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America's Broken-Down Army

By Mark Thompson

For most Americans, the Iraq war is both distant and never-ending. For Private Matthew Zeimer, it was neither. Shortly after midnight on Feb. 2, Zeimer had his first taste of combat as he scrambled to the roof of the 3rd Infantry Division's Combat Outpost Grant in central Ramadi. Under cover of darkness, Sunni insurgents were attacking his new post from nearby buildings. Amid the smoke, noise and confusion, a blast suddenly ripped through the 3-ft. concrete wall shielding Zeimer and a fellow soldier, killing them both. Zeimer had been in Iraq for a week. He had been at his first combat post for two hours.

If Zeimer's combat career was brief, so was his training. He enlisted last June at age 17, three weeks after graduating from Dawson County High School in eastern Montana. After finishing nine weeks of basic training and additional preparation in infantry tactics in Oklahoma, he arrived at Fort Stewart, Ga., in early December. But Zeimer had missed the intense four-week pre-Iraq training — a taste of what troops will face in combat — that his 1st Brigade comrades got at their home post in October. Instead, Zeimer and about 140 other members of the 4,000-strong brigade got a cut-rate, 10-day course on weapon use, first aid and Iraqi culture. That's the same length as the course that teaches soldiers assigned to generals' household staffs the finer points of table service.

The Army and the White House insist the abbreviated training was adequate. "They can get desert training elsewhere," spokesman Tony Snow said Feb. 28, "like in Iraq." But outside military experts and Zeimer's mother disagree. The Army's rush to carry out President George W. Bush's order to send thousands of additional troops more quickly to Iraq is forcing two of the five new brigades bound for the war to skip standard training at Fort Irwin, Calif. These soldiers aren't getting the benefit of participating in war games on the wide Mojave Desert, where gun-jamming sand and faux insurgents closely resemble conditions in Iraq. "Given the new policy of having troops among the Iraqis," says Lawrence Korb, a former Pentagon personnel chief, "they should be giving our young soldiers more training, not less." Zeimer's mother was unaware of the gap in her son's training until TIME told her about it on April 2. Two days later the Army disclosed that Zeimer may have been killed by friendly fire. "They're shipping more and more young kids over there who don't know what they're getting into," Janet Seymour said quietly after learning what her son had missed. "They've never seen war other than on the TV."

The truncated training — the rush to get underprepared troops to the war zone — "is absolutely unacceptable," says Representative John Murtha, the Pennsylvania Democrat and opponent of the war who

chairs the House Appropriations defense subcommittee. A decorated Marine veteran of Vietnam, Murtha is experiencing a sense of déjà vu. "The readiness of the Army's ground forces is as bad as it was right after Vietnam," Murtha tells TIME. Even Colin Powell — a retired Army general, onetime Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and Bush's first Secretary of State — acknowledges that after spending nearly six years fighting a small war in Afghanistan and four years waging a medium-size war in Iraq, the service whose uniform he wore for 35 years is on the ropes. "The active Army," Powell said in December, "is about broken."

Bush warned that if Democrats in Congress did not pass a bill to fund the war on his terms, "the price of that failure will be paid by our troops and their loved ones." But they are already paying a price for decisions he has made, and the larger costs are likely to be borne for at least a generation. This is not only a matter of the U.S.'s ability to defend itself at home and protect its interests overseas, vital though those missions are. The Army is the heart of the U.S. military, practicing what democracies sometimes manage only to preach. All soldiers are created equal; race and class defer to rank and merit. Except for the stars, the general wears the uniform of the private in combat. The Army is the public institution that sets the pace for others to follow, makes the stakes higher, the demands greater. Its rewards are paid in glory and blood.

A volunteer Army reflects the most central and sacred vow that citizens make to one another: soldiers protect and defend the country; in return, the country promises to give them the tools they need to complete their mission and honor their service, whatever the outcome. It was Bush, on the eve of the 2000 election, who promised "to all of our men and women in uniform and to their parents and to their families, help is on the way." Besides putting Powell at State, the President reinforced his Administration with two former Defense Secretaries: Vice President Dick Cheney and, in the job for a second time, Donald Rumsfeld.

So it is no small irony that today's U.S. Army finds itself under the greatest strain in a generation. The Pentagon made that clear April 2 when it announced that two Army units will soon return to Iraq without even a year at home, compared with the two years units have traditionally enjoyed. One is headed back after 47 days short of a year, the other 81. "This is the first time we've had a voluntary Army on an extended deployment," says Andrew Krepinevich, a retired Army officer who advises his old service. "A lot of canaries are dropping dead in the mine."

