

GI SPECIAL GUARD ISSUE:

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“Soldiers In Uniform Began The Four-Mile March To The Pepsi Center In Downtown Denver To Protest The Iraq War”



Iraq Veterans Against The War, Denver [www.ivaw.org/]



Members of Iraq Veterans Against The War (IVAW) march in downtown Denver, leading several thousands of civilians towards The Pepsi Center. (Photo: Rocky Mountain News)

August 28, 2008 By Ruth Conniff, The Progressive & By Patti Thorn, Rocky Mountain News (Colorado) &lvaw.org/ & By Paul A. Anthony, Rocky Mountain News [Excerpts]

It started as a modest sized march.

Two squads of 25 IVAW members each formed up outside the venue and began marching to the Pepsi center.

From the Rage Against the Machine concert at the Denver Coliseum, about 150 soldiers in uniform began the four-mile march to the Pepsi Center in downtown Denver to protest the Iraq War.

The squads were led by members in dress uniforms and combat uniforms, with thousands of supporters marching behind them in support.

The group of mostly young people walked behind a banner that said: “Support GI Resistance.”

Though the event, co-sponsored by the anti-war group Tent State University and Iraq Veterans Against the War, was unpermitted, the parade proceeded peacefully.

Behind the troops, who marched calling cadence and chanting antiwar slogans, came a larger group in civilian clothes, cheering and waving signs, and growing larger and larger as the marchers wended their way through the downtown.

Wearing T-shirts and stickers with slogans such as “Arrest Bush” and “Make Out Not War,” they sang rolling chants, Marine- style. “Tell Me What We’re Marching For,” sang one group. “Stop the torture, stop the war,” answered another.

People lined the streets to watch, most approvingly.

As the marchers wound their way through the neighborhoods west of the coliseum, they found solidarity with a group of Latinos holding up an anti-war sign and cheering them on.

“Si, se puede!” shouted some young marchers. “Yes, we can!”

Not everyone was as respectful.

From the balcony of an apartment complex, a man yelled at the throngs of protesters to move on. “Don’t come back here,” he said.

But one protester had the last word: He suggested the man join the Army.

As they drew near the heavily guarded convention center, cops in riot gear lined the street, and helicopters buzzed overhead. At an intersection, the group stopped facing squad cars with lights on and a phalanx of black-clad police.

“We can go on here or not,” one of the march’s organizers told the troops through a megaphone. The march was unauthorized and it was unclear whether the police intended to have a confrontation.

She seemed to be trying to calm everyone for a moment, pointing out that the Denver police so far have not been “prone to violence.”

The march continued, and the civilians bringing up the rear cheered.

It was quite a spectacle: the soldiers in dress uniform and fatigues, and the cops in riot gear watching them from the sidelines.

The soldiers chanted:

“Everywhere we go
People want to know
Who we are
Where we came from.
We are the veterans
Iraq War veterans
Antiwar veterans
Pissed-off veterans”

At an intersection, the group stopped to read a letter to Barack Obama asking that he agree to three core principles: the immediate withdrawal of troops from Iraq, full and adequate health care for all returning U.S. service members, and reparations to the Iraqi people.

The letter also upbraided the Democratic Party for their “initial and continued” support for the war.

The police presence intensified. I passed a cop videotaping the marchers and a marcher in a green “copwatch” vest videotaping him right back.

Over the long course, from the outskirts of town into the denser downtown, the energy from the crowd seemed to build. The marchers chanting had a hypnotic effect.

“It’s alright
Its OK
Remember MLK
He tried to lead the way
But he was shot one day
early in the morning”

Thus far, the march has been peaceful and well received, as residents along the route sprayed the marchers with hoses and provided water from their homes and businesses.

More and more people joined the march, until, suddenly, looking back as the group crossed a bridge and then paused right outside the Pepsi Center, you could see several thousand people in a line stretching as far as the eye could see.

As the group passed into the perimeter of the convention hall, the police presence grew more threatening. “Hey, those ones have masks,” someone pointed out. A group of police in gas masks were pulling on thick gloves and grabbing their batons.

A white van with police in black flak jackets hanging off it rolled alongside the marchers.

The feeling of the whole, thousands-strong group was moving. “It’s beautiful,” one marcher said, looking back at the crowd in the late afternoon sun.

Joey Minicucci, 18, of Littleton, noted that his brother was in the military and would soon be sent to Iraq. That was one of the reasons he was going to the march.

