

**CU @ THE FOB:  
HOW THE FORWARD OPERATING BASE IS  
CHANGING THE LIFE OF COMBAT SOLDIERS**

**Leonard Wong  
Stephen Gerras**

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All soldiers quoted in print or shown in video excerpts in this monograph gave their consent to publish their comments and post their interviews on the Internet.

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Comments pertaining to this report are invited and should be forwarded to Dr. Leonard Wong at [Leonard.Wong@carlisle.army.mil](mailto:Leonard.Wong@carlisle.army.mil).

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## FOREWORD

As this monograph points out, the situation in post-war Iraq is producing combat veterans accustomed to a perspective of combat that differs greatly from past wars. The Forward Operating Base (FOB) has become the mainstay of the U.S. presence in Iraq. Dr. Leonard Wong and Colonel Stephen Gerras explore the facets of fighting from the FOB and show that it gives soldiers the unprecedented advantage of gaining a respite from constant danger, minimizes the wearing effects of hunger and fatigue, and reduces the isolation of combat. As a result, many of the factors of psychological stress typically present in combat are greatly reduced. They also point out, however, that technology on the FOB allows soldiers to communicate frequently with home, shifting the family from an abstract to concrete concept in the minds of deployed soldiers. As a result, the competition between the family and the Army for soldier time, commitment, loyalty, and energy is renewed. Policymakers and commanders will find this monograph both reinforcing and thought-provoking.

  
DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.  
Director  
Strategic Studies Institute

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF THE AUTHORS

LEONARD WONG is an Associate Research Professor in the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College. He served in the Army for over 20 years, including teaching leadership at West Point, serving as an analyst in the Office of the Chief of Staff of the Army, and also in the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel. He is a Professional Engineer and holds a B.S. from the U.S. Military Academy and an M.S. and Ph.D. in Business Administration from Texas Tech University.

STEPHEN GERRAS is the Director of Leadership and Command Instruction in the Department of Command, Leadership, and Management at the U.S. Army War College. Colonel Gerras has served in the Army for over 24 years, including commanding a light infantry company and a transportation battalion, teaching leadership at West Point, and serving as the Chief of Operations and Agreements for the Office of Defense Cooperation in Ankara, Turkey. He holds a B.S. from the U.S. Military Academy and an M.S. and Ph.D. in Industrial and Organizational Psychology from Penn State University.

## SUMMARY

The Forward Operating Base (FOB) has become the “home away from home” for the American soldier. It has evolved to a place where many of the stresses, frustrations, and discomforts commonly thought endemic in the combat soldier’s life are mitigated. In addition to being a base for launching tactical operations, FOBs have become refuges from danger, places of renewal for physical needs, a respite from the mental stresses of battle, and finally, a means for soldiers to stay connected with the world outside Iraq. On a FOB, soldiers can renew their fighting spirit and also find a psychological escape from the rigors of battle. Soldiers appreciate creature comforts like the good and abundant food, refreshing air conditioning, hot showers, and safety afforded by the FOB. Because of advances in communication technology, however, soldiers are also experiencing competition between the institutions of the family and the military for a limited amount of attention, time, and emotional capital. The competing demands of the family and the mission require the attention of commanders and policymakers.

An electronic version of this monograph, including hyperlinks to video excerpts from soldier interviews, is available on the Strategic Studies Institute website.



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For thousands of soldiers deployed to Iraq in support of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF), life can be divided into two distinct realms. There is the life spent conducting missions in Iraqi neighborhoods—constantly scanning the area for suspicious activity, weapons locked and loaded for action, and adrenaline-pumping situations. And then there is the life on the Forward Operating Base (FOB)—catching up on sleep, pumping iron in the gym, and surfing the Internet.

FOBs have evolved from the Department of Defense’s official definition of “an airfield used to support tactical operations without establishing full support facilities”<sup>1</sup> to the centerpiece of the U.S. presence in Iraq. Instead of merely serving as a staging area for tactical operations, the FOB has become the “home away from home” for the American soldier. With over 100 FOBs in Iraq, conditions at each can vary greatly. On one extreme are the huge FOBs located near Baghdad International Airport that boast air conditioned sleeping and work trailers, cavernous dining facilities, spacious PXs (this acronym, as well as many others used by soldiers, is explained in the Appendix), cappuccino bars, well-stocked gyms, and Internet cafes.<sup>2</sup> On the other end of the scale, some FOBs are located in old Iraqi Army bases or abandoned factories with soldiers still living in tents, food ferried from other FOBs, and more austere conditions.<sup>3</sup> Overall, however, most soldiers in Iraq live on FOBs somewhere in the middle range—air conditioned quarters, a small PX, a MWR facility with Internet and phone lines, and a contracted dining facility.

FOBs have become places where many of the stresses, frustrations, and discomforts commonly thought endemic in the combat soldier’s life are mitigated. On a FOB, soldiers can renew their fighting spirit and also find a psychological escape from the rigors of battle. In addition to being a base for launching tactical operations, FOBs have become refuges from danger, places of renewal for physical needs, a respite from the mental stresses of battle, and, finally, a means for soldiers to stay connected with the world outside Iraq. Of course,



some critics may decry the FOB concept. They point out that the reliance on FOBs prevents soldiers from integrating into the local populace and reflects a bunker mentality. According to this view, a better approach would be to spread troops out in smaller outposts throughout neighborhoods. Two points are important concerning this criticism. First, the goal of U.S. forces in OIF is to hand the counterinsurgency over to Iraqi forces. The Iraqi army and police are the primary forces working to gain the trust of the local population, not the U.S. military. Second, FOBs do not eliminate the potential use of combat outposts for specific purposes. Units can leave the FOB for periods of time to conduct operations, liaison with coalition forces, or work with a particular neighborhood. The key is that the FOB allows regeneration of combat effectiveness without leaving the battlefield.

Of course, most wars have had rear areas, base camps, or firebases from which soldiers would come and go to wage war. Today's FOBs are unique, however, for three reasons. First, the disparity between the environment inside and outside the wire is much more pronounced than experienced with forward bases in past wars. The FOBs are, as one Army general put it, "little oases in the middle of a dangerous and confusing world."<sup>4</sup> Second, the FOBs are situated literally on the battlefields of Iraq. They are where combat soldiers actually live, not just visit for a few days of R&R. Finally, while rear areas in the past have afforded soldiers amenities and safety, only today are forward deployed combat soldiers in daily, or even minute-to-minute, contact with their families. FOBs and evolving technology provide that novel capability.

This monograph presents a brief overview of the security and sustainment functions of the FOB, and then focuses on the often overlooked, but increased capability of deployed soldiers to interact with their families. The many amenities found on FOBs are allowing soldiers to recover physically and mentally from the strains of combat, but the expanded use of technology is also giving soldiers the ability to stay connected with families from a war zone. While increased interaction between soldiers and the home front improves soldier morale, it also raises some interesting implications for combat readiness.

