 Click to Print[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)**Who Will Probe 'Noncombat' Deaths in Iraq?**

About 20% of the U.S. deaths in Iraq are officially labeled "noncombat," and that number has been surging. This includes accidents, friendly fire and well over 120 suicides. But the government, and the media, seem reluctant to expose the tragedy, argues vets leader Paul Rieckhoff.

By Greg Mitchell

NEW YORK (November 06, 2007) -- Pretty much alone in the media, E&P for weeks had been charting a troubling increase in non-combat deaths among U.S. troops in Iraq. So it came as no surprise recently when the Pentagon announced that it would probe the perplexing trend. Lt. Gen. Carter Ham, operations director of the Joint Staff, said commanders in Iraq were concerned enough about the spike in non-combat deaths -- from accidents, illness, friendly-fire or suicide -- that it had asked for an assessment by an Army team.

According to Pentagon figures, 29 soldiers lost their lives in August for non-hostile reasons, and another 23 died of non-combat causes in September. Compare that with the average for the first seven months of this year: fewer than nine per month. The spike has coincided with extended 15-month deployments, one senior military official said.

The military officially counts about 20% of the nearly 3900 U.S. fatalities in Iraq as "noncombat." It has officially confirmed 128 suicides in Iraq since 2003, with many others under investigation (and still more taking place on the return home).

Lt. Gen. Ham said morale remains high, but added, "I think there is a general consensus ... that for the Army, 15 months is a long hard tour. It's hard on the soldiers."

As I've noted repeatedly, the military releases little news to the press when a service member dies from a non-hostile cause, beyond saying it is "under investigation." When that probe ends, many months later, the military normally does not tell anyone but family members of the deceased. For more than four years, however, E&P has kept close tabs on non-combat deaths, and nearly every day lately I have combed the Web for details on new cases. Sometimes local newspapers find out about preliminary determinations -- including suicides -- passed along to families. So I checked again today on October casualties Vincent Kamka, Dr. Roselle Hoffmaster, and others.

In doing that a few days ago, I discovered what happened to Cpt. Erik T. Garoutte of Santee, Ca. He was a Marine who died last month at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. According to the San Diego Union-Tribune he "was exercising when he collapsed. He never regained consciousness."

More tragedy followed: His mother, Donna Stone, also of Santee, had a heart attack after hearing about his death.

The Union-Tribune related that "the family hopes an autopsy will explain what caused Garoutte to die."

But why has the press given this so little attention to noncombat deaths, going back to the early days of the war? Paul Rieckhoff, an Iraq vet and now leader of the Iraq & Afghanistan Veterans of America, has long

shared my concerns and frustration.

Rieckhoff, author of the memoir "Chasing Ghosts," calls this "one of the most under-reported stories of the war. I've been pitching the story to people for over two years. A lot of deaths are taking place under questionable circumstances -- the number would surprise you -- and no one looks at them, in theater or at home. It's a broad research project, and maybe it is not sexy, but it needs to be done."

The Veterans Administration doesn't track the deaths, Rieckhoff says. "I'd like to see a study of how many Iraq vets have died under any circumstance back in this country," he declares. "We have suicide rates tracked in the military, but once they leave it is untraced. We have argued for a national registry, if you have been in the war.

"Nobody has ever taken the step of pulling it all together. I know it would be expensive, time-consuming, and difficult for the media, but it is their responsibility. They did it with body armor, with corruption, now with Blackwater. You could at least do a clustering, like around Fort Bragg -- look at the deaths of all veterans within a 100-mile radius. If we could fund it, we would, but our group is too small."

What is his theory about the recent spike? "We know that our people are under tremendous stress," he replies. "The operational tempo is unprecedented. I met a guy in a bar who has been there eight times. He said, 'Thank God I am young and single.'

"We can push them harder, but is it smart? I don't think it is smart, or is right."

The surge in non-hostile deaths does not mean just suicides, but accidents due to overwork. Soldiers don't have a union like police and firemen, Rieckhoff points out. Federal agencies "would have a field day with working conditions," he adds. Why has there been so little coverage? "I know access to the battle zone is an issue," he admits. "And dealing with families is delicate, but you can still handle it sensitively."

But he also cites what he calls a cultural issue: "After World War II, a lot of vets went into media and could navigate the system. Now so few reporters have served. Many don't know the difference between a brigade and a battalion. Also there is fear of how it is going to play in the pro- or anti-war debate. But this is not a partisan issue. Either way -- get to the bottom of this.

"American people don't know a lot about these issues. People abroad ask me, are Americans stupid? I say, 'No, they just aren't told enough.'"

UPDATE: I received the following two letters in response to the above.

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Thank you for addressing the non-combat deaths issue. I've been struck by the number of people killed when vehicles drove into canals (Michael Kelly of the Washington Post being the best known of these).

Another mystery you should call attention to is the medivacs of people for non-combat injuries and illnesses, which far exceed those for combat injuries. Icasualties.org reports 24,912 non-hostile medivacs, which means the people were flown out of Iraq and to Germany (or perhaps other military hospitals). Some 18,741 of the patients suffer from disease/other (as opposed to the 6,171 for non-combat related injuries, presumably trauma).

Disease? Three times as many of our troops are being flown out of Iraq for disease than wounds in battle

(6,354), and yet we hear nothing about this epidemic, or whatever it is. Soldiers are selected for their good health to begin with and most troops deployed are in their 20s and almost all, other than the National Guard duffers who have been sent over, are under 40. These diseases are serious enough that the soldiers have been flown out of the country, so we're not talking about colds or even the clap, which can be treated with antibiotics. And Iraq seems a little short on prostitutes and brothels serving the U.S. forces anyway, unless they among the "contractors" being flown in from Thailand and other countries to provide services.

So we have a situation where thousands of certifiably healthy young men and women are coming down with diseases of some sort that are serious enough to get them flown out of the country on an emergency basis. What's going on over there?

Also, as for stress levels, the U.S. Army concluded in WWII that 24 weeks of combat was about all anyone could take and still be able to function as reasonably effective soldiers. That is about a third of the current tours of duty in Iraq.

Edward Furey

New York, N.Y.

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I would defy anyone to say with any assurance that they know what the Iraq combat casualties are (under the traditional definition) or that they know of a way to calculate them.

The media has made it a practice to show only the number of deaths.

On the rare occasion that they show deaths and wounded they are hit with a barrage of letters accusing them of being anti-war. Lord help them if they ever reported a total casualties figure.

Even the dead reported may be under counted. We just have no way of knowing from official figures. No one can sit there in Dover and count the airplanes and the caskets. Its verboten.

Has anyone ever attempted to use Nexis-Lexis to count the dead in news stories from around the country?

It is obscene to count as a non-combat death a death that occurs when a military vehicle overturns in a combat zone-- and all of Iraq is a combat zone. If I had a son or daughter killed in Iraq in that manner I would feel that that son or daughter had some how been denigrated, that their death was not as "worthy" as that of someone shot by an Iraqi.

The media now controlled by conglomerates involved with the defense industries or dependent on favorable governmental rulings no longer serves a higher purpose (if it ever did). It is all too ready to go along to get along.

Bob Reynolds

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Greg Mitchell (gmitchell@editorandpublisher.com) is editor. A collection of his columns on Iraq and the media, "So Wrong for So Long," will be published by Union Square Press in March.

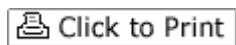
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