The main consequences of a tightly stretched Army is that men and women are being sent into combat with less training, shorter breaks and disintegrating equipment. When those stories get out, they make it harder to retain soldiers and recruit them in the first place. "For us, it's just another series of never-ending deployments, and for many, including me, there is only one answer to that — show me the door out," wrote an officer in a private e-mail to Congressman Steve Rothman of New Jersey.

Army equipment is wearing out even faster than Army troops. Gear and weapons are usually left in the war zone to be used by newly arriving troops. That grinds the equipment into scrap up to 10 times as fast as in

peacetime. The lack of guns and armor back home has a boomerang effect: many of the troops training in the U.S. are not familiar with what they'll have to depend on once they arrive in Iraq.

Today half the Army's 43 combat brigades are deployed overseas, with the remainder recovering from their latest deployment or preparing for the next one. For the first time in decades, the Army's "ready brigade" — a unit of the famed 82nd Airborne Division primed to parachute into a hot spot anywhere in the world within 72 hours — is a luxury the U.S. Army cannot afford. All its forces are already dedicated to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Repeated combat tours have "a huge impact on families," General Peter Schoomaker, the Army chief of staff, told Congress in February. Those deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan more than once — 170,000 so far — have a 50% increase in acute combat stress over those who have been deployed only once. And that stress is what contributes to post-traumatic stress disorder, according to an Army study. "Their wives are saying, I know you're proud of what you're doing, but we've got to get out of here," says Barry McCaffrey, a retired four-star general.

New Defense Secretary Robert Gates concedes there are readiness problems. He told Congress March 29 that next year's proposed \$625 billion defense budget—the highest, adjusted for inflation, since World War II—will "make a good start at addressing the readiness" issues plaguing the Army. His first concern before taking the post in December was his suspicion "that our ground forces weren't large enough," and he has urged troop hikes starting next year.

THE WRONG KIND OF WAR

The Army's problems were long in the making, and the extended deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan have exposed them for all to see: more than a decade of underfunding for boots on the ground while cold war administrations from Richard Nixon's to Bill Clinton's spent lavishly on the Pentagon's high-tech wizardry. The first Gulf War didn't help. It lasted 100 hours on the ground, was fought mainly from the air and reinforced the impression that grunts matter less than geeks.

Today's Army was molded for peacetime missions, with occasional spasms of all-out war, not for the lengthy guerrilla campaigns it is waging. "Following Vietnam, a lot of thoughtful officers said, This is not the kind of war that we want to fight," explains Senator Jack Reed, Democrat of Rhode Island, a Vietnam-era Army officer. Counterinsurgency wars didn't play to the U.S.'s strong suit — superior technology — and instead demanded patience, which is harder to come by in this culture. Even now, more than four years after invading Iraq, the Pentagon seems to be investing much of its current \$606 billion budget in an effort to fight the wrong war. America's potential enemies around the world watched the first Gulf War and learned that the U.S. was unbeatable on a conventional battlefield. But the Defense Department lingered in a cold war hangover. The Air Force continues to buy \$330 million fighters, and the Navy \$2 billion submarines. (The Army is not free of this tendency. It wants to spend \$160 billion on the Future Combat System, a network of 14 ground vehicles and drones of questionable value in the irregular warfare that's likely in the 21st century.) Gates has second-guessed the Pentagon's spending priorities and says he is

studying whether the Defense Department is buying weapons "more tied to cold war needs than future needs." Even John Abizaid, the outgoing Army general who commanded the troops fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq for the past three years, acknowledges that he never had the right tools for his mission. "This is not an Army that was built to sustain a long war," he told a Harvard audience last fall. The force was so stretched, he warned Congress at the time, that a 20,000-strong troop surge in Iraq could not be sustained. Now that Abizaid is no longer in command, Bush has ordered 30,000 more troops into the fight.

Those in charge deny there's a crisis. Schoomaker, the Army's top general, served in the Vietnam-era Army. "I know what an Army that's near broken smells like, what it looks like, how it acts," he said in January. "Drug problems, race problems, insubordination — all kinds of things going on. We're nowhere near anything like that." General George Casey, who will succeed Schoomaker as the Army's top officer April 10, said at his confirmation hearing that "the Army is far from broken." The top brass acknowledge that they have had to husband their resources, pushing soldiers and supplies into combat and shortchanging everything else left behind. But a detailed look at the Army's people and its gear shows that the institution is barely holding together.