The study relies heavily on observations collected from enlisted soldiers deployed to OIF in May 2005—specifically over 50 structured interviews conducted with soldiers in the ranks of staff sergeant and below in locations throughout Iraq and Kuwait. Interviews included combat arms as well as combat service support soldiers and involved Active, National Guard, and Army Reserve soldiers.<sup>5</sup> The only prerequisite for inclusion in the interview sample was that the soldiers had to regularly carry out missions off the FOB (i.e., the study does not include soldiers who spend their combat tour exclusively on the FOB—and are irreverently called “fobbits.”) The interview sessions were conducted on the FOBs, followed an interview protocol, were taped, and were subsequently transcribed.

### **The Oasis.**

We have all the amenities we need. Really nothing to complain about besides being shot at and that’s our job.<sup>6</sup>

Interviewed soldier

In his study of American enlisted men in Vietnam, Charles Moskos described the physical factors influencing the behavior of soldiers in combat: “There are the routine physical stresses of combat existence: the weight of the pack, tasteless food, diarrhea, lack of water, leeches, mosquitos, rain, torrid heat, mud, and loss of sleep.”<sup>7</sup>

Peter Kindsvatter, in his analysis of the American combat soldiers from both World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam, noted that in addition to the physical pressures of combat, there is a pervasive emotional strain on soldiers in a combat environment:

Even as the soldier contended with a harsh, seemingly evil, physical environment, he also found that war stressed him emotionally. He was never completely safe from harm, except when far to the rear, perhaps attending a military school or in a hospital, and even then he was hounded by the thought of having to return to the fighting. Thus the combat soldier was never completely free from fear and anxiety.<sup>8</sup>

Most combat veterans from World War II through the 2003 Iraq War would be able to relate to Moskos’s and Kindsvatter’s description of the combat situation. From the Battle of the Bulge to the drive into

Baghdad, soldiers have understood combat to be tiring, draining, and emotionally exhausting. The situation in postwar Iraq, however, appears to be producing an entire generation of combat warriors whose wartime experience is drastically different from that of past combat veterans.

Today's soldiers, like those of yesteryear, are experiencing the horror, violence, and brutality common to battlefields. The dangers of urban warfare, as well as the possibility of IEDs, VBIEDs, and S-VBIEDs, weigh heavily on the mind of each soldier deployed to Iraq. Unlike previous conflicts, however, the forward operating base has emerged as a critical factor in shaping the ability for soldiers to maintain the requisite psychological readiness for combat operations. Several aspects of the FOB contribute to its vital role in mitigating the stress and fear usually confronting front-line soldiers.

An obvious, yet critical role of the FOB is to isolate the soldier from the danger found in the hostile environs of Iraq. Off the FOB, troops are hypervigilant as they patrol dangerous neighborhoods or follow up on intelligence reports of insurgent activity. On the FOB, soldiers clear their weapons, requirements for helmets and body armor are relaxed, and while the threat of a rocket or mortar attack is always present, it is greatly minimized. Insurgent tactics against FOBs ranging from direct attack to indirect fire have been largely ineffective. Active defensive measures coupled with aggressive offensive tactics have given the insurgents pause in attacking FOBs. The result is that a primary cause of soldier fear and stress—omnipresent physical danger—is largely absent from most FOBs.

FOBs give soldiers the rare opportunity to be engaged in brutal combat one minute and yet return seconds later to a place where the threat of harm is exponentially diminished. The psychological benefit of not feeling threatened by the enemy is significant. A convoy commander, whose mission was delivering supplies throughout Iraq, described the psychological release of arriving at each FOB: "There is a sense of relief. You pull in at the next gate and it's 'Aaaahhhhhh . . . Relax!'" Another soldier commented on what life would be like without the safety found in FOBs: "Imagine you are under constant threat. . . . Your own tent wouldn't relax you. You couldn't relax when you go to take a hot shower. You couldn't relax having a meal. . . . I can see how that would be way harder on people."

Interestingly, the enemy is also aware of the benefits of a safe haven. Abu Jalal, a self-proclaimed insurgent leader in Baghdad, spoke of the safety provided by FOBs: "The old [Iraqi] military officers know very well that the attacks on the bases of the enemy army weaken the morale of the soldiers and frighten them. The soldier feels safe when he goes back to his base. If he is attacked in the place that feels safe, that place is really hell."<sup>9</sup> Because of the largely unseen efforts of thousands of soldiers guarding the perimeter, searching vehicles and people, and being proactive in securing the FOBs, the vast majority of soldiers on FOBs are free from the ever-present threat of danger on the battlefield.

Another persistent factor affecting soldier stress during combat is the lack of sleep. Studies have repeatedly shown that when conducting continuous combat operations, soldiers should ideally get 6 to 8 hours of sleep every 24 hours.<sup>10</sup> A cumulative lack of sleep leads to soldier fatigue, disorientation, and will eventually diminish the ability to resist fear. John Keegan, in *The Face of Battle*, wrote, "It is a fairly safe generalization that the soldiers of most armies, at least before the development of mechanical transport, entered battle tired."<sup>11</sup>

World War II surveys administered in the Italian theater shortly before the end of the campaign (when the fighting had quieted and conditions were "probably as favorable as ever exist in combat") showed that despite a lull in combat, nearly one-third of the men averaged only 4 hours or less of sleep each day.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, researchers chronicling the Vietnam War point out that most infantrymen in Vietnam could expect about an average of 4 hours of sleep a night in combat.<sup>13</sup>

Several aspects of FOBs influence the ability of soldiers to receive adequate amounts of sleep. First, as described earlier, insulating soldiers from the physical danger outside the wire eliminates the requirement for them to be constantly concerned about the security for themselves and their unit. Second, the conditions on FOBs generally allow soldiers to escape the harsh environment of Southwest Asia in order to rest. Air conditioning and comfortable beds are critical luxuries in providing rest for soldiers. One infantry team leader commented, "I've got a bed, nice actual mattress, not those little foam things. I have got my sheets, my covers, my pillows and all my

pictures. I just try to keep everything like I would at home.” Finally, because of the safety afforded by the FOB, commanders can set up a combat rhythm that includes allowing time for sleep. As one soldier noted, “My first sergeant and commander – they are adamant about giving the guys their personal time. We get 5 hours of personal time every night and 6 hours of sleep every night. . . . That takes the fear away from me.”

