

Traveling Soldier

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**December, 2009
Issue #26**

"I am thoroughly opposed to the Army as a whole, and the war in the Middle East"

From the editors: To protect the writer, ID has been removed from this email as published here. The Military Resistance organization, which produces *Traveling Soldier*, will follow up with the writer privately. We welcome other letters from members of the armed services.

Dear Traveling Soldier,

I was promoted to Sergeant less than a year ago.

Although I am thoroughly opposed to the Army as a whole, and the war in the Middle East (I spent 15 months over there for no good reason), I decided that I could take advantage of the system and become one of the few Non-commissioned Officers that refuses to buy into the Army BS.

Goodness knows we could use more of those.

I was leaning heavily on the example set before me by some of the best Sergeants I had worked with, all of whom hated the Army with a fervent passion, but got their jobs done no less effectively.

I respected them because I could relate to them, and I would have taken a

bullet for them without a second thought (whereas I would have had to take a moment to think about it for all of my "hooah" super-goArmy-high-speed NCOs).

With this conviction in hand, I PCS'd to my current unit, ready to show soldiers that leaders can be normal people, that being an asshole doesn't come with the stripes.

Within a few short months of coming here, I was forced to realize that if I don't lead their way (ordering the privates around like dogs and treating them as if they had no ability to think for themselves), then they would find a way to bust me down a peg.

I had already developed common ground with my soldiers, a level of trust that most leaders who demand respect and obedience rarely ever experience. But since this was contrary to how the Army (and those so-called "leaders" who value regulations over sincere trust and respect) does things, they set out to take me down.

I was mentioned by name in a unit anonymous survey for a charge that could have legal consequences if it were even remotely true. Although this accusation is minor, being anonymous

and lacking evidence as it was, the message was all too clear to me: "Continue treating your subordinates like real people, and you will soon be one of them."

I refuse to conform to this.

I firmly believe that, as a leader, if you want to develop the trust necessary to survive in a combat zone, it requires you being a member of the team in garrison.

You can't bark orders and turn your back one day, and then expect a soldier to take a bullet for you the next.

That's not how it works.

For all of you Privates out there reading this, know that there are Sergeants who hate the Army just as much as you do.

Sergeants who would rather be at your side when the shit hits the fan than standing over you expecting you to handle it alone.

There are Sergeants who would rather lose their rank than conform to the Army's expectations of dictatorship in leaders.

Your leader and friend,
SGT A

"If we make it back with ten toes and ten fingers the mission is successful"

October 8, 2009

Martin Fletcher at Forward Operating Base in Wardak province, *The Times* [Excerpts]

American soldiers serving in Afghanistan are depressed and deeply disillusioned, according to the chaplains of two US battalions that have spent nine months on the front line in the war against the Taleban.

Many feel that they are risking their lives — and that colleagues have died — for a futile mission and an Afghan population that does nothing to help them, the chaplains told *The Times* in their makeshift chapel on this fortress-like base in a dusty, brown valley southwest of Kabul.

"The many soldiers who come to see us have a sense of futility and anger about being here. They are really in a state of depression and despair and just want to get back to their families," said Captain Jeff Masengale, of the 10th Mountain Division's 2-87 Infantry Battalion.

"They feel they are risking their lives for progress that's hard to discern," said Captain Sam Rico, of the Division's 4-25 Field Artillery Battalion.

"They are tired, strained, confused and just want to get through." The chaplains said that they were speaking out because the men could not.

"We're lost — that's how I feel. I'm not exactly sure why we're here," said Specialist Raquime Mercer, 20, whose closest friend was shot dead by a renegade Afghan policeman last Friday.

"I need a clear-cut purpose if I'm going to get hurt out here or if I'm going to die."

Sergeant Christopher Hughes, 37, from Detroit, has lost six colleagues and survived two roadside bombs.

Asked if the mission was worthwhile, he replied: "If I knew exactly what the mission was, probably so, but I don't."

The only soldiers who thought it was going well "work in an office, not on the ground". In his opinion "the whole country is going to shit."

The battalion's 1,500 soldiers are nine months in to a year-long deployment that has proved extraordinarily tough.

Their goal was to secure the mountainous Wardak province and then to win the people's allegiance through development and good governance. They have, instead, found themselves locked in an increasingly vicious battle with the Taleban.

