killed or those who die of wounds received in action]?"

The Nebraska senator also wanted an updated tally on the number of US military personnel who had received Purple Hearts and the dates they were awarded. Six weeks later, Hagel received the provocative reply: the Department of Defense did not have the requested information.

The information on the number of Purple Hearts awarded is significant because it speaks to the total number of battlefield

casualties.

In December, Mississippi Democratic congressman Gene Taylor raised the possibility that the Pentagon was deliberately undercounting combat casualties when he brought to light the case of five members of the Mississippi National Guard who were wounded in a booby-trap bomb explosion, but whose injuries were listed as "noncombat" by the military. The truth emerged only because Taylor happened to speak to the most seriously injured of the five at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington. Taylor indicated that he would send a memo to the other members of Congress "and ask if anyone has had a similar incident."

Other commentators have noted the discrepancy between the number of wounded in combat listed by the military and the large number of service personnel medically evacuated from Iraq, an action, one would imagine, that the military does not encourage or take lightly. In passing, for example, an article in the November 5 European edition of *Stars and Stripes* noted that the Landstuhl military hospital in Germany had "treated more than 7,000 injured and ill servicemembers from Iraq." At that time, the military had recorded some 2,000 combat casualties.

The Landstuhl facility, located near the huge Ramstein US airbase, reported January 23 that the total of US medical evacuations from Iraq to Germany by the end of 2003 was 9,433. The number of hostile and "non-hostile" wounded by that point listed by the Army was approximately 2,750.

Julian Borger in the *Guardian* last August noted the odd imbalance between combat and "non-combat" deaths and injuries. He cited the comments of Lieut. Col. Allen DeLane, in charge of airlifting the wounded into Andrews air force base near Washington, who had already seen thousands of wounded flown in and who told National Public Radio, according to Bolger, "90 percent of injuries were directly war-related."

As casualties mounted last summer, US military officials did their best to suppress any discussion of the wounded total in particular. Only on July 10, almost four months after the launch of the invasion, CNN reported that for "the first time since the start of the war in Iraq, Pentagon officials have released the number of US troops wounded from the beginning of the war through Wednesday [July 9]."

In keeping the number of wounded from the public, the military high command was aided by the American media. *Editor & Publisher Online* observed in July that while deaths in combat were being reported, the many non-combat deaths were virtually ignored and the numbers of wounded, in and out of battle, were being under-reported. Questioned by *E & P Online*, Philip Bennett, *Washington Post* assistant managing editor of the foreign desk, acknowledged blandly that "There could be some inattention to [the number of injured troops]."

The sharp increase in the number of US wounded in the autumn—the

official number of combat wounded alone averaged nearly 100 a week between mid-September and mid-November (*lunaville.org*)—made the reluctance of the military to provide figures increasingly problematic. Even the servile US media was beginning to request figures. Still the Pentagon officialdom put up as much resistance as it could.

In September 2003, the *Post* itself noted, “Although Central Command keeps a running total of the wounded, it releases the number only when asked—making the combat injuries of US troops in Iraq one of the untold stories in the war.”

Sen. Bob Graham of Florida, one-time candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination and ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, declared around the same time that he wanted to know how many US soldiers had been wounded in Iraq, but had been unable to find out because the administration would not release the information.

An article in the October 13 *New Republic* by Lawrence F. Kaplan noted: “Pentagon officials have rebuked public affairs officers who release casualty figures, and, until recently, US Central Command did not regularly publicize the injured total either.” Ten days later, however, *E & P Online* commented, “Current injury statistics were easily obtained...through US Central Command and the Pentagon, so getting the numbers is no longer a problem.”

In that same *New Republic* piece, Kaplan discussed the state of many injured soldiers at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. He pointed out that modern medical technique meant that a far higher percentage of wounded soldiers now survived who would have died in previous wars. The use of Kevlar body armor had also reduced deaths. The result, however, was that many of the wounded were left with debilitating injuries, particularly amputated limbs. Because of the higher survival rate, information about the seriously wounded is essential to any accurate picture of the Iraq war.