Cumulative hunger or thirst, like the lack of sleep, adds to combat stress and a decreased psychological readiness. In the words of Major General Baade, Commander of the 90th Panzer-Grenadier Division during the siege of Stalingrad, “Eating just soup makes one cowardly.”<sup>14</sup> In one of the earliest studies on fear in battle, John Dollard interviewed veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade who fought in the Spanish Civil War. He concluded that “hunger and thirst, excessive heat and cold, prolonged fatigue – all tend to force men out of battle.”<sup>15</sup> Despite the recognition of the link between hunger and a soldier’s ability to deal with fear, over half the combat soldiers in a World War II survey reported that they did not get as much to eat as they needed. The main reasons offered by the soldiers were that food was unavailable or they did not like the kind of food provided.<sup>16</sup> Paul Fussell, in describing the lives of soldiers of World War II, noted that even in the good times, “hunger gnawed at the troops, despite the official carbohydrates ladled out three times a day.”<sup>17</sup>

Today’s soldiers would be hard pressed to claim they could not get enough to eat. An embedded journalist marveled over the culinary fare found on a FOB (and not one of the mega-FOBs near Baghdad):

For dinners during my first week here, I had sirloin steak, lobster tails, king crab legs, fried shrimp, meat lasagna and turkey a la king. (But not all at once.) For breakfasts, I had made-to-order omelets or grits. During lunches, I had vegetable lo mein, burritos or egg rolls. And for dessert? It seems that every soldier has some to top off their meals. The dining hall here has an ice cream sundae bar, including all the traditional toppings like cherries and whipped cream.<sup>18</sup>

As one infantryman dryly noted, “If my worst complaint is that there aren’t any tacos in the salad bar, I’ve got it pretty good.”

By sheltering soldiers from danger, affording troops the ability to rest between missions, and providing sustenance in an otherwise hostile environment, FOBs are indeed oases for the physical needs of soldiers. In addition to providing a physical refuge for soldiers, however, FOBs in the Iraqi theater also allow care for their psychological needs.

In his analysis of American soldiers in past wars, Kindsvatter noted that, "Once the troops had attended to the basics of cleaning up, eating, and resting, they began looking for diversions. Any entertainment was greatly appreciated."<sup>19</sup> Examples of amusements included group singing; listening to radio broadcasts, especially music; and watching movies. A World War II soldier commented that the movies "took our minds off the war and transferred us into a fantasy world for a couple of hours."<sup>20</sup>

For today's soldiers, distractions on the FOB allow them also to mentally leave the war zone—although in newer ways. As one soldier pointed out, "Everybody has their way of unwinding. A lot of the younger guys have Xboxes they play with. . . . I got my little DVD player I watch every once in a while." A team leader stressed the importance of recreation, "We work out every day, which takes away the stress. They play Playstation together, pool together, ping pong. . . . That is what they need."

Diversions on the FOB appear to accomplish two functions. First, distractions minimize idleness which can have a detrimental effect on psychological readiness. Dollard pointed out in his study of fear in battle that while some fear is beneficial to prevent complacency, a "good way to combat useless fear is to think about something else."<sup>21</sup> Stress and fear germinate in the minds of soldiers who have nothing to do but ruminate on upcoming missions and think about time away from home. As one infantryman noted, "Staying busy, keeping your mind active with other things. . . . When we are not going outside the gate, I try to keep busy with something." Another soldier gave similar counsel, "If you stop and think about what you are doing and being away, then that's when it gets to you. If you don't stop and think about it, then it's not as difficult."

A second role of distractions on the FOB is to remove temporarily (at least mentally) soldiers from the combat environment. In the words of one soldier, "When I come [to the FOB] I don't feel like

I'm in Iraq,"<sup>22</sup> A combat engineer suggested, "We need to trick our minds that we're somewhere else. Otherwise, we wouldn't be able to go on, knowing today might be our last."<sup>23</sup>

The analogy of the FOB as an oasis is appropriate because the FOB is a haven for safety, rest, and refreshment in an unforgiving environment. The FOB's effect on combat effectiveness by giving soldiers the ability to recover from the stresses of combat is significant. The FOB, however, is more than just a refuge or a sanctuary. While it is a place that serves to isolate soldiers from the debilitating aspects of the battlefield, it also is a place that connects soldiers with the home front.

### **Connecting with Home.**

Of course, communicating with families always has been a critical factor in the morale of combat soldiers. Mail call traditionally has been a highlight (and occasionally a low point) of a soldier's time in combat. In addition to postal mail being used to communicate with home, other methods have been introduced through the years. V, or Victory, mail was introduced in World War II to cut down on the valuable shipping space required for postal mail. Even with the patriotic lure of V-mail, however, most people continued to use regular first class mail which was much more private and less regulated.<sup>24</sup>

In 1948, the Military Affiliate Radio System (MARS) was established to assist in the training of amateur radio operators. A side benefit was that deployed soldiers could phone home free of charge.<sup>25</sup> Because the calls were relayed over amateur radio networks, the calls were limited in availability and quality, were vulnerable to eavesdropping (including the two radio operators relaying the call), and subjected callers to using proper radio procedures (e.g., Hi mom, this is your son, over). The cumulative effect of the disadvantages discouraged most soldiers from using the system.<sup>26</sup>

While telephone calls were possible but extremely rare during the Vietnam War,<sup>27</sup> the potential for commercial telephones for more than a once-a-tour phenomenon became apparent during the invasion of Grenada when an officer called home in order to coordinate fire support.<sup>28</sup> The telephone as a means to communicate with the home

front slowly increased during military operations in Panama,<sup>29</sup> the Gulf War, Somalia,<sup>30</sup> the Balkans, and the Iraq War. Despite the growing availability of commercial telephones, however, expense and availability continued to be limiting factors.

During the Gulf War, and especially during operations in Bosnia and Kosovo, e-mail emerged as a key means of communicating for deployed soldiers.<sup>31</sup> As the use of e-mail surged in the civilian arena, soldiers were quick to adopt it as a means of communicating from the war zone. In the Iraq War, soldiers initially siphoned off bandwidth from military networks for access to the Internet and e-mail capability.<sup>32</sup> As FOBs became established and major combat operations ceased, Internet kiosks began appearing – making e-mail access ubiquitous. This trend has continued in the FOBs of postwar Iraq to a point where currently more than 95 percent of soldiers in Iraq report using e-mail, and nearly two-thirds say they use it three or more times a week.<sup>33</sup>

Against this backdrop of electronic interconnectedness, soldiers interviewed for this study were asked how often they communicated from the FOB with their families. (All the soldiers interviewed were male, so families consisted of wives, children, and girlfriends). The expected response was three or four e-mails a week and maybe a weekly phone call. Instead, researchers were surprised to receive replies such as: “I talk to her every day when I am here,” or “I would say at least twice a day.” Amazingly, many soldiers reported that they were not just “keeping in touch” with their families with e-mails, but were instead communicating real time several times a day.

With frequent communications from the FOB, soldiers reported that they are able to discuss topics beyond the superficial. For example, one soldier stated, “Well, we just talk about my wife trying to get her RN license. So we talk about her schooling.” Another soldier observed, “She is trying to buy [our] house right now, so there is a lot of conversation about that.” Two aspects of the communications from the FOB are important to note. First, the quantity of actual contacts that soldiers make from the FOB is staggering. Using all modes of communication, soldiers are extremely well-connected despite their deployment to a remote location in the world. Second, the quality of their communications reflects a depth and level of interaction not



possible in a written letter or even an e-mail. Soldiers are handling problems, dealing with issues, and getting involved emotionally in real time.

Three factors help explain how this situation came about. The first concerns the increasing penchant of American youth for online communications. Today's soldiers come from a youth cohort where 92 percent of teenagers between 15 and 17 years old go online compared to just 66 percent of adults.<sup>34</sup> E-mail has persisted as the most popular mode of communication with the youth cohort. The medium they use *most often* to talk to friends, however, is *instant messaging* (IM).

