For 1,000 Troops, There Is No Going Home

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Dixie Codner had a question for the marines who came down her gravel road, past the rows of corn and alfalfa, to tell her that her 19-year-old son, Kyle, had been killed in Iraq. Should she bring them the dress blues, still pressed and hanging neatly in his closet, for his funeral?

No need, she recalled them answering. They had dress uniforms from all the services, all sizes, waiting back at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware, where the bodies of American service members come home.

"What does that say?" Ms. Codner asked, as she sat at her kitchen table in Shelton, Neb., on a recent morning, fingerling a thick stack of photographs that her son had sent from the desert. "How many more are they expecting? All I know is that there are 1,000 families that feel just like we do. We go to bed at night, and we don't have our children."

Like Lance Cpl. Kyle W. Codner, each of the more than 1,000 marines and soldiers, sailors and airmen killed since the United States sent troops to invade Iraq leaves behind a grieving family, a story, a unique memory of duty and sacrifice in what has become the deadliest war for Americans since Vietnam.

But along with so much personal loss, the roster of the dead tells a larger story, a portrait of a society and a military in transition, with ever-widening roles and costs for the country's part-time soldiers, women and Hispanics.

As has often been true in the United States' wars, small towns like Shelton and other rural areas suffered a disproportionate share of deaths compared with the nation's big cities. More than 100 service members who died were from California, the most for any state, but the smaller, less-populated states, many in the nation's middle - the Dakotas, Wyoming and Nebraska - recorded some of the biggest per capita losses.

In these mostly Republican-leaning states, people have begun to take painful note of the toll in Iraq. Many of the families of the dead there said they remained supportive of the war, the troops and the president. Still, with the death toll reaching 1,000 just two months before the presidential election, the somber milestone captured a central spot in the national political debate this week.

More than 70 percent of the dead were soldiers in the Army, and more than 20 percent were marines. More than half were in the lowest-paid enlisted ranks. About 12 percent were officers. Three-quarters of the troops died in hostile incidents: most often, homemade-bomb explosions, small-arms fire, rocket attacks. A quarter died in illnesses or accidents: truck and helicopter crashes and gun discharges.
On average, the service members who died were about 26. The youngest was 18; the oldest, 59. About half were married, according to the death roll, which does not include a handful yet to be identified by the Defense Department and three civilians who worked for the military.

Part-time soldiers, the guardsmen and reservists who once expected to tend to floods and hurricanes, were called to Iraq on a scale not seen through five decades of war. Increasingly, Iraq is becoming their conflict, and in growing numbers this spring and early summer, these part-time soldiers died there. Ten times as many of them died from April to July of this year as had in the war's first two months.

American women, too, have quietly drawn closer to combat than they had in half a century. At least 24 female service members died in Iraq, more than in any American conflict since World War II, a stark sign of a barrier broken.

Many Hispanics, once underrepresented in the armed forces, have fought and died in striking numbers. At least 122 Hispanics have died in Iraq, meaning that they died at a rate disproportionately high for their representation in the active forces and among the deployed troops. Among the dead were 39 service members who were not American citizens, significantly more than had died in Vietnam or Afghanistan, according to Defense Department records.

Most of the troops - 85 percent - died after President Bush declared major combat operations over on May 1, 2003. Nearly 15 percent died after the United States turned over sovereignty to Iraq's new leaders this June. The deadliest month was this April, as insurgents stepped up their attacks. Nearly as many American troops died that month as had in the initial invasion.

The Pentagon says it does not track or release estimates of the number of Iraqis killed since the war began, although some independent groups have offered widely varying estimates. (A group called Iraq Body Count said Iraqi civilian deaths exceeded 11,000.)

Among Americans, especially the relatives of service members who have died, the meaning of the toll is already a matter of feverish, sometimes bitter, debate.

Some say they view the number of deaths - and the injuries to more than 7,000 other Americans - as a tragic but unavoidable price of war, and one that seems modest beside the death toll from Vietnam, which was 58,000. About 380 troops died in the Persian Gulf war of 1991, and some 97 in Afghanistan. Any questions about the mounting numbers in Iraq, these relatives said, served as a rejection of the troops' mission, an insult to their lost soldier's work.

