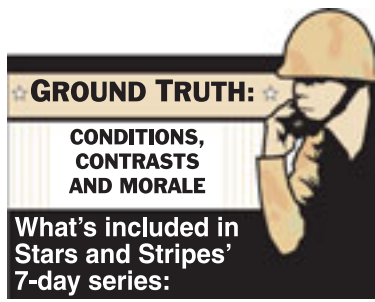


SPECIAL SERIES



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STARS AND STRIPES

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Voices on the ground

Stripes survey of nearly 2,000 troops in Iraq finds morale varies as servicemembers face vastly different experiences

BY DAVID JOSAR
Stars and Stripes

In northern Iraq, just outside Tikrit, a soldier from the 101st Airborne sleeps every night in a sleeping bag under camouflaged netting in an open field. Every meal comes in brown plastic, ready to eat. At Tallil Air Base, about 600 miles to the south, airmen sleep in double beds complete with government-issued comforters and pillows.

Conditions for U.S. troops in Iraq vary widely, and so, too, does the mood and morale of the individual units scattered throughout the country. For months, Stars and Stripes has received scores of letters from troops complaining about one thing or another connected with their service, as well as scores of letters from troops decrying the claims of the complainers and urging them to just do their duty.

In an effort to feel the pulse of U.S. forces firsthand, Stars and Stripes reporters spent three weeks in August fanning across Iraq. Reporters traveled as far south as the enemy prisoner-of-war camp in Umm Qasr, about 15 miles north of the Kuwait border, and as far north as Mosul, about 70 miles from Turkey. To get a firsthand account of what life was like for American forces in Operation Iraqi Freedom, reporters slept, ate, showered and went on patrol with troops.

They handed out and received responses to nearly 2,000 questionnaires. (The U.S. Air Force allowed reporters to visit Air Force bases, but did not allow airmen to complete the surveys at some of its bases. At one base, reporters were allowed to meet with airmen and ask them the questions on the survey.)

Troops were asked about their morale and their unit's morale. They were asked about their living conditions and whether they thought their commanders were doing anything to improve those conditions. They were asked about their unit's mission and if they felt going to war in Iraq was worthwhile for America.

Of those surveyed:
■ Many Reserve and National Guard respondents said they were unhappy with a number of things, just as letter writers from those units had said in letters to the newspaper. They said they often felt like second-class soldiers who don't receive the same equipment, support and treatment as their active-duty counterparts.

■ When asked how worthwhile they thought the war in Iraq was for

the United States, the split among all those responding was 67 percent saying it was "worthwhile," "probably worthwhile" or "very worthwhile," with 31 percent saying it was of "little value" or of "no value at all."

■ Asked about their personal morale, 34 percent overall rated it as "low" or "very low," 27 percent said it was "high" or "very high," and virtually all the rest called it "average." Perceptions of their unit's morale ranked heavier on the "low" side. This question of personal morale elicited widely different responses among the services. Reservists ranked their morale as the lowest by far. Marine and Air Force respondents tended to rate their own morale on the high side, while Army respondents were fairly evenly divided between high and low morale, with most falling in the middle, or "average."

SEE SURVEY ON PAGE 6



TERRY BOYD/Stars and Stripes



DAVID JOSAR/Stars and Stripes

Top: Some people wear their hearts on their sleeves. **Spc. Wesley Fendley** wears his fiancée Stephanie's name on his Kevlar helmet. **Fendley is a military policeman in Iraq with the 1165th MP Company, a National Guard unit from Fairhope, Ala.** **Above:** A soldier fills out a Stars and Stripes survey form while stationed in Iraq. Nearly 2,000 troops completed the form.

“Most complaints I have heard are a direct reflection on the person's lack of responsibility for their own actions.”

1st Lt. C. Chandler
501st MP Company at Baghdad International Airport

SPECIAL SERIES



MARNI MCENTEE/Stars and Stripes

Above: The 372nd Military Police Company calls an old Iraqi date factory near Hillah home. Living conditions for troops deployed to Iraq vary greatly.

Right: Marines from the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines of the 1st Marine Division fill out a Stars and Stripes survey at Camp Twin Towers, a former headquarters for the Baath Party.



