

The Fallen: A profile of U.S. troops killed in Iraq and Afghanistan

By Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., [National Journal](#)

*Go tell the Spartans, you who've read,
We took their orders, and are dead.*

Those words, freely translated from the ancient Greek, long marked the battlefield of Thermopylae. In 480 B.C., about 700 Greeks -- led by the Spartans, the best professional soldiers of the age -- held the narrow mountain pass against more than 100,000 troops of the Persian Empire, the Middle Eastern superpower of the day. It was a suicide mission: The Spartans stood their ground and died there, every last man. But their desperate rearguard action bought the rest of Greece the time to rally and, ultimately, to repel the invaders. In the process, the soldiers preserved from Persian despotism not only Greek independence, but also a peculiar Greek idea -- one the Spartans themselves were not too keen on -- called democracy.

The number of American troops killed so far in Iraq and supporting operations -- 801 as of this writing -- is almost the same as the number of Greeks killed at Thermopylae. But the rest of the situation is almost perfectly reversed. After 25 centuries, the seed of democracy, transplanted far across the sea, has grown into an empire itself. And now that democratic superpower has sent more than 100,000 troops -- the best professional soldiers of the age -- to invade the Mesopotamian heartland of the ancient Persian Empire, with the paradoxical purpose of imposing by force the freedom that land has never known. Just as in the days after the 700 Greeks fell at Thermopylae, the battle has been joined but the outcome hardly decided. The dying is not over yet.

But on the eve of Memorial Day, with the hand-over of some form of sovereignty to the Iraqis scheduled for the 30th of June, it is an appropriate moment to take pause and count the price. Add to the toll in Iraq the 122 U.S. troops killed in Afghanistan and in supporting anti-terrorism operations around the world -- in short, all the deaths that the military officially counts as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom -- and the total is now 923.

In the scales of history, a thousand bodies are almost too light to measure. Even a young and relatively unbloodied country such as the United States has borne heavier burdens, and for longer. More American troops died every month at the height of the Vietnam War in 1968. More American troops died in one day at the start of the Normandy invasion in World War II. More American civilians died in minutes on September 11, 2001, in either tower of the World Trade Center.

But on a human scale, a thousand dead are almost beyond imagining. Some concrete comparisons might help. It is as if every male student (plus two dozen women) at some smallish liberal arts college had been wiped out. If the dead from this war could somehow return, if they were guests at the next State of the Union address, every senator and representative in Congress would have to yield his or her seat on the floor of the House chamber to an Army soldier killed in the Middle East. Soldiers slain elsewhere, plus all the Marines, airmen, and sailors, would overflow onto the

balcony. If the dead could attend a White House reception, if they passed through the receiving line at a brisk clip of about three seconds per person -- handshake; hello; thank you; next, please -- the president would be shaking their hands for roughly 45 minutes, nonstop.

Then there are the living left behind. The vast majority of the troops killed so far in the "global war on terror," as the Pentagon calls it, were young enough to be survived by both their parents. About half of the dead were married. They leave more than 580 children.

All Ages, All Specialties

The differences among the dead are as important as the totals. If there were an archetypal fatality from this war in Iraq, he -- and it would be a "he" -- would not be all that different from one in past wars: He would be an Army infantryman, slain in combat. Unlike his predecessors from most past conflicts, he would be from a metropolitan area, and he would have died after "major combat operations" were officially over. He would be 20 years old.

But while more of the dead fit this description than any other, they are by no means the majority. Like the rest of America, the dead have become more diverse both by race and gender -- 3 percent of the U.S. dead are women, compared with one-hundredth of 1 percent in Vietnam. And though the vast majority of the dead are ground troops from the Army and Marines -- today's enemies can hardly reach U.S. airplanes and ships -- they have also come from every branch of service and from dozens of military specialties.

In a global war without front lines, death has visited commandos and mechanics alike. Some have died heroically, such as Paul Smith, an Army combat engineer working at the supposedly secured Saddam Hussein International Airport on April 4, 2003, when more than 100 Iraqi Special Republican Guards staged a surprise attack. Smith grabbed the machine gun on his rocket-scorched M-113 armored vehicle and, like a Spartan at Thermopylae, held off the Iraqis until the rest of the Americans could rally. Some troops died without ever getting to face the men who killed them, such as Carl Curran and Mark Kasecky from the Pennsylvania National Guard, who were blown up by a makeshift roadside bomb (an "improvised explosive device" or IED) on May 16, 2004, in the western Iraqi town of Al Karmah. Some trained for years and traveled thousands of miles, only to die in random accidents; their ranks include Thomas Allison, James Dorrity, Jody Egnor, Curtis Feistner, Jeremy Foshee, Kerry Frith, William McDaniel, Bartt Owens, Juan Ridout, and Bruce Rushforth -- Army and Air Force Special Operations aviators whose helicopter conked out and crashed into the Philippine Sea on February 21, 2002.