"The loss is there, of course, but we also know the honor and the pride," said Kelby McCrae, himself a captain in the National Guard and the son of a veteran soldier. His younger brother, Erik, was killed in June. "We're just so honored at the sacrifice he gave."

But others said they worried that their soldier's sacrifice in Iraq might be forgotten as more months pass and people grow inured to news of so many deaths, one after the next in this war.

The Guard and the Reserves: 'Weekend Warriors' Go Full Time

Eric S. McKinley was a baker and a part-time soldier. He dyed his hair strange colors and pierced his body in places his mother sometimes wished he had not. His six-year stint in the Oregon National Guard was
supposed to end in April, but it was extended, and Specialist McKinley died June 13 when a bomb blew up near his Humvee near Baghdad. Specialist McKinley's father, Tom, said he was left with a haunting conviction: that guardsmen and reservists are now being asked in record numbers to fight the same lethal wars as full-time soldiers, but without the same level of training, equipment or respect. Dozens of parents and spouses of guardsmen - some who died and others still serving in Iraq - said they shared Mr. McKinley's worries as they wrestled with what the role of the nation's 1.2 million part-time service members once was and what it was becoming.

"They are not prepared for this, not emotionally and not with their gear and equipment," said Mr. McKinley, of Salem, Ore. "There's this opinion that these guys are just 'weekend warriors,' and we'll have them do all the things the regular army doesn't have time to do. But these guys are being asked to put their lives on the line just as much as everyone else. These guys are yanked from their lives, and yet they aren't treated the same."

During special training at a base in Texas before he left for Iraq, Specialist McKinley told his father that his Guard unit was getting only two meals a day, while regular units ate three. And in Iraq, on the day of his death, Specialist McKinley's fellow guardsmen said he was in a Humvee reinforced with plywood and sandbags, not real armor.

Cecil Green, a spokesman at Fort Hood where Specialist McKinley's unit trained before it left for Iraq, said all soldiers - regular and part time - were fed equally. But Col. Mike Caldwell, deputy director of the Oregon National Guard, said his troops had complained about unequal conditions during training there in months past. "There were a lot of problems in their treatment," Colonel Caldwell said. "It was deplorable. They were treated like slaves in some respects."

Thomas F. Hall, the assistant secretary of defense for reserve affairs, acknowledged in a telephone interview last week that since the terrorist attacks of 2001, the nation's reserve components had been called in numbers unknown since perhaps World War II. But those part-timers sent to Iraq are trained and equipped to the same level as any active-duty troops, Mr. Hall said.

"It's no longer your father or your grandfather's Guard and Reserves," Mr. Hall said. "A lot of this is a leftover vestige from a time in which we didn't perhaps equip and train our Guard and Reserve as we need to."

Any shortages of equipment - of armored Humvees or protective gear - have been faced by all types of troops, not just guardsmen, he said. And Mr. Hall insisted that no one, not even him, could distinguish between part-timers and others when it came to Iraq. "They look the same. Their standards are the same. Their training is the same," he said.

Recently home from Iraq with an injury, Specialist Andrew Cross, a member of the North Carolina National Guard, said the only difference he discerned was a little taunting. "Sure, they say stuff about you not being full time," Specialist Cross said, "but who cares what they say."

Specialist Cross's best friend, Specialist Daniel A. Desens, who listened to Bob Marley and Dave Matthews with him as they rolled along in their Bradleys in Iraq, was one of at least 179 guardsmen and reservists killed there, the records of those identified as of yesterday show.

Their deaths make up less than a fifth of those killed, but the timing of their deaths underscores the changing makeup of American forces in Iraq. In the first weeks of war, only a small group of reserve forces was sent to Iraq, and only a few died. The numbers grew swiftly this year, and reserves and guards now amount to about 40 percent of the forces deployed to Iraq, and maybe still more soon.

Back in Oregon, Colonel Caldwell said leaders were busy arranging more deployments for some of the state's 8,400 Army and Air National Guard troops in the coming weeks, even as gloom lingered over the headquarters. Four Oregon guardsmen, including Specialist McKinley, died in a 10-day stretch.

