

Bangor Daily News - Print this Article

Last updated: Wednesday, September 10, 2003

## Unreported Casualties

Getting casualty figures for the war in Iraq and its aftermath is not as easy as you might think. An official Pentagon Web site, DefenseLink, carries a daily tabulation of U.S. deaths. Recent figures were hostile, 183; nonhostile, 103; total, 286. A telephone call to the U.S. Central Command office in Tampa, Fla., elicited slightly different death figures, for a total of 288.

But the Pentagon's Internet site says nothing about the U.S. wounded. The way to get that is to call Tampa. An officer there said the figures at that time were 1,153 wounded in action, and 308 non-hostile injuries.

The Washington Post, in a story last week by Vernon Loeb, noted that the Central Command releases the number of wounded only when asked, "making the combat injuries of U.S. troops in Iraq one of the untold stories of the war." The Post report went on: "With no fanfare and almost no public notice, giant C-17 transport jets arrive virtually every night at Andrews Air Force Base outside Washington, on medical evacuation missions. Since the war began, more than 6,000 service members have been flown back to the United States." The number includes those wounded in action, those injured in vehicle accidents and other mishaps and those physically or mentally ill.

What about Iraqi casualties? A Pentagon spokesman, when asked, replied, "I don't think anyone would keep the Iraqi deaths." The Central Command spokesman said, "There's no way to track that." The nongovernment Center for Defense Information (CDI), in a compilation of war casualties, puts it more delicately: "Iraqi military and civilian casualties are excluded from this data sheet, not because they are without relevance to the conflict, but solely because CDI lacks the resources to derive accurately and to maintain consistently such contested and elusive data."

For what it's worth, an Internet site called Iraqbodycount.org carries a current Iraqi military death toll of 6,118 to 7,836, as compiled from news reports from Iraq. Its page quotes Gen. Tommy Franks of the U.S. Central Command as saying, "We don't do body counts."

Body counts did, indeed, get a bad name in the Vietnam War, when official briefers regularly listed huge numbers of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese dead, yet the hit-and-run guerrilla resistance continued and ultimately prevailed. There is a danger in reporting specific numbers when they are, at best, estimates and should be considered that way.

But the large numbers of American wounded and the far greater numbers of Iraqi casualties point to innumerable cases of suffering and heartbreak - and in some cases growing political resistance to the war and the current U.S. occupation. The Pentagon's bare disclosure of the relatively modest U.S. death toll is only a small part of the ongoing Iraq war story that should be counted at the top of the list of sacrifices to which President Bush referred Sunday night.