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## War's Invisible Casualties: The Families of Part-Time Soldiers

BY DAVID WOOD

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CUMBERLAND, Md. -- Deepening U.S. military commitments overseas are creating a new and largely invisible class of military dependents scattered across America's small towns and city neighborhoods: the struggling families of part-time soldiers called away on lengthy combat tours.

In isolation, they are paying an unreckoned cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as tens of thousands of reservists and National Guard soldiers are dispatched to take the place of exhausted active-duty troops.

To be sure, there are heartwarming stories of support and encouragement. But there is plentiful evidence as well that the painful burden of separation, falling on some and not on others, sharply divides those Americans who are personally and inextricably bound up in the lingering wars and those for whom the battle is a distant and unwelcome distraction.

"When the guys left, we were told not to put any signs of support in our yard or anything like that, showing that we're a military family -- because this is such an unpopular war we'd get the backlash," said Deanna Smith, whose husband, Matt, was mobilized last February with 168 members of the 372nd Military Police Company, a reserve unit based in this small blue-collar city nestled in the mountains of western Maryland.

She put up yellow ribbons anyway, and a sign in the front window of their modest frame house on Springdale Street, a potholed lane between a fast-food joint and a trucking depot.

"Not one of my neighbors has ever said anything," said Smith, a 30-year-old mother of two. "Iraq is not affecting their lives. People don't understand

what we go through."

Sudden deployments into war zones are common at military posts like Fort Bragg and Camp Pendleton. When an active-duty battalion departs, every house on the block is plunged into the same single-parent predicament; every kid in the elementary school lacks a dad or a mom. The active-duty military helps stabilize the ensuing chaos with after-school programs, financial help, car repair and even cooperative grocery shopping.

On such bases, neighbors share the daily anxiety of having a loved one in combat. They experience together the gut-wrenching news that someone has been killed, and often gather to await assurance that "it wasn't one of ours" or the dread visit from the colonel and chaplain bearing the worst news.

But individual reservists and Guard troops now called to active duty -- 184,132 at last count -- come from small towns like Abbeville, Ala., and Paola, Kan., and Driggs, Idaho, and from city neighborhoods in the Bronx, Tucson, Saginaw and Long Beach. Most are hours from a major military installation.

What's more disruptive, many of the reserve and Guard units that belong to these communities have been ripped apart and remade as the Defense Department scrambles to deploy outfits that are 100 percent manned.

Cumberland's MP company, for instance, was short a few people when it was mobilized, so the Pentagon jacked in soldiers from as far away as Texas and South Carolina, further isolating their families from services and friendships.

Janice Davis' husband, Chip, was a reserve ordnance mechanic with a unit at home in Martinsburg, W.Va., until he was suddenly reassigned to the Cumberland MPs, an hour and a half away, just as they were sent to Iraq.

Scattered as they are, it's even harder to make use of the amenities the Pentagon does offer -- family support groups, training sessions and access to military hospitals and the post exchange, or PX, where active-duty families shop discount.

Last summer the Army began offering a toll-free hot line service, staffed by graduate-degree social workers and psychologists who can discuss child care, parenting, and financial and legal issues. They can authorize up to six free sessions with local mental health care providers for reserve or Guard families.

Still, said Shelley M. MacDermid, co-director of the Pentagon-funded Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University, "reserve families

really face a special challenge because of their isolation." The Defense Department, she added, "is well aware of the increasing disconnect" and is studying what else can be done.

"The fact is we are separated," said Linda Comer, 57, whose husband, Sgt. 1st Class Keith Comer, is in Iraq.

An energetic and voluble grandmother, Comer runs the family support program for the 372nd MPs. She operates a phone tree, conveys gossip from the guys in Iraq, passes on official information from the Army -- like the recent announcement that their time in country had been extended from eight months to 12.

But maintaining camaraderie is an uphill job. Fewer than two dozen of the unit's 168 families can get to monthly support meetings; their official PX and family support center are at Fort Meade, a round-trip drive of three hours.

Money, as always, is a struggle. Incomes drop as some families swerve from civilian salary to military pay. Others, like Davis, have to pay for car mechanics and plumbers to do work her husband usually does.

Even when families are willing to drive hours to see a military doctor, some find they're put on a waiting list behind active-duty soldiers and their kin. "Hello, my kid's sick this week -- not three weeks from now," said Davis, a 36-year-old whose four children range from 17 to 9.

Chip Davis deployed for Desert Storm in 1990, and that was hard. "We stupidly thought this would be easier -- but some days I don't know if I'm going to make it," Janice Davis said. Last time his homecoming was so rocky they got divorced -- then remarried several years later.

Trying to head off such disasters, Comer works the phones and e-mail from her modest brick home in Beans Cove, Pa., 30 minutes from Cumberland. Her front window sports a neon "God Bless America" sign in red, white and blue.

It is her view that service in a war zone is no picnic, but it's the families who suffer.

"They call at all hours, especially midnight. They have no one to turn to," she said. "The men over there are in a squad, in a platoon, they're all in there together. We have people drive three, four hours to a family support meeting.

"Yesterday was a bad day. Calls all day long. I was exhausted."

And that's in the midst of her own worries, which crowd in during rare moments of idleness. "I can't imagine what our soldiers are going through over there," she mused during a dark moment. "I think they'll come back

different people. Are we all going to be splitting up?"

Recalling a homeless, alcoholic veteran she'd seen, she wonders: "Are our guys going to be another group of lost people?"

But in the supermarket the other day, a woman behind her in line was complaining about the cost and lack of progress of the Iraq occupation. Comer went red, then exploded. "You're only saying that because you have no one there!" she shouted, drawing stares.

There are stories as well of community support rallies, of volunteers who collected Christmas toys for reserve families, of veterans groups that organized care packages and video e-mail to link families and soldiers.

"People want to do things," said Becky McClarran, a Cumberland community activist whose son serves in Iraq with the 372nd MPs. "Often people just don't know what to do."

But it's difficult to keep that momentum. "Where everybody was so helpful and checking in on us last February, that has kind of dwindled down now," said Deanna Smith.

The war, she said, "is not affecting the lives of anyone around here. Their lives go on."

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