THE TROOPS ARE TIRED

Nearly 5,000 soldiers and their supporters met recently in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., at a gathering of the Association of the U.S. Army, a pro-Army group. A retired general spoke privately of a disconcerting change in recent months in the wounded soldiers he visits at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. "Ever since the war started, they'd be saying all they wanted to do was to get back to their buddies in Iraq to keep on fighting," he said. "Now it's more about getting out and wondering about civilian jobs. There's very little chatter about rejoining the unit."

That kind of frontline report unnerves the Army's high command. While they acknowledge that equipment shortfalls and faulty plans have plagued the Iraq campaign, they have always been able to parry such concerns by pointing to G.I.s — including those wounded in action—who believe in the war and are gung-ho to reenlist.

The soldiers' change of heart is reflected in a poll by the independent *Army Times*. In December, for the first time, more troops surveyed disapproved of the President's handling of the war (42%) than approved of it (35%). Over the past two years, the number of troops surveyed who think victory is likely has fallen from 83% to 50%. Army suicides, an admittedly rough barometer of morale, show a steady increase, rising from 51 confirmed in 2001 to 91 (plus seven possible suicides still under investigation) last year. Desertions are climbing.

In the field, manpower shortages are everywhere. Captain David Eastburn's artillery company — part of the 2nd Infantry Division — arrived for its second tour in Iraq with only 72% of its personnel slots filled. "It just puts extra pressure on us," Eastburn, 30, says of his troops during a patrol in southeastern Baghdad.

"They have to work longer, harder to make up for the lack of personnel." After training to fire the artillery's big guns at foes 15 miles away, his unit is pulling infantry duty. "I love the Army," the 12-year veteran, a native of Columbus, Ohio, says, "but I hate this war."

LOWERING THE STANDARDS

For its part, the Bush Administration boasts of its plan to permanently boost the Army by 65,000 troops, to 547,000, over the next five years. Gordon Sullivan, a retired Army chief of staff and head of the Association of the U.S. Army, says the service's size "should be approaching 700,000" to do the job the nation expects of it. But where will such numbers come from?

True, the Army is making its recruiting targets — but only by accepting less qualified people. Recruits from the least-skilled category have climbed eightfold, to nearly 4%, over the past two years. Just 81% had high school diplomas last year, a sharp drop from 94% in 2003. The past two years have been the first in a decade in which the Army missed the Pentagon goal of 90% with diplomas. (The rest have GEDs.) The Army has boosted the maximum enlistment age from 35 to 42 — but 12% of recruits over 35 drop out within six months, double the rate for younger soldiers. To boost its numbers, the Army has had to cut its standards. It granted recruits nearly twice as many waivers for felonies and other personal shortcomings in 2006 as it did in 2003. Such waivers allow prospects with criminal records, medical problems or poor aptitude scores to enlist. They climbed from 4,918 in 2003 to 8,129 last year, Pentagon data show.

One response to difficulties in recruitment: stop people from leaving. Sergeant Isaiah Santopoalo is one of 70,000 soldiers who have been barred from quitting the Army by a stop-loss order that keeps G.I.s in uniform beyond their retirement date or the end of their enlistment obligation. Since 2004, the Army has denied departures for troops headed to or already in Iraq or Afghanistan as a way to promote continuity in fighting units. "I definitely want to get out," says Santopoalo, 22, of the 73rd Cavalry Regiment outside Baqubah, 30 miles east of Baghdad. Three weeks before his enlistment was up last year, the Army ordered him to Iraq for a second tour. He had been planning to live with his wife in Chicago and attend film school by now. Instead, Santopoalo stalks Sunni insurgents through the palm groves. "You start to think about what life could be — sitting on a beach drinking a Corona," he says. "That's when it affects you."

The Army has been turning to its sister services for enlistees. About 20,000 "sandbox sailors" from the Navy and airmen from the Air Force are serving as "in lieu of" soldiers—driving trucks and providing security in Iraq and Afghanistan. Dedicating Air Force personnel to Army missions is hurting the Air Force, its leaders have told Congress. "The Air Force doesn't guard prisoners. We don't have prisoners," Air Force Secretary Michael Wynne told Congress Feb. 28. "The Army guards prisoners." But the Air Force is guarding them now in Iraq because the Army doesn't have enough troops. The Army is even cannibalizing the other services' officer corps, recruiting 325 so far (in exchange for a \$2,500 bonus), with 200 more expected to switch to Army green this year, now that the bonus has been raised to \$10,000.

