



Strain on forces in the field at a five-year high

Updated 5/9/2011 10:50 AM |

By **Gregg Zoroya**, USA TODAY

U.S. troops fighting in Afghanistan are experiencing some of the greatest psychological stress and lowest morale in five years of fighting, reports [a military study](#).

"We're an Army that's in uncharted territory here," says Gen. [Peter Chiarelli](#), Army vice chief of staff, who has focused on combat stress. "We have never fought for this long with an all-volunteer force that's 1% of the population."

Mental health strain was most severe among veterans of three or more deployments, with a third of those showing signs of psychological problems defined as either stress, depression or anxiety, the report obtained by USA TODAY says.

The research, based on a survey of soldiers and Marines in 2010, also found that the praise the troops have for their unit sergeants has never been higher as the [United States](#) approaches the 10th year of its longest war.

The report says decline in individual morale is significant: 46.5% of troops said they had medium, high or very high morale, compared with 65.7% who said that in 2005. About one in seven soldiers — and one in five Marines — reported high or very high

morale.

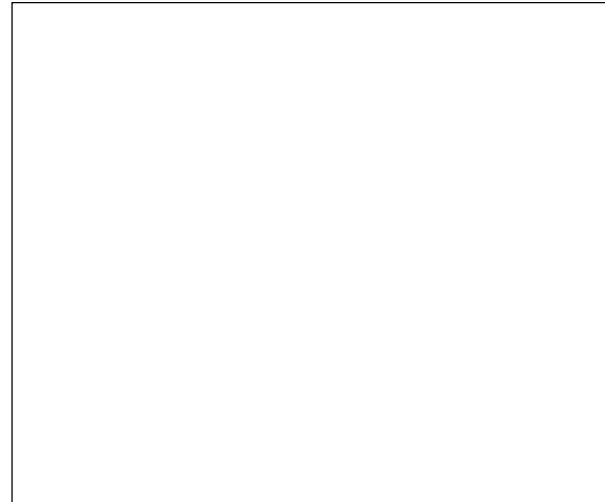
Stressed-out

[President Obama](#) ordered a surge of 30,000 troops into Afghanistan last year, bringing the total number to 100,000 troops. He said at the time that withdrawals would begin this July depending on security. The report says soldiers and Marines reported more intense fighting than during the surge in Iraq in 2006-07, with 75%-80% of those in Afghanistan involved in firefights.

Half or more of those surveyed said they had killed the enemy, and 75%-80% described the death or wounding of a buddy. Half also said that an improvised explosive device detonated within 55 yards while they were on foot patrol. The study's researchers also found evidence of physical wear-and-tear with a third of the force experiencing chronic pain.

"I'm not worried about our ability to continue the fight," Chiarelli says. "Folks who are coming home now are going to see that they're not going back for 24 months. And

Advertisement



Print Powered By FormatDynamics™



that hasn't been the way it's been for 10 years."

Mental health staffing has doubled in Afghanistan since 2009 and troops report better access to this care, though many are so busy fighting "outside the wire" to seek help, the study says.

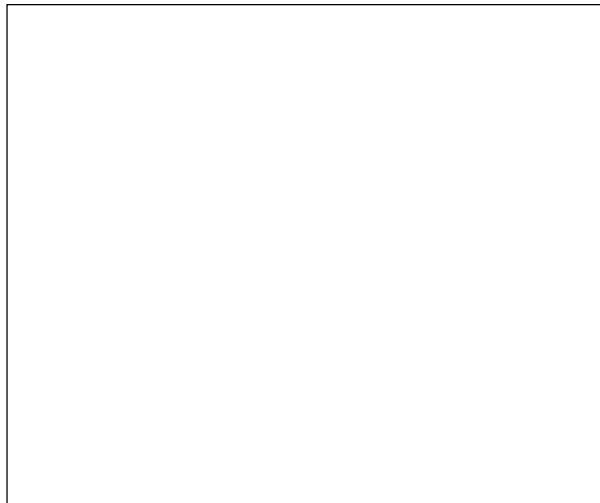
"Having therapists forward, we're able to get them to talk to someone right away and intervene," says Kathleen Chard, a psychologist with the [Department of Veterans Affairs](#) who trains Army medics. "In as little as two to four sessions we can begin having an impact on these guys and women."

The report noted that the emotional strain, while high, was lower than expected given the severity of combat — evidence of a growing resilience in the force. And confidence in the command skills of squad and platoon leaders has never been higher at close to 50%, up from 38.6% in 2005.

"They have learned to be leaders in a crucible," Chiarelli says. "And their soldiers have seen that."

*For more information about [reprints & permissions](#), visit our [FAQ's](#). To report corrections and clarifications, contact Standards Editor **Brent Jones**. For publication consideration in the newspaper, send comments to letters@usatoday.com. Include name, phone number, city and state for verification. To view our corrections, go to corrections.usatoday.com.*

Advertisement



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™