Nationally, Mr. Hall said, recruiters may fall 1 percent short of their goals for new Guard members when the annual count is taken at the end of September. In Oregon, Colonel Caldwell predicted dire shortfalls: 10 percent to 15 percent.

"I think it's pretty obvious what's happening," he said. "People have realized: you join the Guard in Oregon, you're going to be mobilized."
The Women: Dying, in a Role Quietly Redefined

Before she left her home in Richmond, Va., Leslie D. Jackson's Junior R.O.T.C. instructor warned her that although women might not officially be on the very front line of a ground war, they were edging ever closer - and the line itself, if ever there was one in Iraq, had grown dangerously blurry.

"I told her that even combat support roles could still take you places that maybe you should not be," said Master Sgt. Earl G. Winston Jr., who taught Private Jackson at George Wythe High School. "But she said she was ready to accept the challenge. She said she did not want her fellow soldiers, most of them men, to think that she wasn't every bit as good as them."

Private Jackson, who had talked her reluctant mother into letting her sign up for the Army when she was 17, died on May 20 in Baghdad. The truck she was transporting supplies in hit a roadside bomb. She had finished basic training eight months before, and had turned 18, making her the youngest of 24 women who have died in Iraq.

Not long before, she had sent an e-mail message to her former principal, Earl Pappy, to say that she was spending long hours driving trucks and had been unnerved at seeing a soldier killed for the first time right before her: "I left home as Mommy's little girl," Mr. Pappy said she wrote, "and I'm coming back as a strong woman."

"She told me she wouldn't be in combat, and I don't think women should be," said Viola Jackson, Private Jackson's mother. "But then again, they joined the Army, and I guess you've got to do whatever the other people are doing. I don't know. What I know is she was a sweet child."

Women make up some 10 percent of American forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, but they account for less than 3 percent of the 1,000 deaths in Iraq. Still, more women have died there than in any conflict since hundreds died in World War II - a certain if somber sign of how women's roles in the military have grown in the last decade.

More surprising, though, to advocates on both sides of a long-simmering debate over what women should and should not do in times of war has been the public's reaction to the loss of 24 women. Mostly, there has been silence.

"What it means is that our view of women has changed," said Lory Manning, director of the Women in the Military Project at the Women's Research and Education Institute in Washington and a retired 25-year veteran of the Navy.

"Within our minds, women are doing a lot of athletic things. They're SWAT team members and firefighters now. This is worldwide. So people see this as less horrible. The horror of death is equal now."

But others, like Elaine Donnelly, president of the Center for Military Readiness, an independent public policy group in Livonia, Mich., said Americans were largely oblivious to the role women were playing in Iraq and would be disturbed if they knew. Female soldiers who die receive little attention, she said, except in small hometown newspapers; the same is true of the 207 women who have been injured in Iraq.

Shortly after the war began, there were hints of the nation's discomfort when three female soldiers, including Pfc. Jessica Lynch and Specialist Shoshana Johnson, were taken hostage, and one of them, Pfc. Lori Ann Piestewa, was killed, Ms. Donnelly said. In images broadcast around the world, Specialist Johnson looked terrified, her eyes darting.

"The risk of capture is why we oppose women in combat," said Ms. Donnelly, who wants the Pentagon to reconsider the jobs close to combat that women now hold. "We're a civilized nation. Violence against women is wrong. I hope that we don't become that kind of a nation that doesn't care about this sort of thing."

Eight women died in Vietnam. Sixteen died in the first Persian Gulf war. Three died in Afghanistan. And through most of that time, people have argued over what place women should take in war.

Women have served in the American military since 1901, and others quietly did unofficial military work as early as the Revolutionary War. But in 1948, Congress adopted the Armed Forces Integration Act, which capped women at 2 percent of the services and barred them from serving on combat planes and combat ships.
After Vietnam, and the end of the draft, the restrictions on women began to fade, one by one. By 1994, women were allowed to fly combat aircraft, to serve on fighter ships but not submarines, and to fill ground jobs except those most directly on the front lines: special forces, infantry, armor, artillery. But in Iraq, the jobs that women could fill - as drivers in convoys bringing supplies to troops and as members of military police units - came under attack from homemade bombs and mortar fire, too, and the notion of a front line seemed no longer to fit the conflict.