They have been targeted by at least 300 roadside bombs, about 180 of which have exploded.

Nineteen men have been killed in action, with another committing suicide.

About a hundred have been flown home with amputations, severe burns and other injuries likely to cause permanent disability, and many of those have not been replaced.

More than two dozen mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicles (MRAPs) have been knocked out of action.

Living conditions are good — abundant food, air-conditioned tents, hot water, free internet — but most of the men are on their second, third or fourth tours of Afghanistan and Iraq, with barely a year between each.

Staff Sergeant Erika Cheney, Airborne's mental health specialist, expressed concern about their mental state — especially those in scattered outposts — and believes that many have mild post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). "They're tired, frustrated, scared. A lot of them are afraid to go out but will still go," she said.

Lieutenant Peter Hjelmstad, 2-87's Medical Platoon Leader, said sleeplessness and anger attacks were common.

A dozen men have been confined to desk jobs because they can no longer handle missions outside the base.

One long-serving officer who has lost three friends this tour said he sometimes returned to his room at night and cried, or played war games on his laptop. "It's a release. It's a method of coping." He has nightmares and sleeps little, and it does not help that the base is frequently shaken by outgoing artillery fire. He was briefly overcome as he recalled how, when a lorry backfired during his most recent home leave, he grabbed his young son and dived between two parked cars.

The chaplains said soldiers were seeking their help in unprecedented numbers.

"Everyone you meet is just down, and you meet them everywhere — in the weight room, dining facility, getting mail," said Captain Rico. Even "hard men" were coming to their tent chapel and breaking down.

The men are frustrated by the lack of obvious purpose or progress.

"Soldiers aren't dying because the Army is sending us overseas. Some of them pass away because the Army doesn't care."

From the editors: To protect the writer, ID has been removed from this email as published here. The Military Resistance organization, which produces *Traveling Soldier*, will follow up with the writer privately. We welcome other letters from members of the armed services.

A soldier passed away last night after recent tonsil surgery.

He could have been dead as long as forty eight hours because that was the last known contact anyone had for him.

I want everyone to know that soldiers aren't dying because the Army is sending us overseas.

Some of them pass away because the Army doesn't care.

Please keep his family in mind.

This took place on 21 October 2009.

I prefer to remain anonymous, but that's up to you.

- J

“The soldiers’ biggest question is: what can we do to make this war stop.

“Catch one person? Assault one objective?

“Soldiers want definite answers, other than to stop the Taliban, because that almost seems impossible. It’s hard to catch someone you can’t see,” said Specialist Mercer.

“It’s a very frustrating mission,” said Lieutenant Hjelmstad. “The average soldier sees a friend blown up and his instinct is to retaliate or believe it’s for something, but it’s not like other wars where your buddy died but they took the hill.

“There’s no tangible reward for the sacrifice. It’s hard to say Wardak is better than when we got here.”

Captain Masengale, a soldier for 12 years before he became a chaplain, said: “We want to believe in a cause but we don’t know what that cause is.”

The soldiers are angry that colleagues are losing their lives while trying to help a population that will not help them. “You give them all the humanitarian assistance that they want and they’re still going to lie to you.

“They’ll tell you there’s no Taliban anywhere in the area and as soon as you roll away, ten feet from their house, you get shot at again,” said Specialist Eric Petty, from Georgia.

Captain Rico told of the disgust of a medic who was asked to treat an insurgent shortly after pulling a colleague’s charred corpse from a bombed vehicle.

The soldiers complain that rules of engagement designed to minimise civilian casualties mean that they fight with one arm tied behind their backs. “They’re a joke,” said one. “You get shot at but can do nothing about it. You have to see the person with the weapon. It’s not enough to know which house the shooting’s coming from.”

The soldiers joke that their ISAF arm badges stand not for International Security Assistance Force but “I Suck At Fighting” or “I Support Afghan Farmers”.

To compound matters, soldiers are mainly being killed not in combat but on routine journeys, by roadside bombs planted by an invisible enemy.

“That’s very demoralising,” said Captain Masengale.

The constant deployments are, meanwhile, playing havoc with the soldiers’ private lives. “They’re killing families,” he said. “Divorces are skyrocketing. PTSD is off the scale. There have been hundreds of injuries that send soldiers home and affect families for the rest of their lives.”