DAVID JOSAR/Stars and Stripes

Survey: Troops reveal feelings on life in Iraq

SURVEY, FROM PAGE 3

■ Of all troops surveyed, 72 percent rated living conditions "average" or better. But disparities existed throughout the region. One Army unit could have three hot meals a day and another unit with the same mission subsisted on MREs and rationed bottles of water. Some units, although they had been in Iraq for months, still hadn't had a day off or access to a hot shower. Other troops had been in Iraq a few weeks and were already being allowed to leave on morale trips.

The numbers show that sometimes camp conditions and morale are not always connected. Some Marines surveyed in southern Iraq live in austere conditions but still had overall high morale.

■ There is a sharp divide between the Air Force and Army. The Army and Air Force

share several bases in Iraq, but the Air Force has separate — and superior — living conditions. The Air Force at Tallil Air Base, for example, brought in a Pizza Hut concession but the Army is barred from using it. The Air Force does deploy differently based on its mission, but soldiers, after seeing the contrast, said the division, which at times is a fence topped with barbed wire, undercuts morale and teamwork. The Air Force has its own gyms, morale tents and mess halls.

■ Noncommissioned officers predict problems in re-enlistment, although military leaders say enlistment rates historically drop after conflicts. Nearly half of the troops surveyed said they do not plan to re-enlist. No re-enlistment figures from Iraq are available at this point, while generally the overall military re-enlistment rates appear to be sat-

isfactory or better.

■ While from all indications troops in Iraq are doing what needs to be done, slightly more than one-third of those responding to the questionnaire said their mission was for the most part "not clearly defined" or "not at all defined." Sixty-three percent said it was. Again, reservists mostly said that the mission was unclear. Marine and Air Force respondents tended to say that the mission was "mostly clear" or "very clear." As in other questions, Army respondents, the largest group surveyed, were almost evenly split on the question. At the same time, many respondents — mainly from the Reserves and Army — said that what they were doing was not closely related to what they were trained to do. Air Force and Marine respondents mainly tended to see their current mission and their training as more closely aligned. Reporters in the field found that the transition from war-fighting to occupation had led to different tasks. Soldiers in transportation companies were operating equipment they were not trained to drive, for instance. Marines were asked to perform peacekeeping duties they said they had been rarely been asked to do before. In interviews or written responses to the questionnaire, some troops described what they were doing as "busy work."

■ While supply problems have not crippled operations, they have stymied some units. Troops had plenty of bullets, grenades, weapons and fuel, but they said they did not have enough of the plates that make flak vests impervious to bullets. Units also complained that they were sent into combat without enough medical supplies, and transportation companies resorted to building their own "gun trucks" because there were not enough to provide security for convoys. More than 60 percent of the troops surveyed rated their chain of command's ability to get them supplies as "average" or better. Sixty-three percent of Reserve troops rated that ability as "not good" or "poor," and 27 percent of the Army rated that "not good" or "poor."

Nearly half of the troops surveyed said they don't plan to re-enlist, although military leaders say re-enlistment rates typically drop after conflicts.

■ In interviews, written comments on questionnaires and letters to the editor, a number of troops complained about having to spend more time in Iraq than they thought necessary or were told they would spend. Most of these were reservists.

Over the next week, Stars and Stripes will present its findings on the issues that the troops in Iraq say are important to them. The series also will show creative means troops come up with to do their jobs — and to have some fun or add levity. And it will present what troops say leaders can do to improve morale and some ways troops keep their own morale high. It will conclude with what is next for troops and bases in Iraq.

Staff writers Jon Anderson, Terry Boyd, Lisa Burgess, Steve Liewer, Marni McEntee and Scott Schonauer contributed to this story.



JON ANDERSON/Stars and Stripes

A Bradley Fighting Vehicle stands watch over the Tigris River in northern Iraq.

☛ After spending 16 years in the Army, it has come to my attention that new soldiers have no concept of what the Army is. When you enlist, you should expect to be deployed. Understand that it is not a personal thing against you. Others are deploying also. This Army is to protect America, our freedoms and our interests. You don't have to like what you're doing, but you have to do it. ☛

A 34-year-old reservist at Camp Cropper, 443rd MP Company