DOLING OUT CASH AND PROMOTIONS

To keep soldiers in uniform, the Army is spending money like, well, a drunken sailor. It will pay out close to \$1 billion this year and next to attract and keep them in the force. The Army is weighing special dwell-time bonuses for soldiers who spend less than two years at home between deployments. It's considering boosting, after one combat tour, the \$225 monthly bonus soldiers get for serving in a war zone.

All these incentive campaigns are getting expensive. The service paid more than \$600 million in retention bonuses in 2006, up from \$180 million in 2003. (If that seems excessive, the Army notes in an internal document, "New York Yankees payroll: About \$350 million," although it's actually closer to \$190 million.) Nearly all soldiers deployed to Iraq, Afghanistan or Kuwait receive up to \$15,000 for re-enlisting. Soldiers and retirees pocket a \$2,000 bounty for identifying a prospective recruit who enlists. (Immediate family is exempt.) On March 15, the service extended the bonus offer to its 240,000 civilians.

There's more money to come. The Army is weighing a program that would offer soldiers a choice between a down payment for a new home or money to launch a small business—up to \$45,000. "Home-buying assistance is being offered by other employers (e.g., Princeton)," the Army argues in an internal document detailing the proposal, although the Ivy League school isn't quite so generous. The Army expects the program "to be a major recruiting-market attraction—the next Army College Fund," says Lieut. General Michael Rochelle, the Army's top personnel officer.

Attracting and recruiting good men and women is a problem that goes up through the ranks. The Army will be at least 3,000 midlevel officers short through 2013 because of overly deep cuts made in the young officers' ranks a decade ago. It has only 83% of the majors it needs, for example, and has what it calls "critical shortfalls" in specialties such as aviation, intelligence, engineering and military police. To fill the gaps, the Army is promoting green officers more quickly. Captains are advancing to major after 10 years instead of 11; lieutenants can be pinned on as captains after 38 months instead of the usual 42. But the Government Accountability Office (GAO) recently warned that such fast promotion hurts officers' ability "to master their duties and responsibilities."

The war in Iraq hurts in other ways too. As the public increasingly turns against the war, what the Army calls its influencers — parents and teachers — are steering children away from military service. "Negative attitudes toward Army ROTC are increasing on college campuses because of opposition to operations in Iraq," the GAO said in a January report. Those attitudes — and budget cuts — meant there were only 25,100 ROTC cadets last year, 6,000 shy of the target. The U.S. Military Academy generated 846 freshly minted 2nd lieutenants in 2006, 54 short of its goal. West Point officials told the GAO that the reduction "may be the result of ongoing operations in Iraq." The war's toll can be seen in how many Army officers stay beyond their five-year required minimum term of service. Just 62% of West Pointers re-upped, about 25 percentage points lower than at the other service academies.

A SHORTAGE OF GEAR

The Army has also skimped on armor. "You go to war with the Army you have," Rumsfeld famously told a grunt who complained of inadequate armor in 2004, "not the Army you might want." Lieut. General Stephen Speakes, the Army's top planner, recently recalled the shock Army leaders felt when Private Jessica Lynch and the 507th Maintenance Company stumbled into an ambush in Nasiriyah that left 11 of her comrades dead in the war's opening days. "We found to our horror that this was a logistics unit that had no ... [major] weapons, no night vision, none of the modern enablers for war," he said. "And we said, Well, they were never supposed to fight." The Pentagon war plan called for a neat conflict with well-defined front lines that support troops like Lynch could be safely stationed behind.

But in a guerrilla war, even those soldiers are on the front lines, and protecting them isn't cheap. A World War II G.I. wore gear worth \$175, in today's dollars. By Vietnam, it cost about \$1,500. Today it's about \$17,000. Amazingly, the Army had only 32,000 sets of body armor when the Iraq war began. The Army now insists that troops don't go "outside the wire" — leave their heavily defended posts in Iraq — without adequate protection. But that's not what the Pentagon's inspector general reports. Some troops "experienced shortages of force-protection equipment such as up-armored vehicles, electronic countermeasure devices ... weapons and communications equipment," an unclassified summary of a still secret Jan. 25 report says. "As a result, service members were not always equipped to effectively complete their missions." Schoomaker, who declined an interview request, dismissed the inspector general's report at a February congressional hearing as "anecdotal in nature."