Of the U.S. troops who have died in the global war against terrorism since 9/11, nearly a third -- 31.3 percent -- have perished not from enemy action but from accidents or illness. The percentage of such "nonhostile" deaths is an outright majority, 57.5 percent, in the actions grouped under Operation Enduring Freedom -- campaigns against terrorist groups in Afghanistan, the Philippines, and the Horn of Africa -- where fighting is less intense but the terrain more difficult. In Operation Iraqi Freedom, by contrast, 73 percent of deaths result from hostile action, which still falls short of the intensity of Vietnam, where hostile action accounted for 81 percent of deaths. However, in such unconventional wars, "hostile" does not mean "in battle"; roadside bombs, car bombs, and suicide bombs account for almost a third -- 29.4 percent -- of hostile deaths in Iraq.

Another difference from Vietnam is that the dead today, on average, are older and higher-ranking. "Two major changes both produce an older force," said David Segal, a military

sociologist at the University of Maryland. First, where Lyndon Johnson was loath to call up the Reserves and National Guard, George W. Bush has leaned heavily on these troops, most of whom have spent a tour or two on active duty before becoming reservists. So the proportion of reservists among the dead has nearly doubled, from 10 percent in Vietnam to 17 percent today.

Second, the active-duty force itself is older, because the end of the draft and the rise of the all-volunteer Army has replaced young conscripts with more-professional, longer-serving troops.

So while more 20-year-olds still die than any other age group, the average age at death has risen, from just 22 and a half in Vietnam to almost 27 now. The average age is even higher, 29, in Afghanistan and other Operation Enduring Freedom actions worldwide, which tend to involve smaller, more-specialized, and more-experienced forces. Similarly, the most common rank at death in Vietnam was pay grade E-3 -- a private first class in the Army, equivalent ranks in other services -- whereas in Iraq today, it is E-4, specialist or corporal, and in Afghanistan it is E-5, sergeant.

These older soldiers are more likely to have families. Among the dead in Vietnam, single men outnumbered the married by more than 2-to-1. Today, the proportions are almost equal. And at least 40 percent of the troops killed in Iraq had children. So the young still suffer disproportionately -- but this time, it is a different subset of "the young."

Ethnicity

It is wrong to say that minorities are disproportionately bearing the burden. Whites are indeed slightly under-represented in today's active-duty military as a whole: They make up 64.2 percent of the force, compared with 69.1 percent of the U.S. population. (The reserve components are somewhat whiter.) But whites are slightly over-represented among the dead, at 70.9 percent.

Conversely, African-Americans are notably over-represented in the military as a whole. They make up 19.1 percent of the active-duty force, and a staggering 24 percent of the Army, as opposed to just 12.1 percent of the population. But blacks are not significantly over-represented among the dead of this global war: They make up only 12.4 percent.

The reason for this discrepancy, say experts, is that although blacks sign up in greater numbers, they cluster pragmatically in noncombat units whose training in mechanics, electronics, and logistics translates well into civilian careers upon leaving uniform. "The proportion of blacks to whites is very much smaller in the combat arms than in other branches," said retired Maj. Gen. Robert Scales, former commandant of the Army War College and a noted author. He added that Special Forces and aviation units have the smallest percentage of minorities of all segments of the military.

During the initial invasion of Iraq, the minority-heavy support units were strung out along poorly secured supply lines. That made them vulnerable to irregulars such as Saddam's Fedayeen -- as the capture of Jessica Lynch and the death of her American Indian comrade, Lori Piestewa, illustrated. Ironically, said Segal, even as the fighting in Iraq moved into anti-guerrilla warfare, support units moved into more-secure base areas, shifting the burden of casualties back onto the combat units actively hunting the insurgents. The pattern is even more pronounced in Afghanistan, where white-dominated elite units lead the hunt and take the heaviest losses. Helicopter pilots make up 6.4 percent of Army deaths in Operation Enduring Freedom but only 3.2 percent of Army deaths in Iraq; Special Forces make up 15.4 percent of Army dead in

Enduring Freedom but only 1 percent in Iraq. Thus, the percentage of white casualties is highest, and that of blacks lowest, in Afghanistan and related operations; the percentage of blacks was highest, and that of whites lowest, during the initial invasion of Iraq. The ethnic mix for the current counterinsurgency in Iraq falls between those two extremes. In other words, the dead have gotten whiter as the insurgency has persisted.

