

4,000 lives

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

When an American service member is killed in Iraq, it takes a day or two, sometimes more, for the military to verify the circumstances of the death, notify the next of kin and then make the name public. So it may be Wednesday before we know the identity of the 4,000th U.S. military fatality in Iraq.

Even then, death No. 4,000 will be arbitrary. Numbers 3,997, 3998, 3,399 and 4,000 took place simultaneously, at 10 p.m. Sunday in southern Baghdad when a roadside bomb blew up a Humvee. A fifth soldier in the vehicle was wounded.

It was 2 p.m. in St. Louis. You may have been finishing an early Easter dinner or watching basketball games on television. Four U.S. families will never be the same, but yours is OK, and so are ours. We don't even have to care if we don't want to, and judging from the attention the war is getting on TV and in the newspapers in the early days of its sixth year, most of us don't.

Besides, whoever the 4,000th fatality was, his death is no more or less a tragedy than all the others. What is noteworthy, when you dig behind the statistics, is how remarkable so many of these young men and women were.

No. 3,994, for example, was Specialist David Stelmat, a 27-year-old medic with the 1132nd Military Police Company of the New Hampshire National Guard. He and two fellow soldiers died in Baghdad on Saturday, the victims of yet another roadside bomb.

Specialist Stelmat, of Littleton, N.H., was on his second tour of duty in what the administration calls the Global War on Terrorism. The first tour, in Afghanistan in 2003, was with the regular Army and ended with a general discharge. Troubled by the screams of the wounded, he had laid down his rifle and refused to fight any more.

But his mother told the New Hampshire Union-Leader that her son was troubled by his decision and subsequently joined the National Guard. He trained as a medic, she said, because "he did not want to carry a gun to kill people. He would rather fix what happened."

He didn't like the way he got out so he went back in. America as a whole needs to get out the right way - slowly and carefully - but we need to begin immediately, before another thousand lives are wasted.

In August 2007, 54 percent of those polled by the Pew Research Center for People and the Press knew that about 3,500 Americans had been killed in Iraq. This month, the Pew Center asked the same question, and this time only 28 percent of those polled knew that the number was closing in on 4,000.

Iraq fatigue has set in, particularly in the last year. The troop surge reduced violence. So did the decision to pay 80,000 Sunni insurgents \$10 a day to be on our side. But as Sen. Chuck Hagel, R-Neb., said Sunday on ABC's "This Week," "We have lost 900 Americans since the surge began. We are in a mess in Iraq. And the reality is we are going to have to deal with it."

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