

## Pentagon counts the psychological cost of Iraq war as survey reveals suicide levels

Suzanne Goldenberg in Washington  
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The Jeremy Seeley who went off to war was a man his grandfather remembers as tender-hearted. When Specialist Seeley returned from Iraq, he could not bring himself to tell his mother he was home, or even to hear her voice, leaving two disjointed messages on her answering machine but no contact number.

On January 13 he walked out of the 101st Airborne base at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, checked into a motel room, and put a Do Not Disturb sign on the door. The police discovered his body four days later, along with containers of household poison. Seeley was 28.

In Canton, North Carolina, his grandfather, Rayburn Seeley, says the soldier's family and friends still have no idea what drove him to his death. He had recently re-enlisted in the army, and was awaiting a plum assignment in Germany.

"There is a chance that they might have caught it, if he had had additional screening," Mr Seeley says. "Maybe this will cause them to see the need that people get more help."

There have been 24 soldier suicides in Iraq since the start of the war, according to the Pentagon's count. That figure does not include Seeley, or William Howell, 36. Howell, a special forces veteran, shot himself in the head on March 13 after chasing his wife around the garden of his Colorado home with a handgun. He was at least the seventh soldier believed to have committed suicide after returning from Iraq.

The Pentagon's figure also does not account for several other deaths in Iraq that were attributed to non-combat related bullet injuries.

But as the war in Iraq enters its second year, the Pentagon has been forced to make its fullest acknowledgement to date of the psychological toll exacted by the conflict. In a painful report, the Pentagon last week made available for the first time its findings on the extent of suicide in Iraq, low morale in the ranks, and soldiers' access to mental health care.

The survey was commissioned by the commander of US forces in Iraq, General Ricardo Sanchez, after five soldiers committed suicide during the month of July. The findings were so disturbing to the Pentagon that officials withheld its release for three months.

The survey confirmed figures released earlier by the Pentagon that the suicide rate among soldiers in Iraq was higher than the army average, with 15.6 for every 100,000 troops.

It also suggests that the extended American occupation of Iraq is claiming a toll on service personnel and their families far beyond that measured in the casualty rate.

Such considerations are weighing heavily on the Pentagon during the advance planning for the next round of troops rotations into Iraq and Afghanistan.

A survey published in the Washington Post yesterday suggests the US military could confront a serious troop shortage. In the survey of military spouses, 50% said they expected the army was heading for a problem with retaining personnel, as families grow weary of prolonged and repeated deployments.

That disillusionment has already surfaced within the ranks now serving in Iraq. In the Pentagon survey, 52% of troops reported low or very low morale, and 72% said their units suffered low morale. More disturbing for the Pentagon, the soldiers had little faith in their commanding officers.

"Nearly 75% of the groups reported that their battalion-level command leadership was poor," the report says. The troops also believed their officers showed little concern for their wellbeing.

Mental health experts believe the very nature of the war in Iraq intensifies the psychological dangers to US forces. Jonathan Shay, a psychiatrist for the US Department of Veterans Affairs, has attributed the high level of post-traumatic stress disorder among Vietnam veterans to the guerrilla tactics of their Viet Cong opponents, who used mines and booby traps to create an atmosphere of constant danger. More than a third of Vietnam vets exposed to significant combat suffered PTSD through the 80s, surveys have shown. In Iraq, the biggest threat to troops so far has been improvised explosive devices.

"The phrase that has currency in the field of trauma studies is 'no safe place'," Dr Shay says. "If your body can never let down, if there is truly no safe place, if the enemy is constantly creating a condition of threat, this contributes a great deal, I think, to the development of psychological injury."

The scale of those injuries is becoming more apparent. As many as 10% of the casualties arriving from Iraq were evacuated with mental health problems, the commander of America's main medical centre at Landstuhl, Germany said last month.

Other soldiers have sought help on their own following their return from theatre. Wayne Smith, an adviser to Vietnam Veterans of America, says as many as 4,500 troops returning from Iraq or Afghanistan have tried to seek counselling from veterans' centres rather than seek help through the

regular military channels.

### **Rebuilding**

"In some instances, the soldiers have the onset of symptoms, and the military is not telling them where to go," he says. "We think that the price of the war has to include care and treatment and rebuilding of their lives."

The Pentagon insists it is doing precisely that. Officials say the survey should be seen as a snapshot - taken at a time when conditions in Iraq were at their most miserable. Since then, officials say the Pentagon has taken steps to give soldiers better access to mental health care.

"The conditions were there, but measures have been taken to alleviate the stress of these conditions," said an army spokesman, Lieutenant-Colonel Kevin Curry.

"A lot of things were going on, and we didn't have everything set up to the extent that we do now."

He said the Pentagon was committed to appointing a mental health overseer for troops in Iraq, and to increasing the number of frontline mental health workers.

Such findings give a small degree of comfort to Rayburn Seeley. But he wonders at the Pentagon's surprise in the costs of war on a generation. Mr Seeley spent four years in the US army during the second world war.

"Things like that do strange things to a man's mind. I've seen men go stark raving mad because the strain is just so much - and we did after the war.

"There were servicemen even after the war was over would go home and still kill themselves," he says.

"Maybe they could see more than their minds could stand."

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