Instant messaging allows real time communications over the Internet with exchanges resembling a telephone call more than an e-mail. Instant messaging is interactive, synchronous, and usually offers a "presence awareness" capability. The instant messaging presence awareness feature indicates if people on a user's list of contacts are currently online and available to chat. In other words, a wife can look at the computer screen to check if her deployed husband is back from a mission and online.

Instant messaging is currently a young person's tool. For online youth 15 to 17 years old, 84 percent report using instant messaging compared to only 42 percent of adults.<sup>35</sup> The shift toward instant messaging for casual written communication is significant. For American youth – and today's young soldiers – instant messaging is becoming the key interactive means of communication while e-mail has become "something you use to talk to 'old people,' institutions, or to send complex instructions to large groups."<sup>36</sup> Thus, one of the key factors affecting the FOB's role as a center for interaction between soldiers and their families is the comfort level young soldiers have with online technology – especially instant messaging. A second factor behind the FOB emerging as a place for soldiers to remain connected to the home front concerns the introduction of inexpensive and widely available phone service.

As combat operations in the Iraq War subsided and FOBs were initially being established, the military sought to provide Internet connections for the troops that did not require military bandwidth. To fill that gap, enterprising Iraqi businessmen set up Internet

kiosks, and soldiers were able to surf the Web as well as send e-mails. Unfortunately, those initial Internet kiosks relied on a fiber optic infrastructure that did not survive the postwar chaos. To restore Internet connectivity, a small Virginia-based company named Segovia was contracted in the summer of 2003 to provide satellite broadband Internet access across the Iraq theater. Almost as an afterthought, a small but very significant feature was included in the contract—Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) phone capability.<sup>37</sup>

VoIP can turn a standard Internet connection into the means of placing phone calls. The bottom line of this new technology is that by transmitting the digital signal of a phone conversation over the Internet, the phone company (and its long distance charges) is bypassed. VoIP phone calls can be made two ways: through an Internet Protocol (IP) phone, or PC to PC. IP phones resemble normal phones but connect directly to a router and an Internet connection. A PC to PC connection requires software, a head set, a sound card, and an Internet connection.

With the Segovia contract, VoIP capability was added to the broadband service on FOBs, and soon soldiers could phone home on any of the 3,560 Internet terminals or 1,424 VoIP phones in 178 MWR Internet cafes.<sup>38</sup> Prior to the introduction of VoIP, soldiers were paying \$1.50 a minute or more to call the United States using traditional phone lines. Using VoIP, the price dropped to an amazing 4.7 cents a minute. At contract renewal, the price was reduced to 4 cents a minute for a call to the United States or Germany.<sup>39</sup> Widespread availability and low cost have transformed the FOB-to-home telephone call from what was once a special treat to what is now a routine occurrence.

While instant messaging has eclipsed e-mail as the communication tool preferred by today's teens, the telephone remains the dominant communication medium for American youth. According to recent polls, 5 percent of teens use e-mail most often to communicate with friends, while 24 percent say they will most often use instant messaging. A significant 51 percent of U.S. young people however, still prefer the phone to talk to friends.<sup>40</sup> The presence of VoIP phone service on the FOBs allows a generation of soldiers who are accustomed to staying connected via telephone to call home without worrying about exorbitant phone bills.

While the Segovia contract was the command's top-down response to the disabled fiber optic system of the original Internet kiosks, another technological development concerning the interaction of soldiers and their families emerged that reflected a bottom-up approach. After the fiber optic Internet kiosks failed, innovative Iraqi entrepreneurs (vaguely referred to by soldiers as "Baghdad Bob") approached units on FOBs and offered to set up satellite links to the Internet. Soon groups of about 20 soldiers were pooling their money to purchase a satellite dish, router, and individual accounts for Internet access. Dividing the costs, soldiers would each spend somewhere around \$300 for equipment and about \$30 a month for high speed Internet access. (Soldiers recoup the installation costs when they sell the equipment to the next unit rotating onto the FOB). In addition to relying on many private business agreements instead of a single government contract, this decentralized approach has the key impact of delivering Internet access directly to the living quarters of soldiers – usually through wireless connections.

With Internet access increasingly becoming available in their living quarters on the FOB, soldiers no longer have to wait for a 30-minute time slot at a terminal in the MWR facility to send an e-mail, use IM, or make a VoIP call. Instead, soldiers buying into this approach have continuous broadband capability beside their bunks—often through laptops provided free of charge through eArmyU.<sup>41</sup> Thus a wife sitting in Fort Benning, after checking that her husband is back from a mission in Baquba, can hold a real time conversation with him via instant messaging or VoIP. Of course, soldiers are quick to exploit new technological features as they become available. In the words of one infantryman who used instant messaging extensively, "We both have webcams. I bought her a webcam so I can see her almost everyday."

Soldiers have developed high expectations concerning life on the FOB. Security, plenty of food and drink, a place to rest, and morale-building activities are now taken for granted by combat veterans. Instantaneous communications with home are gradually joining the list of amenities expected by soldiers in combat. As one section leader observed:

We just had a census over in the company. The commander did his census and my guys' biggest problem was the Internet. They want Internet. We have three MWR computers, but they would like some Internet in their rooms. I said if that is your biggest concern, then we are doing okay.

## **Distant, but Not Disconnected.**

This monograph has argued that the Army's use of the FOB has changed the way soldiers fight. The FOB gives soldiers the ability to escape the omnipresent danger of the battlefield, avoid the debilitating effects of hunger and fatigue, and enjoy diversions to counter the stresses of combat. The result is a soldier who goes outside the wire as a more capable, revitalized, and refocused warrior. This study also pointed out that young soldiers come from a generation comfortable and competent with modes of communications that go beyond e-mail and letters. The introduction of accessible, low cost VoIP phone service on the FOB as well as broadband Internet access into living quarters permits soldiers to interact with families at unparalleled levels.

The implication of the FOB serving as an oasis from the stresses of battle is simple. Soldiers are more psychologically ready for waging war. Thus, the combat enabling conditions set by the FOB should be recognized and protected. The implications become more complex, however, when examining the role of the FOB as place where soldiers can stay connected to their families. As pointed out earlier, the amount of contact that soldiers have with their families is surprising. With many soldiers reporting that they talk to their families "every day, all night," issues emerge that are not as prevalent with other forms of communication such as letters or e-mail.

With phone calls and instant messaging from Iraq becoming almost routine, the concept of the family has shifted for deployed soldiers from the abstract to the concrete. The family is no longer a fond memory tucked in the back of the soldier's mind only to be resurrected prior to turning in for the night. Instead, for many soldiers the family has become part of their battle rhythm—a tangible factor affecting their daily routine and perspectives.