The chaplains said that many soldiers had lost their desire to help Afghanistan.

“All they want to do is make it home alive and go back to their wives and children and visit the families who have lost husbands and fathers over here. It comes down to just surviving,” said Captain Masengale.

“If we make it back with ten toes and ten fingers the mission is successful,” Sergeant Hughes said.

“You carry on for the guys to your left or right,” added Specialist Mercer.

The chaplains have themselves struggled to cope with so much distress. “We have to encourage them, strengthen them and send them out again. No one comes in and says, ‘I’ve had a great day on a mission’. It’s all pain,” said Captain Masengale. “The only way we’ve been able to make it is having each other.”

Lieutenant-Colonel Kimo Gallahue, 2-87’s commanding officer, denied that his men were demoralised, and insisted they had achieved a great deal over the past nine months.

A triathlete and former rugby player, he admitted pushing his men hard, but argued that taking the fight to the enemy was the best form of defence.

He said the security situation had worsened because the insurgents had chosen to fight in Wardak province, not abandon it. He said, however, that the situation would have been catastrophic without his men. They had managed to keep open the key Kabul-to-Kandahar highway which dissects Wardak, and prevent the province becoming a launch pad for attacks on the capital, which is barely 20 miles from its border. Above all, Colonel Gallahue argued that counter-insurgency — winning the allegiance of the indigenous population

through security, development and good governance — was a long and laborious process that could not be completed in a year.

“These 12 months have been, for me, laying the groundwork for future success,” he said.

At morning service on Sunday, the two chaplains sought to boost the spirits of their flock with uplifting hymns, accompanied by video footage of beautiful lakes, oceans and rivers.

Captain Rico offered a particularly apposite reading from Corinthians: “We are afflicted in every way but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.”

BARACK OBAMA STEAMING HIS WAY THROUGH AFGHANISTAN TOWARDS OSLO TO PICK UP HIS NOBEL PEACE PRIZE.



MR FISH

"Morale Has Gotten Low"

Oct 17, 2009 By Gregg Zoroya, *USA TODAY*
[Excerpts]

WARDAK PROVINCE, Afghanistan — An Army commander in Afghanistan has responded to concerns about low morale among his troops in a personal letter that assures them they are contributing to the “overall success of the mission” here.

As the Obama administration debates the military strategy in Afghanistan, the letter offers a rare glimpse about how that debate is playing out among troops on the battlefield in one of the country’s most violent provinces.

Col. David Haight, of the 10th Mountain Division’s 3rd Brigade Combat team, sent the letter to the 3,500 men and women after two of them were killed in combat and his chaplains reported that many were disillusioned about the war.

“From the individual’s foxhole, it is probably often difficult to see the bigger picture,” wrote Haight, who provided a copy of the letter to *USA TODAY*.

Haight wrote that “some may ask why” efforts to clear valleys of insurgents or keep roads open are “so important (or) really worth it. ... I am here to solemnly testify that it is all important.”

In an interview after sending out the letter, Haight said that some of the public debate may have reached soldiers in the ranks.

“I can tell a soldier to do anything, and he may or may not in his mind question why,” Haight said. “But if you explain the why very, very clearly, he will not only accomplish the mission, but he will do the mission to a much higher standard.”

“Morale is something that varies by person and circumstance,” said Army Lt. Col. Mark Wright, a Pentagon spokesman. “But based on conversations with commanders in the field, morale across the force is generally pretty good.”

The letter itself wasn’t unusual, said Lt. Col. Paul Swiergosz, spokesman for 10th Mountain Division, based at Fort Drum, N.Y.

Haight writes a letter every month in the unit’s newsletter, Swiergosz said. He said the unit’s soldiers remain focused on their mission.

Haight said he wrote the letter after a request by Capt. Jeffery Masengale, a chaplain who told British newspaper *The Times* that many soldiers worried their mission

was pointless and the Afghans reluctant to help them.

Masengale declined to comment.

Staff Sgt. Stephen Barnes, a squad leader fighting in the Tangi Valley, said “there’s a lot of soldiers that are going to be glad as hell that (the chaplain) has spoken up.

“Because out of fear of reprisal, they don’t speak. I will say it. Morale has gotten low. I will say it on the mountaintops.”



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