Nearly all of the women killed were full-time soldiers in the Army. And two-thirds of them died in hostile situations, not in accidents or because of illness.

Even Ms. Manning, who supports bigger roles for women in the military, said she was surprised at the degree to which women had been included in critical operations, including patrolling checkpoints. In part, their role may have been a necessary outgrowth of cultural differences in Iraq. Female soldiers were needed when Iraqi women were searched or questioned.

Still, Ms. Donnelly and other critics say, the scars from so much change are being ignored: What will come of the children, they asked, who lose their mothers to war?

Sgt. Tatjana Reed, a single mother, was killed on July 22 when a bomb exploded near her convoy vehicle. She had signed papers leaving her 10-year-old daughter, Genevieve, in the care of relatives near her base in Germany, expecting the arrangement to be temporary.

Sergeant Reed "always said, 'What a man can do, I can do,'" recalled her mother, Brigitte Dykty, who lives in Clarksville, Tenn. "Sometimes I wish she hadn't thought that."

The Hispanics: Underrepresented, Except on Death Rolls

Five years ago, the National Council of La Raza, an advocacy group for Hispanics, released a scathing study of Hispanics in the United States military. The central finding was that the military was not employing as many Hispanics as it should.

In 1996, the study said, Hispanics 18 to 44 made up more than 11 percent of the civilian work force but accounted for less than 7 percent of the military's active forces.

The military took notice, and the Marines, in particular, began a serious recruiting effort aimed at Spanish-speaking markets, said Lisa Navarrete, vice president of the advocacy group.

"They took it very, very seriously," Ms. Navarrete said.

By 2004, Latinos accounted for 9.2 percent of all active-duty forces and about 10 percent of those forces deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan.

That news came with a distinctly bittersweet edge. Of the 1,000 killed in Iraq, at least 122, or more than 12 percent, were Hispanic, according to the Defense Department, which says ethnicity was not tracked by the same measures in previous wars.

"It seems that in a time of peace, we're underrepresented," Ms. Navarrete said quietly. "In a time of war, the situation is completely changed."

One reason for the high rate of Hispanic deaths in Iraq is that Hispanics account for a particularly large segment - more than 13 percent - of the Marines, the ground troops who suffered significant losses early in the war, as well as in the uprisings of recent weeks.

Some of those who died fighting for the United States were not even citizens. At least 39 noncitizens - many, though not all, of Hispanic heritage - were among the dead. Legal residents of this country have long served in the armed forces, but records of their deaths in war are hard to find. The official Defense Department records show that one noncitizen died in military duty in Vietnam and three in Afghanistan.
In 2002, Mr. Bush issued an order shortening the waiting periods for service members and their families seeking citizenship, and Congress made those changes permanent with a law that takes effect in October. Some anti-immigration advocates said that military service alone was not a qualification for citizenship, while others worried that the changes might induce some immigrants to enlist in hopes of speedy citizenship.

"But the bottom line, whatever the casualties, is that people are going to continue to join because they have to," said Rodolfo Acuna, a professor of Chicano studies at California State University, Northridge. "They want to live better. They want to get money. They want to better themselves."

Rey David Cuervo was born in Tampico, Mexico, but his mother, Rosalba Kuhn, took him to Texas when he was 6. She was a maid in Port Isabel. He was an only boy among three sisters, the quiet one with just a handful of friends.

At age 8, she said, he went to her carrying a picture of the American flag and explained that he planned to join the American Army. "He said that this is all he wanted," she recalled not long ago. "He said if they wouldn't take him in the Army here, then he'd go back to Mexico and sign up there."

In 1999, he left for basic training.

"I was so proud," Ms. Kuhn said. "When I came here, my dreams were that I would see my kids here, see them learn the language, see them get a better life for themselves. Part of that was wanting to see my son in an American uniform."

Ms. Kuhn said she thinks of her son every day when she wakes up. She lights candles for him. She holds a hat of his under her nose and breathes it in. In the sadness, though, Ms. Kuhn said she had no anger. Her son wanted to go into the Army. He wanted to go to Iraq. He chose his future.