Kaplan wrote: “The near-invisibility of the wounded has several sources. The media has always treated combat deaths as the most reliable measure of battlefield progress, while for its part the administration has been reluctant to divulge the full number of wounded.”

The number of “combat injuries,” however, is far from the whole story. That leaves out the thousands who have become physically or mentally ill in Iraq. As noted above, estimates of the real number of US servicemen and women evacuated from Iraq by the end of 2003 vary widely.

The British *Observer* newspaper asserted September 14 that the “true scale of American casualties in Iraq is revealed today by new figures...which show that more than 6,000 American servicemen have been evacuated for medical reasons since the beginning of the war, including more than 1,500 American soldiers who have been wounded, many seriously. The figures will shock many Americans, who believe that casualties in the war in Iraq have been relatively light.”

By the end of November, Roger Roy in the *Orlando Sentinel* could place the number of those “killed, wounded, injured or...ill enough to require evacuation from Iraq” at approximately 10,000. Roy noted that such figures were hard to track, “leading critics to accuse the military of underreporting casualty numbers.”

Mark Benjamin of United Press International (UPI) has been one of the more assiduous in pursuing an accurate total of the number medically evacuated from Iraq. On December 19, Benjamin reported that in response to a request from UPI the Pentagon had provided a figure of nearly 11,000 US wounded and medical evacuations—2,273

wounded and 8,581 medical evacuations.

Benjamin cited the comments of Aseneth Blackwell, former president of the Gold Star Wives of America, a support group for people who lose a spouse in war, who said the country had not seen such a total since Vietnam. “It is staggering,” she added.

Benjamin pointed out that the Pentagon’s official casualty update as of December 17 reported only 364 soldiers as “non-hostile wounded.”

The largest estimate of the number of medical evacuations from Iraq is to be found in a December 30 article by retired US Army Col. David Hackworth, “Saddam’s in the slammer, so why are we on orange?”

Hackworth writes, “Even I...was staggered when a Pentagon source gave me a copy of a Nov. 30 dispatch showing that since George W. Bush unleashed the dogs of war, our armed forces have taken 14,000 casualties in Iraq—about the number of warriors in a line tank division.” The former colonel adds that the figure “means we’ve lost the equivalent of a fighting division since March. At least 10 percent of the total number” of available personnel—135,000—“has been evacuated back to the USA!”

Lt. Col. Scott D. Ross of the US military’s Transportation Command told Hackworth that as of Christmas his “outfit had evacuated 3,255 battle-injured casualties and 18,717 non-battle injuries,” a total 21,972 servicemen and women. Ross, however, cautioned that his figure might include some of the same service members counted more than once.

The major categories of “non-battle” evacuations included orthopedic surgery, 3,907; general surgery, 1,995; internal medicine, 1,291; psychiatric, 1,167; neurology, 1,002; gynecological (mostly pregnancy-related), 491.

Hackworth concludes that “it’s safe to say that, so far, somewhere between 14,000 and 22,000 soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines have been medically evacuated” from the war zone in Iraq.

Once back in the US, the injured are stored in dozens of military medical facilities around the country, their existence virtually ignored by the administration, their plight largely unreported by the media.

Until a public outcry improved matters, many wounded veterans, UPI reported in October, had to wait “weeks and months for proper medical help” at military facilities such as Fort Stewart in Georgia and were “being treated like dogs,” according to one officer. The indifference of Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld to the fate of US servicemen and women is a part of their general contempt for the broad layers of the working population, Iraqi and American.

The deliberate obscuring of the human toll of the war and occupation in Iraq is an indication of considerable nervousness within the Bush administration. Despite the official claims of overwhelming popular support, the political and media establishment knows full well that opposition to this war is growing, and that an accurate picture of the war’s devastating consequences would further turn the tide of public opinion.



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