Anne Hill, of Montrose, had other reasons. “I’m marching because it seems to be the last vestiges of our free speech and because people have demands and our government’s not listening,” she said.

The march came to a standstill at the perimeter of the Pepsi Center around 6:30 p.m., at which time the veterans attempted to have their statement delivered to Obama.

Tension with police seemed to escalate, until several veterans stepped forward and saluted police. “We are your brothers and sisters in arms,” said one.

“We don’t want to hurt you. We don’t want you to hurt us.”

With that, the standoff melted away and soon an appropriate aide was contacted.

"I figured as long as we kept things peaceful, they would hear us, and they did," said Army veteran Jeffrey Wood.

Nancy Pelosi, meanwhile, was answering tough questions from the founder of Digg on CNN about why the Democrats in Congress have failed to pull the troops out of Iraq.

The thing that stays with me is the sight of those troops looking worried but determined in the face of police force and possible public hostility, trying to make their statement for peace, and how, at the last moment, the whole, huge crowd of civilians had joined them, lifting up their little march and transforming it into an enormous, uplifting show of support.



V.A. Rats At It Again: 37,000 Guardsmen, Reservists Back From Iraq Didn't Get Their Benefits Packages; "Members Twice As Likely To Have Their V.A. Claims Denied As Active-Duty"

July 23, 2008 By Les Blumenthal, McClatchy Newspapers

WASHINGTON — The Department of Veterans Affairs failed to send benefit packages to nearly 37,000 National Guard and Reserve members who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan because it mistakenly thought they were ineligible.

Several senators raised the discovery Wednesday, detailed in a report by the VA's Office of Inspector General, as the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee held a hearing on whether Guard and Reserve members are being adequately informed of the benefits that are available to them.

In addition, Guard and Reserve members are twice as likely to have their VA claims denied as active-duty service members are, [Sen. Patty Murray] said.

Guard Troops Hammered By Stop-Loss

May 3, 2008 By Michelle Tan, Army Times [Excerpts]

Last year's surge of five combat brigades into Iraq helped drive a 43-percent increase in soldiers being barred from leaving the service under stop-loss orders, and Army leaders predict the policy will remain in place at least through next year.

More than 12,230 soldiers are under stop-loss orders, compared to 8,540 in May 2007, during the surge.

Under stop-loss policies, active-duty soldiers within 90 days of retirement or obligated service are barred from leaving the Army if they are in units alerted for deployment. Reservists and National Guard members are barred from leaving if their units have been alerted for mobilization.

In March 2005, 15,758 soldiers fell under stop-loss orders, the most for any month between November 2004 and March 2008, according to Army data. The numbers stayed between 10,000 and 13,000 for about two years after that and fell to an all-time low of 8,540 in May 2007.

But the trend reversed the next month as the last of the five surge brigades flowed into Iraq and soldiers settled into 15-month tours.

At the end of March, the most recent month for which data are available, 6,868 active Army soldiers, 3,879 Army National Guard and 1,488 Army Reserve soldiers were affected by stop-loss.

Much of the increase in March can be attributed to a spike among Guard soldiers — the 3,879 soldiers stop-lossed during that month make up the largest group of Guardsmen affected by the policy since November 2004.

Troops Invited:

What do you think? Comments from service men and women, and veterans, are especially welcome. Write to Box 126, 2576 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10025-5657 or send email contact@militaryproject.org. Name, I.D., withheld unless you request publication. Replies confidential. Same address to unsubscribe.

Oregon National Guard Gets The Finely Sharpened End Of The Stick: “Here's What They Can't Say, At Least Publicly” “This Is A Mission From Hell”

[Thanks to Elaine Brower, The Military Project, for sending this in.]

August 02, 2008 by Mike Francis, The Oregonian [Excerpts]

On the record, the men and women of the Oregon National Guard salute and say they are ready to do their duty when the 41st Brigade Combat Team is summoned to Iraq next year. They are soldiers, they understand the chain of command and they know the "Big Army" doesn't care much what they think anyway.

But here's what they can't say, at least publicly:

This is a mission from hell.

This mission, to provide security for convoys carrying fuel, food, medical supplies and other items from base to base, means that the soldiers of the 41st Brigade are scheduled to spend a year scattered around a shooting gallery, with no ability to control events by participating in neighborhood meetings, training police or raiding houses -- all things that Oregon soldiers have done in previous deployments.

They will be, one officer said, "IED magnets."

As such, they are less likely to fire their weapons than to be fired at.