Before addressing the implications of the shift of the family from an abstract to concrete concept, it is important to point out that this

phenomenon is found mostly in junior enlisted soldiers. Interviews in the field reflected that officers and more senior noncommissioned officers are less likely to communicate as frequently with home and thus tend to view the family in a more abstract perspective. Three reasons help to explain why. First, officers and senior NCOs are older and therefore tend to have relationships with wives, girlfriends, and children that have had more years to mature. There is less of a perceived need for frequent communication as relationships are more stable and family members become more independent. Second, senior NCOs and senior officers are less comfortable with the emerging technologies of VoIP and instant messaging (junior officers are quite adept, though). For older NCOs and officers, the traditional letters, e-mail, and an occasional phone call remain the standard means of communication. Finally, and most importantly, NCOs and officers do not have as much discretionary time or mental energy to contact home due to leadership responsibilities. While junior enlisted soldiers have periods of personal time after missions, NCOs and officers continue to be engaged with mission planning or checking on the troops. One soldier commented on his increased responsibilities upon becoming an NCO and the subsequent reduced communications with his wife:

I have a greater responsibility. Before, I was a Bradley driver and now I am a 50 caliber [machine] gun team leader and all my direction and attention is on my soldiers and my job. Which is the way it has always been, but now it's a little more so because I have troops underneath me and I don't need to be burdened with family problems . . . I mean she understands.

In past conflicts, when phone calls to home were rare, conversations were usually highly emotionally-charged events. One soldier described calling home on his first rotation into Iraq during the ground war in 2003:

We never got the chance to call back and use the phone pretty much from February to the beginning of May. . . . So when I first got a chance to call my wife, she had uncontrollable crying. I couldn't get her to stop sobbing on the phone. I said, "Hey, we are pretty much done—we're safe now. I should be coming home soon. Don't worry about it." All you heard on the other end was crying and I love you, and all that.

In contrast, soldiers frequently calling or instant messaging their families from the FOB report that communications have moved from fleeting occasions of reassuring loved ones to more practical interactions.<sup>42</sup> One soldier describing the daily exchanges remarked that the conversations were “just day-to-day stuff . . . basically like things going on with the kids and stuff like that.” The shift toward everyday issues is confirmed by research on the social aspects of communication media. According to research in that field, an increased frequency of communication leads to more informal and intimate interactions.<sup>43</sup>

Given the considerable amount of communication with home, soldiers were asked what types of topics were discussed with families. As expected, soldiers quickly pointed out they seldom mentioned any details of life in Iraq. The initial reason given for guarding their conversations was concern for operational security. When pushed for a deeper explanation, however, soldiers expressed a desire to shield their families from any information that could cause concern or worry. For example, in one interview, a soldier had these responses to a researcher’s questions:

**Interviewer:** Do you tell other people about what you do here?

**Soldier:** No.

**Interviewer:** Fiancée? Anything?

**Soldier:** No I try to keep them out of it. So that way she’s not worried. She knows I go on missions.

**Interviewer:** And you don’t give details?

**Soldier:** No, I told her about the IED, which I shouldn’t have done.

**Interviewer:** What made you feel afterwards that you shouldn’t have done that?

**Soldier:** She got all worried. I really shouldn’t tell her anything.

Another soldier commented similarly, “I try not to tell her a whole lot except that I am doing OK and just the normal stuff. . . . I just don’t want her to worry as much as she does.” Today’s soldiers, much as soldiers from previous generations, have learned not to burden families with the stresses of the combat zone. The primary motivation in restricting the amount of detailed information conveyed about day-to-day happenings in the war zone is to prevent families from worrying. Soldiers believe that it is better to spare the details than to provoke apprehension in the home front.

Despite the paucity of problems being communicated homeward, most soldiers surprisingly reported that family problems at home are being communicated to the FOB. While soldiers are careful that no potentially anxiety-producing information is relayed home, there is an unusual expectation—and a desire—to hear about the problems at home. An interview illustrated this interesting phenomenon:

**Interviewer:** Now, does she tell you problems from home?

**Soldier:** Oh I hear all of them. Well, I can't say I hear *all* of them. I feel I have a stressful situation but I realize that she has a stressful situation and she does everything she can. It just gets away from her sometimes and she needs to vent [to someone].

**Interviewer:** And that's you?

**Soldier:** That's me, no matter how far away I am.

When asked why concerns and anxieties seem to flow in only one direction, another soldier observed:

I like to think of her job—with four kids at home—as much worse than my job here. I try to make it as easy as possible on her. I don't vent about my job. She asks, "How's work?" and I say, "Work is work and I am here" and that's all it's going to be. . . . She knows I can handle that burden a lot more than she can hear about body parts blowing up in front of a position down the street. She doesn't need to hear about that or she won't sleep well or she's going to worry. Versus me worrying about the kids, you know, "You got to e-mail your son; he's kind of out of control right now."

Another soldier put it simply, "I want to be able to listen to her and listen to her worries and I don't want her to worry about what's going on over here."

Why would soldiers facing the stresses of an insurgency in Iraq want to take on additional concerns from the home front? Researchers have long noted the detrimental effects of family problems on combat troops. For example, Michael Doubler wrote of World War II soldiers:

Mental anxiety was perhaps the greatest cause of low morale. The army learned that war fostered worries that could drain a soldier's working and fighting efficiency. Troops thousands of miles from home, living and fighting under heartbreaking and nerve-wracking conditions, worried

about immediate problems and the *welfare of loved ones at home*. Common concerns among officers and enlisted men included being gone from the United States for long periods, *family matters at home*, and the overall progress of the war.<sup>44</sup>

To help keep family problems from becoming distractions to deployed soldiers, the Army traditionally has relied on informal and formal organizations such as Family Readiness Groups (FRGs) to support and assist families. FRGs operate under the assumption that providing support to families allows soldiers to “concentrate on the mission at hand, and have the emotional readiness to carry out that mission.”<sup>45</sup> FRGs continue to assist in vital problem-solving support for families, but communication technology is allowing soldiers to retain more of the role of providing *emotional* support to the family. Deployed soldiers understand that they cannot physically contribute to the family, but the informal and intimate nature of VoIP phone calls and instant messaging is allowing them to share the emotional burdens of parenting and marriage. One infantryman who called home on a daily basis explained why he called so often:

Being the man of the family, your job is to support them and protect them. Well I can't protect them right now because I am not with them. . . . I know I am the one in the combat zone, but I just worry about them—making sure they are all right constantly, stuff like that.

### **The Potential Benefits.**

The availability of affordable synchronous communications has resulted in many deployed soldiers attempting to retain much of their roles as husbands and fathers. While they may be physically distant, they are not disconnected. Despite being thousands of miles away in a combat zone, soldiers have learned that technology and the protective qualities of the FOB enable them to still help redirect a wayward child or encourage a disheartened spouse.

The most obvious outcome of this increased connectivity is an increase in morale. Today's young soldiers, like their peers in American society, crave relationships and staying connected. Being involved in the lives of their families—including their problems—is preferable to being isolated from the home front. As one soldier



commented on the alternative, “One letter every month from your wife or fiancée? That would be hard. That would be very hard because I would be worried about her and what’s going on back home.”