The pattern for Hispanics is similar to that for blacks, although the differences are less extreme. The highest proportion of Hispanic dead came during the initial invasion of Iraq, the lowest in Afghanistan, with the Iraq insurgency's numbers falling in between. Overall, unlike blacks, Hispanics are significantly under-represented in the ranks of the military's living and -- to a lesser degree -- of its war dead. Hispanics make up 12.5 percent of the U.S. population but just 9 percent of the active-duty military (9.9 percent of the Army). They account for 11.1 percent of those killed worldwide. Hispanics' socioeconomic disadvantages help keep them out of uniform and out of danger: They are much more likely than other racial groups in the U.S. to drop out of high school and hence lack the diploma required to enlist.

The great exception, interestingly, is the Marine Corps, the service with the most aggressive warrior culture. Hispanics are slightly over-represented among living Marines, at 13 percent, and startlingly over-represented among the ones who have died, at 18.6 percent. If the archetypal casualty of this war is a white Army GI, a Hispanic Marine Corps rifleman lies close by his side.

How does all this compare with Vietnam? For blacks, the percentages are virtually identical: 12.4 percent of the dead in the war since 9/11 are listed as African-American, whereas 12.5 percent of the dead in Vietnam were then listed as "Negro."

But the terminology of the time is problematic in more ways than one. Most important, the category "Hispanic" did not exist in official forms or in most people's minds until the 1970s. As a result, the Hispanic death toll during Vietnam is hidden among the "Caucasian" and, to a lesser extent, the "Negro" figures. Attempts to reconstruct the Hispanic share of the Vietnam era give some high figures -- a quarter of those killed in action were Latino, by one estimate -- but rely on shaky methodologies, like guessing whether individual names sound Spanish. Academic sociologists such as Segal and the Defense Department's own official record-keepers agree that all racial and ethnic data from Vietnam (let alone Korea) are inherently suspect and dangerous to compare with current categories.

Class Warfare

Record-keeping has indeed improved since Vietnam. But one crucial bit of demographic data remains elusive even today: class. Vietnam is burned into memory as a war fought by the poor and the working class. After Vietnam and the end of the draft, many feared that the new all-volunteer force would still suck in only those with the worst options in life. The military of today, however, requires a high school diploma, rejects people with drug or other criminal offenses, and holds to other higher standards.

"There is a class effect, but not the one that people think," argued Peter Feaver, a professor of political science at Duke University. The most privileged don't bother to enlist, but the most disadvantaged don't qualify, so "it's the middle classes that are mostly represented in the military," Feaver said. "Obviously, folks who go into the military today are facing economic pressures. The biggest predictor of whether you're in the military today is the unemployment rate in your home county."

So do the disadvantaged do most of the dying? The Pentagon officially records educational attainments and home ZIP codes -- two of the best indicators of socioeconomic class. But the records are scattered across multiple databases in multiple formats, often buried in thousands of individual files, and, say Defense officials, prohibitively difficult to compile. The only readily available data on origins is "home of record," which is not only imprecise -- identifying a town rather than a demographically definable neighborhood -- but also potentially inaccurate. Young people often move away from home before enlisting, for example, and long-serving reservists often settle somewhere entirely different from where they lived at first enlistment. In a National Journal spot check of newspaper and wire-service obituaries for dead troops from seven states, 13 percent were found as having grown up somewhere other than in their official Pentagon "home of record."

Nonetheless, some conclusions can be teased out of the available data. A study done for the Austin American-Statesman by Bill Bishop and Robert Cushing revealed that, although the majority of the war dead come from what the Census Bureau calls "metropolitan" areas, which usually include close-in suburban counties, a disproportionately large share came from "nonmetro" counties. According to Bishop and Cushing, nearly a third (29 percent) of dead troops came from rural areas and small towns, compared with only a fifth (19 percent) of the general population. Given the concentration of political, economic, and cultural power in America's cities and near suburbs, and the slow dwindling of opportunity in many small towns, this analysis does suggest that the lower middle class is unduly bearing the burden. But the information is hardly conclusive. The definitive answers will take years to disinter. And in the end, the truth, like the dead, may be lost in the fog of war and time.