Private Cuervo, who once told his mother that he planned to retire from the military after 20 years and then buy a big house, died on Dec. 28, 2003, when a bomb exploded. He was 24, one of 32,000 noncitizens in the armed forces. The government granted him citizenship after he died.

The Small Towns: When the Population Is Reduced by One

There are no sidewalks along the quiet streets of Shelton, Neb., but there is red-white-and-blue bunting, a little faded now, and tattered black ribbon tied to the street posts. Not that anyone here needs to be reminded about Kyle Codner.

The nation's small towns experienced more than their share of death in Iraq, a clear reflection of their representation in the nation's military services. Not only did death arrive in disproportionate numbers in these towns, but each death seemed to echo louder and longer than it might have in a big city.

One resident here compared Corporal Codner's death on May 26 to a tornado whipping up in the Midwest and zeroing in on this town of 1,100 people.

"The word 'shock' is overused, generally," said Lynn McBride, the chairman of Shelton's village trustees and a schoolteacher. "But it understates the feelings about this. We're all in it together here, and there was a feeling that this couldn't be true."

To Shelton, Corporal Codner was the son of Dixie and Wain Codner. He was one of 19 graduates of Shelton High in 2003, and one of two to go off to the military. He was the basketball player with the blond girlfriend, each of them usually on the king and queen court. He was the clerk at J. R.'s Mini Mart. He was the kid who got his photograph taken in front of the old military tank that sits at the town's entrance, and the student named in the yearbook as "Most Likely to Kick Some Terrorist Butt."

Nebraska and a long list of states in the country's middle and South had some of the highest death rates per capita. Many of these states are considered Republican strongholds. Vermont, a Democratic-leaning state in the presidential race, had the most deaths per capita. Among swing states in the presidential race, Oregon, Maine and Iowa had heavy losses.

No one can be sure what role the deaths in Iraq will play in this election season. Nebraska has been more reliably
Republican through five decades of presidential races than any other state. Still, Democrats in Nebraska say the war and the death toll of 14 is stirring political discussion.

"The Republican voting bloc is persuadable here, especially when you're talking about sending your sons and daughters to war," said Barry R. Rubin, executive director of the Nebraska Democratic Party. "One thing about Nebraska is we are very independent-minded people, and people are seriously questioning the merits of this war."

But along the streets of Shelton last weekend, most people said they backed the war, and would probably vote for Mr. Bush. Among them was Corporal Codner's best friend from childhood, Matthew S. Walter, 19 and preparing to vote in his first presidential election. "I don't think I like what John Kerry has to say," Mr. Walter said.

Most people interviewed said they did not see Corporal Codner's death through the prism of politics.

"I sense no bitterness or contrition whatsoever about Kyle," Mr. McBride said. "I've never heard any of that. I think the overall feeling is that we're grateful he died the way he did - serving his country."

About eight miles away, back at Ms. Codner's kitchen table, the Codners said they would vote against President Bush, one of the many people Ms. Codner describes as "someone without skin in the game."

She and her husband go to sleep thinking of the boy in the circle of class pictures on their living room wall, she said, and then they wake up thinking of him. In the moments when other thoughts crowd out those memories, Ms. Codner said, something always brings him back. On Friday, it was the mail. Four packages that had been sent to her son in Iraq were returned to her, unopened. A yellow form on the front of the boxes gave a curt explanation in the form of a checked box: "Deceased."

The Codners tried to discourage their son from joining the Marines during his senior year in high school, but when he complained that they were not being supportive, they tried to go along.

Wain Codner said the town's embrace helped his family the first weeks after his son's death. "The support was incredible," he said. "But then, people go on with their lives."

A few days before Corporal Codner died, he sent home a roll of film. His family developed it, then waited, hoping he would call, so he could tell them exactly what they were seeing.

The mysterious stack of pictures still sits on the kitchen table. One shows Corporal Codner, with a wide smile, beside an Iraqi child. In another, a thick automatic weapon dangles around his neck, seeming to dwarf his slim frame. Another shows just a sleeping bag and pad, arranged carefully on a concrete block. This is probably where he slept, his parents surmise, but they will never be sure.

Tom Torok and the research staff of The New York Times contributed to this report.