Besides boosting morale, increased interaction with home may have some less obvious, but extremely significant effects. In his examination of combat trauma during Vietnam, psychiatrist Jonathan Shay describes the “the berserk state” – a condition characterized by rage, callousness, and unrestrained anger. According to Shay, soldiers descend into the berserk state as they become socially disconnected and “cut off from all human community.” Often driven by revenge, soldiers in a berserk state “cannot see the distinction between civilian and combatant” and are prone to committing atrocities.<sup>46</sup> In a harsh counterinsurgency environment where the insurgents are not easily identified and the populace may be sympathetic or even assisting the enemy, the potential for soldiers to move toward the berserk state is increased. One implication of remaining emotionally connected with home via technology on the FOB, however, is the calming effect on soldiers.

With an instant messaging session or a VoIP phone call home, moral and social restraints on soldiers are restored. The social isolation normally found in a combat zone is diminished by the soldier’s interaction with a familiar voice from home as the soldiers are reminded of their humanity. A Humvee gunner described the effect of daily chats with his fiancée in Georgia: “She keeps my nerves calm.” A sergeant observed that lower ranking soldiers are often at the receiving end of orders and bear the psychological brunt of counterinsurgency operations. He pointed out that it is therefore important for soldiers to hear “a friendly voice.” Especially, he added, because “I am not a friendly voice. I am not their friend. I am their leader.” Frequent and intimate communications with home help to restore the human side of soldiers – a critical aspect in a prolonged counterinsurgency situation.

Another potential outcome of the increased connections with home concerns the re-integration of the soldier back into the family upon redeployment. Upon returning home, soldiers traditionally have wondered “if their families still need them or if their children will recognize them. Spouses may worry about having to give up newfound independence or fear they have made bad decisions during

their soldiers' deployment."<sup>47</sup> With deployed soldiers increasingly involved through technology in the family's everyday rhythm of life, the redeployment transition may be less troublesome. When soldiers were asked about the purpose of their communications, they replied with responses such as "We just talk about our daily routine and the kids," or "I try to call home and talk to her and let my kids hear my voice, especially my little one." In other words, many soldiers are taking deliberate steps to remain involved in their families despite their deployed status.

Ironically, it is actually possible that many young soldiers are spending more time interacting with their spouses from the FOB than when not deployed. Soldiers reported that they had established routines of conducting phone calls or instant messaging sessions very early in the morning (e.g., 4:00 a.m.) and again late at night (e.g., midnight) because of mission cycles and the time difference in the United States. Consistently setting aside specific times of the day for the sole purpose of interacting with one's spouse is a habit that would probably benefit the marriages of all soldiers – not just those deployed. Interestingly, a captain related that one of his concerns was that some of his troops were noticeably tired from waking up very early to communicate with home. Nevertheless, the availability of synchronous communications has great potential in reducing the debilitating effects of a deployment on family relationships. A significant subsequent implication is that soldiers and families could be more apt to tolerate future deployments, given this trend toward increased connectivity while deployed.

### **The Potential Problems.**

Of course, there are also potentially detrimental effects of instantaneous interactions from the FOB to home. A frequently cited possible danger is the compromised security resulting from sending sensitive information over unsecured lines. The recent attention placed on posting IED damage to U.S. vehicles on Internet discussion forums – complete with photographs – illustrates how the Internet can be a potentially valuable source of information for the enemy. Two factors, however, suggest that VoIP phone conversations and

instant messaging sessions may be less of a concern. First, nearly all soldiers interviewed were careful to state that they were wary about operational security concerns when using technology. In other words, soldiers have been heavily sensitized to the hazards of using open Internet media. Second, the information transmitted over phone and IM is usually less fact-laden than letters, e-mails, or discussion forum postings. As discussed earlier, soldiers are using synchronous communications more to discuss family matters, not operational details. Still, even telling a family member that an instant messaging session has to be discontinued because the soldier is going out the wire is a security breach.

A more likely misuse of instantaneous communications is sidestepping the chain of command during an incident involving unit casualties. It is standard procedure for the chain of command to hit the “kill switch” on outgoing communications immediately after casualties are known. For official channels (e.g., the MWR computers), the kill switch can be literal. For unofficial channels (e.g., private cell phones or Baghdad Bob’s broadband service), however, the kill switch relies on following the chain of command’s directive to enforce a communication blackout. Unfortunately, some soldiers relay unconfirmed information home in their earnestness to assure their families that they are all right. Such incomplete reporting is usually the grist of rumor mills at the home front. Possible security or casualty notification lapses, however, are not new issues. Units in past deployments have had to deal with identical concerns—just different technologies.

### **The Greedy Institutions of the Family and the Military.**

A less obvious, but potentially more troubling issue concerns the competing demands of the family and the Army. Communication advances on the FOB give the family access into the combat environment—a world traditionally dominated by the military’s hold on soldier attention and energy. Soldiers have a finite amount of energy and time, yet both the family and the military are what military sociologist Mady Wechsler Segal calls “greedy institutions.” Greedy institutions depend for their survival on the commitment of their members and, as a result, demand considerable amounts of

their members' loyalty, time, and energy.<sup>48</sup> The military is a greedy institution because in combat, a soldier's life is largely dedicated toward accomplishing the mission. On the other hand, the family is also a greedy institution as it must be sustained by plentiful attention and energy.

Because technology on the FOB shifts the family from an abstract to concrete concept, the competition for soldier time and commitment is renewed. A very real possibility exists that soldiers may spend time thinking about family concerns when they should be focusing on the mission. During interviews, soldiers were questioned about this potential problem.

Soldiers responded that while pressing family issues require increased attention, it is possible to remain focused on the mission. One soldier talked about turning off thoughts of his family while out on a mission, "It's pretty tough, sir. It is. You just shut it off. You make it seem that whatever you're doing at that time is the only thing that matters in this world." Another soldier commented, "Once I roll out of the gate, my wife does not cross my mind because I talked with her before, and I can't do my job properly if I think about her. That is the deal." Another soldier talked of the attention demanded by both his family and his unit, "I had to learn not to focus on my family while I am out on my mission but focus on my crew, which is my immediate family here." One soldier spoke of temporarily blocking his family from his mind when going out the wire, "I am mission focused. I am all about coming back alive and then get my lovey-dovey face back on."

Some soldiers, however, candidly acknowledged the possibility that family concerns could be a distraction. For example, one soldier reported, "When I talk to my mom, and my mom will yell at me for not doing the right thing or for not being there—which I can't do anything about—I'll get [distracted] in the head for a day or two." Nevertheless, a large majority of the interviewed soldiers contended that they were able to balance the attention required by their families and the mission. Nearly all interviewed soldiers asserted that when the situation demanded, the mission received their total focus. It may be that soldiers are over-confident in their ability to divide their attention and are underestimating the effects of the family on their focus. Or it may be that they were weaned on the frenetic pace of

Sesame Street and MTV, grew accustomed to surfing the Internet while watching television, and are truly adept multitaskers able to compartmentalize the many demands on their attention.