But even if they are simply anecdotes, they are not the only signs of a crisis in gear. Beyond the lack of weapons for stateside troops, Army stockpiles of equipment around the globe are shrinking as their contents are siphoned to Iraq, reducing the nation's ability to respond to the next crisis. And what is in Iraq is often not what is needed. The military badly miscalculated what the war would look like. It had plenty of monstrous M-1 tanks and thin-skinned humvees but not much in between. Yet 70-ton tanks don't win many friends in Baghdad streets, and the canvas doors of Army humvees offer scant protection against improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The Army said at the start of the war it would need 235 armored humvees; the number is 18,000 today — and each time the Army improves the armor on the truck, the insurgents improve their IEDs. The Army has packed on all the armor a humvee's transmission and axles can carry, so the military is rushing to buy 7,774 Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles for an estimated \$8.4 billion — more than \$1 million each. Their V-shaped undercarriage is designed to deflect blasts from the soldiers on board.

HOW TO FIX IT

The Army and the Pentagon bought into the notions that the war was going to be quick and easy and that victory would come right after the next Iraqi elections or the ones after that. As such optimistic scenarios proved false, the problem of shortfalls in troops and matériel got worse each year. A Republican-controlled Congress, wary of challenging a G.O.P. President on the war's course, added some funds but not nearly

enough. Next year the Army is seeking a 19% budget hike, including a 55% rise in procurement dollars, to \$130 billion.

The only way to fix the Army's woes is to effect a change in money or mind-set or probably some of each. The Army has been starved for cash since the cold war's end. (Its leaders gripe that from 1990 to 2005, their service pocketed just 16% of the Pentagon's hardware budget, while the Air Force got 36% and the Navy 33%.) Diverting funds from some of those two services' high-tech — and costly — cold war weapons could help restore the Army's health. And the Army needs to change its preferred way of fighting — also a vestige of the cold war — pitting tanks against tanks along well-defined front lines. "The Army still tilts toward dealing with conventional threats," says Krepinevich, the retired Army officer. "I keep telling them, There's no tank army out there for you guys to fight."


If the Pentagon or, just as likely, Congress prefers not to cut politically popular weapon systems, it could simply ratchet up the defense budget. Many defense experts say about a 4% slice of the GDP (currently \$13 trillion a year) should be viewed as the nation's "insurance premium" and be dedicated to the Pentagon. (It is at 3.8% now and dipped as low as 3% from 1999 to 2001.) The downside: as the nation's economy continues to expand, taxpayers run the risk of paying too much for their military. The upside: any agreed-upon slice of the national economy would permit smarter budgeting, since the Pentagon could count on predictable funding. Finally, the U.S. could retool its military ambitions. Emphasizing diplomacy over war, and alliances over unilateral actions, could lead to a reduced need for defense dollars.

"One of my favorite sayings is, Experience is the ability to recognize a mistake when you make it again," Gates told a congressional panel March 29. "Five times in the last 90 years, the United States has disarmed after a conflict — World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam and then the cold war." Gates noted that the U.S. spent 9.8% of GDP at the height of the Vietnam war, 11.7% during the Korean conflict and 4.4% in 1991, at the end of the cold war. But after enjoying peace dividends for several years following each war, the U.S. "discovered that the world hadn't really changed" and was forced to beef up military spending.

McCaffrey, the retired general, says the Joint Chiefs are responsible for the state of today's Army. They rubber-stamped Rumsfeld's plan to build a smaller, more agile force while fighting two wars. McCaffrey, a Vietnam veteran, recalls the scolding lesson of *Dereliction of Duty*. That 1997 book explained how the Vietnam-era Joint Chiefs' timidity in challenging Defense Secretary Robert McNamara allowed the U.S. to slide into that war. Written by H.R. McMaster, an Army colonel now in Iraq, the book has been required reading for many military officers. "Should there be a *Dereliction of Duty II*?" McCaffrey wonders aloud. "The answer is, Yes, of course."

Meanwhile, far away from Washington and from Iraq, Matthew Zeimer was buried Feb. 12 in the middle of a Montana snowstorm. Hundreds of mourners lined the route his hearse followed from Glendive's Sacred Heart Catholic Church to the hilltop Dawson County Cemetery. They stood in silent salute in the bitter 8

cold. Five members of an Army honor guard fired off volleys of three shots each. The Army bugler stepped from his warm car and played Taps into the biting wind. The Army honor guard carefully folded the flag that had covered Zeimer's coffin and presented it to his family. But a local priest had to conduct Zeimer's funeral and burial. The Army chaplain who was supposed to preside didn't make it in time. His car slid into a ditch about 100 miles west of town.

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