Bad behavior reported less, report on Iraq troops shows

by Rick Rogers

SAN DIEGO - Only 40 percent of Marines would report a member of their unit for killing or wounding an innocent civilian, according to the military's first report on the ethics of U.S. troops in Iraq.

One-third of the Marines surveyed would turn in someone for stealing, and 30 percent would report a unit member for unnecessarily destroying property.

The figures for the Army were roughly 15 percent higher in those three categories, but even those were described by the report's authors as in clear need of improvement.

"People are going to be surprised and disturbed by this, and then they are going to understand that this is war," said John Pike, director of the military think tank GlobalSecurity.org.

ETHICSREPORT - California National Guard Staff Sgt. Patrick Alvarez of Chula Vista, who was awarded the Bronze Star for valor, says strong military leadership will help keep troops in line while reducing stress level. Photo by John Gibbins.

ETHICSREPORT - 'You don't know who your enemy is. You don't know if it is the 10-year-old with the cell phone or the old man sitting on the corner watching you,' said Rey Uy, a retired Marine staff sergeant. Photo by John Gibbins.

The San Diego Union-Tribune obtained a copy of the 30-page report from an anonymous source and asked Pike to comment on it. The Pentagon had not authorized the release of the document, which was prepared by the Army's Mental Health Advisory Team and sent to the commandant of the Marine Corps on April 18. The military is using the report to prioritize training and other needs.

"Troops are sent to fight for their country, but when they get to the battlefield, they are fighting for their buddies," Pike said. "I suspect that combat in Iraq is more stressful than is understood. This list of behaviors shows classic symptoms of combat stress."

The report indeed showed that longer deployments and multiple tours of duty were increasing troops' rates of marital and mental-health problems, including post traumatic stress disorder. An even bigger factor was each service member's exposure to combat: More fighting typically led to a greater likelihood of mental difficulties.

Strong leadership by enlisted officers, such as sergeants and staff sergeants, greatly reduced a unit's

psychological strain - and vice versa, the report's authors concluded. They recommended more aggressive and consistent training in ethics and leadership skills for these officers, as well as chaplains and mental-health professionals working in war zones.

The document was based on focus groups and surveys of 1,320 soldiers and 447 Marines from August to October. The service members' responses were kept anonymous because the interviewers wanted to get the most honest answers possible.

Combat veterans said the report accurately portrays troop behavior in Iraq, which they depicted as a frustrating and soul-sapping place where the enemy seems to lurk everywhere.

"When you deal with a loss in a unit, you have to fight the anger and feeling of inhumanity you feel toward the people," said Patrick Alvarez of Chula Vista, Calif., a staff sergeant in the California National Guard. His unit lost a soldier during a convoy attack about three years ago in Baghdad.

"When something like that happens, you start to lose the desire to do what is right," said Alvarez, who received the Bronze Star for valor. "I know of it first-hand. I was looking at 10-year-olds and under the right circumstances, I would have wasted those kids in a heartbeat."

Then he added: "An innocent civilian? I don't think I ever met one over there."

Some military personnel said a unit's sense of loyalty and camaraderie can overpower the obligation to report wrongdoing, especially when its members have banded together to survive in combat.

"You are protecting their lives and they are protecting your life," said Rey Uy, a retired Marine staff sergeant who also lives in Chula Vista.

Urban combat can cause intense frustration, he said.

"You don't know who your enemy is. You don't know if it is the 10-year-old with the cell phone or the old man sitting on the corner watching you," said Uy, who served with the 3rd Battalion, 11th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division at Camp Pendleton. "You can't find them, yet every day you have a Humvee blown up and people hurt or killed. And then back at base camp you are getting rocketed and mortared."

The more brutal the war and the longer that troops are exposed to it, the more difficult it is for them to follow the military's rules of engagement, said Jean Bethke Elshtain, a professor of social and political ethics at the University of Chicago.

But not all service branches react the same way to combat stress, said Kateri Carmola, who teaches political science and war ethics at Middlebury College in Vermont.

The Army has emphasized battlefield ethics training since the Vietnam War, she said, while the Navy and Marine Corps have concentrated on internal ethics since the early 1990s.

What Carmola, Elshtain, Pike and the combat veterans all agreed on was that strong, competent leadership can address nearly every ethical problem in the war zone.

A firm hand will keep troops in line while reducing stress levels, Alvarez and Uy said. The ethics report showed that units with enlisted officers who were highly rated had less than half the rates of post traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression compared with those that had poorly rated leaders.

"One time, we captured two insurgents with rocket-propelled grenades and improvised explosive devices. ... A few weeks earlier, we had taken a loss from an IED," Alvarez said. "So we have these guys and we are law. We know that if we turn them in, there is a good chance they'll be out of jail in a few weeks. Do you kill them? No, because it is wrong. Leadership calls right from wrong. Leadership was the answer. Leadership is the answer."

Among the report's other findings:

- The length of combat exposure is the main factor influencing a service member's mental health.

- Ten percent of respondents said they had mistreated an Iraqi. The number was an average of all responses for behaviors such as assaulting a noncombatant and unnecessarily damaging an Iraqi's property.

- Troops diagnosed with mental-health problems were much more likely to engage in unethical behavior on the battlefield than those with no psychological ills.

- Only 42 percent of soldiers who screened positive for a mental-health problem went on to seek help from a chaplain, primary-care doctor or behavioral specialist. That's because the Army's mental-health treatment system is largely voluntary.

- Nearly 66 percent of respondents personally knew a service member who was killed in combat in Iraq.

Besides seeking greater leadership and more psychological training for various military personnel, the Mental Health Advisory Team recommended that the Pentagon create a joint system for all service branches to monitor and report mental-health needs. It also encouraged commanders to establish a training program devoted solely to battlefield ethics for soldiers and Marines.

At the end of its list, the team suggested that the Pentagon extend the interval between deployments to 18 to 36 months so troops could mentally "reset." In contrast, the Army recently lengthened its standard tour of duty to 15 months, with at least a year of rest between each deployment. The length of a standard Marine deployment is still seven months.

On Wednesday, a spokesman at Marine Corps headquarters characterized the report as "one instructive item in a series."

Lt. Col. Scott Fazekas said the Corps understands "it represents an honest and faithful attempt to capture what frontline Marines are experiencing and we will continue to examine the study and its recommendations closely."

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