Greedy institutions demand energy and time, but they also demand a person’s total commitment and loyalty. Loyalty to one’s comrades is a key aspect of combat effectiveness. The institution of the military – especially at the small unit level in the Army – requires that its members place loyalty above self-preservation. In combat, loyalty to fellow soldiers and the mission must overcome the fear of death. As Israeli military psychologist Shattai Noy stated, “The main conflict of a soldier in the battlefield is survival versus duty and loyalty. . . . In combat, this threat is pervasive and difficult.”<sup>49</sup>

Ben Shalit, Chief Psychologist of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) during the Yom Kippur War in 1973, interviewed soldiers after battles and asked what soldiers found to be the most frightening or stressful aspect in combat. Table 1 shows the responses for junior enlisted soldiers. Note that the soldiers’ most common fear was letting their comrades down.

<b>Most Frightening Response</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Letting comrades down	40.4%
Loss of limb, injury	26.6%
Death	20.7%
Letting the unit down	4.1%
Being captured	3.2%
Being abandoned	2.8%
Letting the country down	1.1%

**Table 1. Factors listed as “The Most Frightening Aspect of Battle,” Israeli Soldiers.<sup>50</sup>**

Combat effectiveness relies upon soldiers placing responsibility for their fellow soldiers above their own personal safety. In the extreme conditions of combat, the military becomes the ultimate greedy institution by demanding that soldiers fear letting their comrades down more than the possibility of their own death. With the greedy institution of the family entering the scene via increased connectedness, however, an interesting question emerges – does the

family compete for deployed soldiers' loyalties? In other words, as the family becomes a more concrete concept in the minds of young soldiers, does it affect their obligations to the unit?

Samuel Stouffer addressed this issue with World War II soldiers. He wrote:

Closely related to this struggle [of overcoming concern for personal safety] is the problem of the tension between the requirements of military duty and the individual's felt obligations to a social circle at home. Many men felt a deep obligation to a wife and children, or to a dependent mother and father. The society at large indicated that their highest obligation was to fight for their country. But it would be surprising if such men did not feel a strain between these obligations. Should they take risks which they might avoid but which seemed necessary for most effective accomplishment of their military mission?<sup>51</sup>

Stouffer proposed that the competing demands of the mission and the family should be manifested by greater worry and fear in the battle situation. In a survey of combat soldiers in Italy, he confirmed that married men were more likely to say that they worried a lot about their chances of becoming a casualty when they were in combat.<sup>52</sup>

Soldiers interviewed for this study were asked the same question posed by the IDF's Ben Shalit—"What was the most frightening aspect of battle?" The responses were interesting. Because the IED or VBIED was the most prominent threat at the time of the study, soldiers generally were fatalistic about what they feared. They often related that there was no reason for any fear since the main threat was, in their minds, a random occurrence. Sniper attacks and IEDs were dangerous, but it was not worthwhile to be frightened because there was nothing they could do about it anyway. One soldier put it this way, "It is not going to happen unless the good Lord intends. If he punches your number, there is nothing you can do."

Very few soldiers commented that they were concerned about the possibility of their own death or injury. Most mentioned little about the fear of letting their comrades down. After some reflection, however, a surprising majority of soldiers commented on how the *consequences* of their death or wounds frightened them. One infantryman gave a typical response, "I could care less if I get shot, sir. . . . My kids growing up with no dad — *that* scares the [life] out of

me.” Another soldier noted, “I try not to think about it. If it happens, it happens. You know, I sometimes think about what my family is going to do if something happens to me – to where I am incapacitated or killed, but I try not to put too much thought into that.”

An infantryman who commented that he had no specific fears in battle stated:

If anything, I worry. I worry about the well-being of my soldiers. I worry about me not coming home. I don't worry about me personally, I worry for my kids. I have taken such great pride in being a father to my children.

He went on to add:

I just want to be there for [my wife]. She just wants me to be there for her. So I worry about not being able to come home to her. It doesn't matter if I came home in a different condition as long as I come home for her. So those are my worries – never fear. . . . Since I have been in the Army, sir, I just haven't been scared of anything.

As with Shalit's findings with the IDF in the early 1970s, self-preservation for the American soldier is not a major source of fear or stress. Unlike Shalit's findings and more in line with Stouffer, however, today's soldiers do show concern for their own safety *when considering the impact on their families*. It appears that because the family has emerged as a concrete concept in the world of today's deployed troops, the institution of the family is competing for soldiers' attention as evidenced by observations such as, “I worry more about how my wife would react to something happening to me more so than I would worry about me personally getting hurt.” Concerns voiced by soldiers revolved not around their own personal injury, but instead on the effect an injury would have on their ability to continue being the family provider and supporter. Soldiers listed concerns such as, “What will happen to my family? How are my wife and kids going to handle it?” and “How will it affect my wife? Will they be taken care of?”

Ironically, while FOBs have removed many traditional distracters and sources of stress for deployed soldiers, allowing the greedy institution of the family access through improved technology may

be putting demands on soldiers at levels not experienced in previous conflicts. Soldiers today are interacting daily with their families resulting in stronger emotional family bonds and in turn raising their family's welfare as an aspect of battle that frightens them the most.

Of course, other factors may also be contributing to the increased salience of the family in the minds of soldiers other than just increased interaction with the home front. First, today's force is more married than in the past. Currently 48 percent of the enlisted force is married, while the junior enlisted soldiers studied by Stouffer in WWII reported a 36 percent marriage rate.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, today's soldiers may be more motivated to cite family concerns as a source of fear in battle based on their own family experiences. They come from an American cohort increasingly accustomed to growing up in single-parent homes. Currently 27 percent of American youth come from single-parent families—three times the amount in 1960.<sup>54</sup> Soldiers may be stating their desire to avoid that situation. Finally, soldiers may be more apt to be concerned about their role in supporting their families simply because they feel other support mechanisms are lacking. The connectedness between Americans and their family, friends, and neighbors has been gradually diminishing over the years (e.g., the amount of time that Americans entertained friends at home decreased 45 percent in the past 2 decades).<sup>55</sup> With support from other social institutions declining, soldiers may feel that they are personally indispensable in providing for their families.

## **Implications.**

This monograph has attempted to provide a glimpse of life on the forward operating base. For much of the Army, operating from a FOB has become the expected standard for fighting a war. And with plans to turn existing FOBs over to Iraqi forces and consolidate U.S. forces into four huge FOBs,<sup>56</sup> the aspects of the FOB described in this study appear to be more permanent than temporary. The FOB gives soldiers engaged with the enemy the unprecedented advantage of gaining a respite from constant danger, minimizing the wearing effects of hunger and fatigue, and reducing the isolation of combat.



As a result, many of the factors of psychological stress typically present in combat are greatly reduced.

As conditions on the FOBs have improved, technological advances such as VoIP phone calls and instant messaging are allowing soldiers to step back into their roles of husbands and fathers (and wives and mothers). The benefits to morale are tangible. Just as soldiers in the past two centuries have looked forward to hearing their names called during mail call, instant connectivity from the FOB to the family is what soldiers look forward to upon returning from a mission. And yet the first implication of this study is that commanders must realize that increased interaction with families may not always be beneficial.

