

## Ill-Equipped Soldiers Opt for “Search and Avoid”

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*WATERTOWN, New York, Oct 24 (IPS) - Iraq war veterans now stationed at a base here say that morale among U.S. soldiers in the country is so poor, many are simply parking their Humvees and pretending to be on patrol, a practice dubbed “search and avoid” missions.*

Phil Aliff is an active duty soldier with the 10th Mountain Division stationed at Fort Drum in upstate New York. He served nearly one year in Iraq from August 2005 to July 2006, in the areas of Abu Ghraib and Fallujah, both west of Baghdad.

“Morale was incredibly low,” said Aliff, adding that he joined the military because he was raised in a poor family by a single mother and had few other prospects. “Most men in my platoon in Iraq were just in from combat tours in Afghanistan.”

According to Aliff, their mission was to help the Iraqi Army “stand up” in the Abu Ghraib area of western Baghdad, but in fact his platoon was doing all the fighting without support from the Iraqis they were supposedly preparing to take control of the security situation.

“I never heard of an Iraqi unit that was able to operate on their own,” said Aliff, who is now a member of the group Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW). “The only reason we were replaced by an Iraqi Army unit was for publicity.”

Aliff said he participated in roughly 300 patrols. “We were hit by so many roadside bombs we became incredibly demoralised, so we decided the only way we wouldn’t be blown up was to avoid driving around all the time.”

“So we would go find an open field and park, and call our base every hour to tell them we were searching for weapons caches in the fields and doing weapons patrols and everything was going fine,” he said, adding, “All our enlisted people became very disenchanted with our chain of command.”

Aliff, who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), refused to return to Iraq with his unit, which arrived in Kirkuk two weeks ago. “They’ve already lost a guy, and they are now fostering the sectarian violence by arming the Sunnis while supporting the Shia politically ... classic divide and conquer.”

Aliff told IPS he is set to be discharged by the military next month because they claim his PTSD “is untreatable by their doctors”.

According to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the number of Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans seeking treatment for PTSD increased nearly 70 percent in the 12 months ending on Jun. 30.

The nearly 50,000 VA-documented PTSD cases greatly exceed the 30,000 military personnel that the Pentagon officially classifies as wounded in both occupations.

VA records show that mental health has become the second-largest area of illness for which veterans of the ongoing occupations are seeking treatment at VA hospitals and clinics. The total number of mental health cases among war veterans increased by 58 percent; from 63,767 on Jun. 30, 2006, to 100,580 on Jun. 30, 2007, according to the VA.

Other active duty Iraq veterans tell similar stories of disobeying orders so as not to be attacked so frequently.

“We’d go to the end of our patrol route and set up on top of a bridge and use it as an over-watch position,” Eli Wright, also an active duty soldier with the 10th Mountain Division, told IPS. “We would just sit with our binoculars and observe rather than sweep. We’d call in radio checks every hour and say we were doing sweeps.”

Wright added, “It was a common tactic, a lot of people did that. We’d just hang out, listen to music, smoke cigarettes, and pretend.”

The 26-year-old medic complained that his unit did not have any armoured Humvees during his time in Iraq, where he was stationed in Ramadi, capital of the volatile Al Anbar province.

“We put sandbags on the floors of our vehicles, which had canvas doors,” said Wright, who was in Iraq from September 2003 until September 2004. “By the end of our tour, we were bolting any metal we could find to our Humvees. Everyone was doing this, and we didn’t get armoured Humvees in country until after we left.”

Other veterans, like 25-year-old Nathan Lewis, who was in Iraq for the invasion of March 2003 until June of that year while serving in the 214th field artillery brigade, complained of lack of training for what they were ordered to do, in addition to not having armoured Humvees for their travels.

“We never got training for a lot of the work we did,” he explained. “We had a white phosphorous mortar round that cooked off in the back of one of our trucks, because we loaded that with some other ammo, and we weren’t trained how to do it the right way.” The “search and avoid” missions appear to have been commonplace around much of Iraq for years now.

Geoff Millard served nine years in the New York Army National Guard, and was in Iraq from October 2004 until October 2005 working for a general at a Tactical Operation Centre.

Millard, also a member of IVAW, said that part of his duties included reporting “significant actions”, or SIGACTS, which is how the U.S. military describes an attack on their forces.

“We had units that never called in SIGACTS,” Millard, who monitored highly volatile areas like Baquba, Tikrit and Samarra, told IPS. “When I was there two years ago, there were at least five companies that never had SIGACTS. I think ‘search and avoids’ have been going on there for a long time.”

Millard told IPS “search and avoid” missions continue today across Iraq.

“One of my buddies is in Baghdad right now and we email all the time,” he explained, “He

just told me that nearly each day they pull into a parking lot, drink soda, and shoot at the cans. They pay Iraqi kids to bring them things and spread the word that they are not doing anything and to please just leave them alone.”

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