And when they see one of their colleagues killed by an improvised explosive device, they will inevitably ask themselves if it was worth the life of a friend to escort a load of lettuce, diesel fuel and toilet paper from one military base to another.

Oregonians generally don't realize the implications of next year's deployment, which will be the largest from Oregon in 60 years.

It will gather about 3,500 soldiers -- people from every community in the state -- and send them in the middle of summer to Iraq, where they will endure 10 or so months of duty escorting people and goods from one military base to another. Meanwhile, the Guard's strength in Oregon will be cut almost in half, raising questions about the state's

ability to respond quickly and effectively to disasters like the Vernonia floods or widespread forest fires.

Of course, a lot can change between now and next May, when the brigade is scheduled to mobilize, first for 60 days of training in Georgia, then for 10 months of duty in Iraq. For one thing, the new U.S. president may decide not to send the brigade overseas at all. Or he may elect instead to send it to Afghanistan, or give it a different mission in Iraq or elsewhere. There are no guarantees at this stage about how the mission will play out.

But brigade commanders and soldiers must operate on the best information they have today, which is that the Oregon brigade will be broken down into smaller units, scattered around southern and western Iraq, and be given jobs that most soldiers would prefer not to do.

"I think it's a very dangerous mission," Gov. Ted Kulongoski said in a telephone interview. "There are things the active-duty Army doesn't want to do, and I'm very offended by it."

Kulongoski sent a letter to Defense Secretary Robert Gates on July 10 expressing disappointment in the role the Pentagon is asking the 41st Brigade to play.

"Using (the National Guard brigades) in ad hoc organizations structured specifically for the mission is seen by our soldiers as making them 'fillers' rather than trained, cohesive units," Kulongoski wrote. "It sends the signal to them that they are second-rate soldiers and units."

Col. Daniel Hokanson, who commands the 41st Brigade, is preparing as if the brigade will be given the mission that the Defense Department described to it this winter.

Nobody has done a precise count yet, but Hokanson thinks about half of the soldiers of the 41st have deployed once already, with the largest chunk going to Afghanistan at a time when that country was relatively peaceful. About 30 percent of the previously deployed have gone twice, estimates Maj. Arnold Strong, the brigade's public affairs officer.

This suggests the challenges associated with the other end of the mission: when the soldiers return home. Already, the state is grappling with a wave of post-traumatic stress disorder diagnoses, traumatic brain injuries, divorces and even some suicides.

Families in every corner of the state have been touched by the war. Employers are struggling to abide by the law that requires them to hold jobs open for deployed soldiers, despite the difficulties it poses for them. How much more of this will wash over Oregon in the months and years after the brigade comes home in 2010?

"We will see a continued rising number of marriage and family casualties of the war," said Dr. Jim Sardo, program manager for the PTSD clinical team and substance program at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Portland. Further, he noted, this deployment will dramatically increase the number of veterans who have deployed more than once. And that, he said, "increases the likelihood of long-term mental-health consequences."

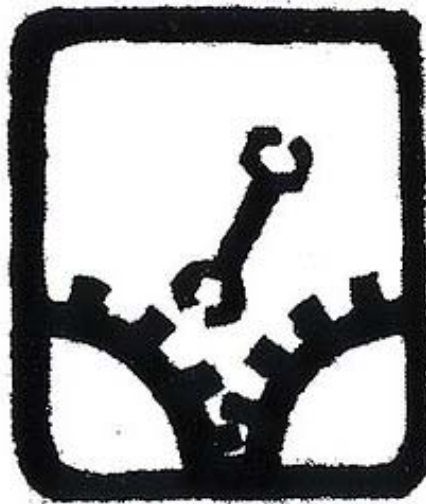
For the roughly half of the brigade that has never deployed, the planned mission in Iraq will come like a blast from a furnace. They will fly from Georgia to a desert where temperatures routinely top 120 degrees, they will be saddled with heavy armored vests and told to ride down roads where other soldiers have been killed, and not to fire their weapons unless they determine they are in imminent danger of attack. They won't be in the fight unless fired upon. They won't interact deeply with Iraqi civilians.

But they will be targets for anybody who aims to disrupt military operations -- and plenty of such people remain in Iraq.

It's highly likely that some members of the 41st Brigade won't come home alive. That should cause Oregonians to think deeply about what their fellow citizens are being asked to do.

"I think everybody is worried about the continual deployment of the Guard," said Kulongoski. "I think sometimes we're asking too much of these kids and their families."

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