

# Morale crumbling among US and British troops in Afghanistan

James Cogan  
17 October 2009

Several reports from the frontlines of Afghanistan this month provide an insight into the growing demoralisation among US and British troops who have been sent to kill and be killed for the neo-colonial occupation. The articles suggest that many soldiers believe that the war is not justified and not worth dying for.

On October 8, the London *Times* published the comments of US Army chaplains and personnel from two battalions of the 10th Mountain Division that are in the final three months of a year-long tour of duty in the province of Wardak, to the south of Kabul. Out of 1,500 troops, 19 have been killed in action, one has committed suicide and at least 100 have suffered severe injuries. Patrols have been hit by at least 180 improvised explosive devices (IEDs) or mines. More than 100 others were detected before they exploded. The troops rarely make any contact with Taliban guerillas and are operating among a civilian population they strongly suspect supports the anti-occupation insurgents.

Captain Sam Rico, chaplain with an artillery battalion, said, “Everyone you meet is just down. They feel they are risking their lives for progress that’s hard to discern. They are tired, strained, confused and just want to get through.”

Captain Jeff Masengale, chaplain with an infantry battalion, told the *Times*: “The many soldiers who come to see us have a sense of futility and anger about being here. They are really in a state of depression and despair and just want to get back to their families. Divorces are skyrocketing. PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) is off the scale. There have been

hundreds of injuries that send soldiers home and affect families for the rest of their lives.”

Staff Sergeant Erika Cheney, a mental health specialist, said, “They’re tired, frustrated, scared. A lot of them are afraid to go out [on patrol] but will still go.”

A 20-year-old soldier, Specialist Raquime Mercer, commented, “We’re lost. That’s how I feel. I’m not exactly sure why we’re here. I need a clear-cut purpose if I’m going to get hurt out here or if I’m going to die. The soldiers’ biggest question is: what can we do to make this war stop? Catch one person? Assault one objective? Soldiers want definite answers other than to stop the Taliban, because that seems almost impossible. It’s hard to catch someone you can’t see.”

The frustration, fear and casualties among the occupying troops can lead to hatred and a desire for revenge against the occupied people. That has been the source of countless atrocities in colonial wars.

Specialist Eric Petty told the *Times*, “The soldiers are angry that colleagues are losing their lives while trying to help a population that will not help them. You give them all the humanitarian assistance that they want and they’re still going to lie to you. They’ll tell you there’s no Taliban anywhere in the area and as soon as you roll away, 10 feet from their house, you get shot at again.”

Similar sentiments emerged in an October 3 *Times* report on British troops operating in the Sangin district of Helmand Province during the Afghan presidential election in August. The unit, the 2nd Rifles, had lost 100 dead or wounded out of 500 combat troops since

April. The author noted that the casualty rate compared with that experienced during the intense fighting in Europe in the final years of World War II.

Patrols are attacked as close as 500 metres from the walls of the British base but, as in Wardak province, the troops in Helmand rarely make any contact with the Taliban insurgents who have savaged their ranks with IEDs, mines and sniper fire.

A corporal commented, “When we first came here we were whingeing that we weren’t getting enough action. How we take those words back now—massively.” Another young soldier said, “I can’t see how I won’t get hit before the tour is through.” The *Times* correspondent noted that “no one ever volunteered for a patrol they did not have to do and I didn’t meet one soldier there who spoke of ‘winning’.”

Eight years after 9/11, propaganda about fighting a “war on terrorism” has evaporated. The soldiers are on the frontlines of a bloody counterinsurgency that has only one objective—to prop up an American puppet regime. The majority are economic conscripts. Under conditions of poverty wages and growing unemployment, enlisting in the military is one of the few ways for many youth to get a secure job and adequate income.

The illegitimate character of the wars is undoubtedly a factor in the number of Afghanistan and Iraq veterans coming home with psychological illnesses. Studies suggest that between 20 and 30 percent of all those who have served in the conflicts suffer some degree of PTSD. It is linked to suicide, homelessness, substance abuse, crime and imprisonment among veterans.

A staggering 20,000 former British soldiers are in prison or on parole, with the proportion of prisoners who are veterans increasing by 30 percent over the past five years. A representative of the British probation officers’ union, Harry Fletcher, told the *Guardian* last month, “There is overwhelming evidence that support is not available of sufficient calibre when soldiers leave the service. The preponderance of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression is also alarming.”

According to figures cited by *Mirror*, British ex-British soldiers have committed suicide since 2001 after returning from Afghanistan or Iraq and 31 suspected cases are still unconfirmed.

Earlier this month, 28-year-old Dylan Kemp, a Royal Marine commando, hung himself shortly after returning from seven months of intense combat operations in Afghanistan. He had been arrested for road rage and reportedly assaulted his girlfriend. His friend told the *Mirror*, “Afghanistan tipped him over the edge. He said in his note he was sure many more squaddies [soldiers] would end up in a messed-up state like him. He was just so full of anger. His mental scars couldn’t be healed.”

The suicide rate among serving US military personnel is also continuing to rise. By the end of September, there had been 117 suicides in the Army and 38 in the Marine Corp, with a further 35 deaths still under investigation. Suicide among Marines, who form the bulk of the 17,000 additional troops that the Obama administration rushed to Afghanistan earlier this year, has increased by 20 percent this year. The majority of Marines and soldiers who have taken their own lives had served tours in one of the two war zones.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**