At the group level of analysis, unit cohesion may suffer as soldiers devote time and energy into maintaining the emotional bonds with their families rather than with their comrades. While this study focused on soldiers who travel frequently off the FOB, maintaining cohesion could be especially troublesome in units that seldom leave the FOB with missions requiring little interaction between soldiers (e.g., administrative clerks). Soldiers may develop unhealthy battle rhythms of putting in their time during their shift and then retreating for the rest of the day and night to their virtual friends and families. Units with missions off the FOB have the advantage of more interaction between soldiers, but even in these units, it is not unusual for soldiers to cloister themselves back on the FOB with their own music, videos, and Internet connection to home.

At the individual level, the Army and the family compete for the soldier's attention. This study has proposed that soldiers are attempting to maintain simultaneously the emotional roles of husband and father, as well as soldier. By remaining an integral part of the family problem-solving process, soldiers continue to feel needed and valued by the family. Although the connectivity with the family significantly increases the level of conscious awareness of familial obligations and concerns, it also most likely places additional stress on the soldier. As mentioned earlier, for instance, the soldiers' major concern for their own safety focused on the impact of their death on their family. Taken to the extreme, however, the perceived responsibilities to the family could result in a soldier's hesitation to take risks required for mission accomplishment or unit welfare.

Although this study found no evidence of this occurring, it is a possibility.

Additionally, despite assurances from our multitasking young soldiers that they can compartmentalize the various demands on their attention, spending time ruminating on family concerns and events can disrupt a mission focus. It is difficult to imagine that a soldier, who learns from his wife during a phone call at 8:00 p.m. that his 5-year-old is having significant behavioral problems in school, will be able to devote complete attention to a mission occurring 30 minutes later. Special Forces teams understand this and thus go into isolation prior to a deployment in order to “get their heads into the game.” Keeping a hypervigilant mission focus is especially critical in the streets of Iraq where random and infrequent enemy contact can gradually lull a soldier’s mind back to the last instant messaging session with home.

Although eliminating or even reducing connectivity with the home front is neither a realistic nor desirable option, commanders can be proactive in managing the competing demands of family and mission. First, leaders must ensure that group cohesion is maintained. While combat soldiers need some time alone (and FOBs provide plenty of opportunities for that), leaders may have to subtly introduce activities that force soldiers to interact, build trust, and nurture the emotional bonds between warriors. Ironically, leaders in the past developed cohesion-enhancing activities as a distraction for deployed soldiers. In the future, leaders may have to create cohesion-enhancing activities to counter an over-abundance of distracters on the FOB.

Similarly, in previous conflicts, limited connectivity between soldiers and their families enabled leaders to devote more energy to mission-related requirements instead of soldier personal and family issues. The connectivity between soldiers and their families described in this monograph points to a change to this paradigm. Leaders need to be constantly vigilant on the impact of the greedy institution of the family on their troops. In previous conflicts, leaders learned to be more vigilant for psychological stress indicators after mail call or after a 3-day rest and relaxation to the rear where phones were available. Today, leaders need to monitor their charges for the

impact of potentially distressing family situations 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Predeployment education for soldiers and families should address the issue of the potentially detrimental effects of connectivity. Soldiers need to know that they probably cannot accommodate both greedy institutions simultaneously to the degree desired. Additionally, families should understand the impact of unloading home-life issues on the deployed soldier in a hostile environment. Conversations with senior NCOs and officers in Iraq generally supported the notion that the more mature the spouse, the more they tended to shy away from communicating problems from home to the deployed soldier. Predeployment training may be able to sensitize young spouses to this issue.

## **Conclusion.**

In an odd twist, the same issues associated with fighting from a FOB are being played out 7,000 miles away at Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada—albeit with a slight variation. Instead of a battle rhythm of fighting the war in person and then returning to the FOB to connect virtually with families, Nellis pilots are remotely controlling *Predators*—Hellfire-armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs)—in Iraq and then commuting home to their families in person. In other words, these pilots are fighting a long distance war via technology, but remaining at home. Despite the benefits of being home to fight the war (which parallel the many amenities of the FOBs—safety, rest, food, and comfort), many *Predator* pilots are reporting diminished morale and more problems in their personal lives. One pilot commented, “I get to sleep in my own bed,” but then pointed out that he feels pulled in two directions—between spending more time fighting the war and being an integral part of his family. Interestingly, he added that it was easier when he was physically deployed to Iraq because he was isolated from the emotional demands of family life.<sup>57</sup> The commander of the *Predator* unit commented on the psychological impact of this type of warfare: “Our people are proud they contribute to the war from home. But being at home brings some additional stresses.”<sup>58</sup> A reporter chronicling the Nellis unit contrasted the stresses of *Predator*

pilots to those of deployed soldiers. She ironically concluded that “soldiers in the field have to cope with danger, but at least they live in one world, whereas their counterparts at Nellis commute daily from war to civilian life.”<sup>59</sup>

In reality, soldiers on FOBs in Iraq understand the issues that arise from commuting to war. They appreciate creature comforts like the good and abundant food, refreshing air conditioning, hot showers, and safety afforded by the FOB. But like *Predator* pilots, soldiers are also experiencing the competition between the greedy institutions of the family and the military for a limited amount of attention, time, and emotional capital. Fighting from the FOB has changed the fighting capacity of our combat soldiers. The entire impact of that change, however, has yet to be fully explored.



## APPENDIX

CHU	Containerized Housing Unit
CU	See You (Instant Messaging abbreviation)
DVD	Digital Video Disk
IDF	Israeli Defense Force
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IM	Instant Messaging
IP	Internet Protocol
MARS	Military Affiliate Radio System
MRE	Meal, Ready to Eat
MTV	Music Television
MWR	Morale, Welfare, and Recreation
PC	Personal Computer
PX	Post Exchange
RN	Registered Nurse
S-VBIED	Suicide Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
VBIED	Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device
VoIP	Voice Over Internet Protocol



## ENDNOTES

1. Department of Defense, *Dictionary of Military Terms*, 2005, <http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/data/ff/02200.html>
2. For example, see Kirk Semple, "G.I.'s Deployed in Iraq Desert with Lots of American Stuff," *New York Times*, August 13, 2005, p. A1.
3. For example, see Dave Hirschmann "Forward Base Grim, 'Tolerable,'" *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 15, 2005, p. 3F.
4. Brigadier General Karl Horst in David Zucchino, "The Conflict in Iraq; Comforts of Home Amid Perils of Iraq," *Los Angeles Times*, March 27, 2005, p. A1.
5. While the researchers did not specify gender as a criterion for selecting soldiers to be interviewed, only male soldiers arrived at the interview locations. Thus, the study refers mainly to soldiers and their *wives* or *girlfriends*.
6. Unless otherwise noted, quotations are from transcribed interviews with soldiers deployed to the Iraqi theater of operations in May 2005.
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