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**As Iraq winds down, U.S. Army confronts a broken force**

**Nancy A. Youssef | McClatchy Newspapers**

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WASHINGTON — When Lt. Col. Dave Wilson took command of a battalion of the 4th Brigade of the 1st Armored Division, the unit had just returned to Texas from 14 months traveling some of Iraq's most dangerous roads as part of a logistics mission.

What he found, he said, was a unit far more damaged than the single death it had suffered in its two deployments to Iraq.

Nearly 70 soldiers in his 1,163-member battalion had tested positive for drugs: methamphetamine, cocaine and marijuana. Others were abusing prescription drugs. Troops were passing around a tape of a female lieutenant having sex with five soldiers from the unit. Seven soldiers in the brigade died from drug overdoses and traffic accidents when they returned to Fort Bliss, near El Paso, after their first deployment.

"The inmates were running the prison," Wilson said.

What Wilson had to deal with, however, was hardly an isolated instance.

With the U.S. drawdown in Iraq, the Army is finally confronting an epidemic of drug abuse and criminal behavior that many commanders acknowledge has been made worse because they'd largely ignored it during nearly a decade of wars on two fronts.

The Army concedes that it faces a mammoth problem.

A 350-page report issued in July after a 15-month investigation into the Army's rising suicide rate found that levels of illegal drug use and criminal activity have reached record highs, while the number of disciplinary actions and forced discharges were at record lows.

The result, the Army found, is that "drug and alcohol abuse is a significant health problem in the Army." Where the Army once rigidly enforced rules on drug use, it got sloppy in the rush to get soldiers ready for the battlefield, commanders say. Officers who once trained soldiers on everything from drug abuse to financial planning had only enough time to get their troops ready for battle.

The number of misdemeanors that soldiers committed — including traffic infractions, drunk driving and being absent without leave — rose to 50,523 in fiscal year 2009 — a sign, the report said, that "good order and discipline" were declining in the ranks. Five years earlier, the number was 28,388.

No disciplinary action was taken in at least 15,074 of the 2009 cases, the report said.

From 2001 to 2009, only 70 percent of DUIs and 61 percent of positive drug tests were referred to the Army's substance abuse program, and drug testing became haphazard, as well: In 2009, 78,517 soldiers went untested for illegal drug use. Statistically, the Army estimated, that meant that 1,311 offenders probably escaped detection.

Sexual assault more than tripled in the same period, from 302 cases in 2001 to 1,015 in 2009.

The increase in drug abuse and bad behavior came at the same time that the Army enlisted thousands of recruits who in previous years would have been ruled ineligible because of drug or other criminal convictions. According to the report, nearly 20 percent of the soldiers who've enlisted in the Army since 2004 — perhaps as many as 10,000 — would "not have been eligible for entry into the Army before."

"I think we've got to understand that the force we have today is different from the force we had 10 years ago," said Gen. Peter W. Chiarelli, the vice chief of staff of the Army, who oversaw the study and is heading up the Army's response to it. "We've got kids that are going to have some behavioral health issues. The real hard part for us is to determine, 'OK, I am willing to help this kid with behavioral health issues, but how long can I help him? How long can I do that and make sure I have a force capable of doing whatever the nation asks it to do?' "

Chiarelli said that simply discharging soldiers with drug and behavioral problems wasn't an option.

"We can't use these people up, have them develop a problem and then throw them away and not take care of them. There is no way. I can't be part of an organization like that," he said. "Part of the reason they're having the problem is the situation we put them into."

Wilson said he found a failure of leadership to be a major factor in the deterioration of his unit.

When the brigade returned from Iraq in December 2007, many commanders were moved to other units, and new soldiers were rushed through the system to get them to the battlefield quickly, without the proper guidance.

As a result, 37 of the 69 drug abusers in Wilson's battalion belonged to one company of 200, he said. When he was a company commander a decade ago, having five soldiers test positive would have been considered a lot, he added.

"We found that we had leaders that were dealing with combat stress issues as well. So when you have sick leaders, that leader can't care for the soldiers properly," said Wilson, who commanded 1,163 of the brigade's 3,800 soldiers. "The drug problem was just a symptom of the disease."

Wilson said he turned his unit around by keeping leaders in place, disciplining soldiers and making time during combat training for things such as leadership and the perils of drug abuse. He had them read the motivational books "Who Moved My Cheese?" and former Notre Dame coach Lou Holtz's "Winning Every Day." Positive drug tests later fell to five a year.

The brigade also kicked 200 soldiers out of the Army.

"There were times I walked out of my headquarters at 2 and 3 in the morning and went back in an hour and a half later for PT," or physical training, Wilson said. "There are times the Army requires us to give up a little more juice than normal."

Chiarelli said he was hopeful that the drawdown of American troops in Iraq would give the Army more time to address the issue.

"As our soldiers start to spend more time at home, we can start to dust off some of the things we used to do ... and start tracking these kids, make sure we are taking care of them," he said.

ON THE WEB

Read the Army report, [Health Promotion, Risk Reduction, Suicide Prevention](http://bit.ly/cll7VH)

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