

Two soldiers critical of Iraq war among its latest casualties

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Two Army sergeants who were co-authors of a public letter sharply critical of the US occupation of Iraq and the Pentagon's assessment of it were killed in a Baghdad vehicle accident Monday. The deaths came as General David Petraeus, the top military commander in Iraq, prepared to deliver congressional testimony declaring the troop buildup a success.

Sergeant Omar Mora and Staff Sergeant Yance Gray, whose "The War as We Saw It," written with five other soldiers and published last month in the *New York Times*, were among nine killed when their truck veered off an elevated highway and fell about 30 feet.

Those killed included seven soldiers and two detainees. The crash also wounded 12 others, including one detainee. The military made no mention of hostile fire in its announcements of the incident.

The soldiers were members of the 82nd Airborne Division, part of the Army's Task Force Lightning, a large force charged with stamping out resistance in Northern Iraq. Since September 5, the unit has been engaged in bloody air strikes and raids as part of counterinsurgency operations referred to as Lightning Hammer II. The 82nd Airborne Division has borne 53 deaths so far this year, 14 of those in the past month.

While perhaps better known than other soldiers to some because of their *Times* commentary, the backgrounds of the two sergeants typify the ranks of the US enlisted. Both Mora, who was 28, and Gray, 26, were expecting to come home to their wives and families by November. Gray was the father of a five-month-old daughter whom he had only seen once; Mora is survived by a five-year-old daughter.

Gray, who grew up in Montana, liked to write and to draw. Mora, who was born in Ecuador and grew up in Texas, had recently been granted US citizenship. His family said he was passionate about fixing cars and

playing soccer.

Both were described by their parents as independent-minded, warmhearted, and disciplined sons who had entered the military out of a sense of duty. And, like thousands of other troops currently in Iraq, both had been endlessly redeployed. Mora and Gray were serving their third and fourth tours, respectively.

Mora's mother, Olga Capetillo, told the press that her son was deeply affected by the conditions in which he witnessed Iraqis living. The pain and poverty suffered by children prompted him to often ask his family to send packages of cookies and candy. In late August, his mother said, a friend died in Mora's arms.

When he called her for the last time on September 7, she described him as withdrawn and exhausted. "He was so quiet, as if he did not want anyone to hear him," she told the Associated Press. "I told him that I was counting the days until he would come home, that I would give him a big hug."

"Maybe he had a premonition that something was going to happen to him, that he was not going to come back," Capetillo told the AP. "My son escaped death two times before. But this time, no."

"I want to know all the details of how he died," she said. "I want to know the truth. I don't understand how so many people could die in that accident. How could it be so bad?"

In their letter published August 19, the soldiers described the situation confronting the Iraqi population as well as US troops as one of extreme peril, chaos and terror. Even as they authored the piece, one of the seven soldiers, Staff Sergeant Jeremy Murphy, was shot in the head and had to be airlifted out of Iraq. He remains hospitalized in the US.

The soldiers called the Pentagon's appraisal of the war "surreal." "To believe that Americans, with an

occupying force that long ago outlived its reluctant welcome, can win over a recalcitrant local population and win this counterinsurgency is far-fetched,” they wrote. “We are skeptical of recent press coverage portraying the conflict as increasingly manageable and feel it has neglected the mounting civil, political and social unrest we see every day.”

Without challenging the underlying political justification for the occupation, the soldiers sharply disputed the official claims of progress and success in Iraq. They wrote, “we operate in a bewildering context of determined enemies and questionable allies, one where the balance of forces on the ground remains entirely unclear.... While we have the will and the resources to fight in this context, we are effectively hamstrung because realities on the ground require measures we will always refuse—namely, the widespread use of lethal and brutal force.”

“The ability of, say, American observers to safely walk down the streets of formerly violent towns is not a resounding indicator of security.” In contrast to the photo-ops staged by visiting politicians, the soldiers wrote, “we see that a vast majority of Iraqis feel increasingly insecure and view us as an occupation force that has failed to produce normalcy after four years and is increasingly unlikely to do so as we continue to arm each warring side.”

The soldiers clearly saw the ruinous state of Iraqi society as a major concern, and one that they recognized was utterly ignored by the war’s architects. They wrote that “the most important front in the counterinsurgency, improving basic social and economic conditions, is the one on which we have failed most miserably. Two million Iraqis are in refugee camps in bordering countries. Close to two million more are internally displaced and now fill many urban slums. Cities lack regular electricity, telephone services and sanitation. ‘Lucky’ Iraqis live in gated communities barricaded with concrete blast walls that provide them with a sense of communal claustrophobia rather than any sense of security we would consider normal.”

Their comments elicited a strong but pursed-lipped reaction from the Pentagon. In its short statement on the editorial, issued to the journal *Editor & Publisher*, the military attempted to isolate and dismiss the soldiers. “It is important to note that as individuals

voice their opinions on matters, that those viewpoints are representative of their personal perspective. With approximately 160,000 Americans serving in uniform here in Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, you’ll probably get that many different perspectives if you ask each of them.”

To the contrary, while the 82nd Airborne Division soldiers were speaking from their own experience, they were also speaking to some degree of the common experience for active duty troops. They sent the editorial unsolicited and refused payment in exchange for its publishing.

Following General Petraeus’s congressional report this week, President Bush was expected to announce a token reduction in US forces. The White House has emphasized that this so-called drawdown does not signal a shift in policy, and that troop levels cannot be expected to be reduced to the “pre-surge” level of 130,000 before mid-2008, meaning casualty figures will continue to mount.

The latest confirmed fatalities bring the US toll to 34 so far in September, and to 690 since the troop surge began in February. Since 2003, 3,776 US military personnel have died; total occupation force casualties stand at 4,074.



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