

Deployment stress is topic of military conference at JBER

RESILIENCY: DOD personnel try to help GIs, family avoid tragedy.

By RICHARD MAUER

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When the big troop surge in Iraq in 2007 forced longer deployments and shorter breaks back home for U.S. soldiers, military leaders began to search for ways to build "resilience" in troops and their families.

With recent studies in hand and examples of helpful programs, some of the Defense Department's resiliency experts attended a conference Wednesday of senior Army leaders in Alaska as the pace of deployments continues to demonstrate the need. A mechanized brigade from Fort Wainwright in Fairbanks is currently in Afghanistan, and Maj. Gen. Raymond Palumbo, the top Army officer in Alaska, said the 4-25th airborne brigade from Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Anchorage is due there just before Christmas, its third deployment since 2006.

"The Army's going to be in this kind of challenge for the next several years," Palumbo said. "A lot of pressure on families, our loved ones. What we're trying to do is talk about coping skills, things we can do to improve the resilience of not only our soldiers and their families but the communities."

While the conference, in a wood-and-leather Air Force meeting center at the joint base, was off limits to outsiders -- Army officials said they wanted their commanders to be frank with one another -- Palumbo invited reporters to talk with him and one of the experts during the lunch break.

As if to emphasize the informality of the conference and its concern with feelings, the battalion and brigade commanders, along with headquarters staff of the U.S. Army in Alaska, including Palumbo, left their uniforms at home and attended in civilian clothes.

The Army's favorite term these days for maintaining the mental health of its soldiers and their families is "resilience," the ability to navigate repeated stress. One of the starkest measures of mental health failure is suicide, and the Alaska bases have seen their share: three in 2010, along with two confirmed and another suspected this year.

As suicide rates among soldiers nationally climbed higher than in the civilian population, the Army initially focused on suicide prevention as its chief mental health concern, Palumbo said. But experts advised it should be watching for all forms of risky or destructive behavior, he said.

The Army now takes other measurements: speeding tickets, drunken driving arrests, drug offenses and domestic violence incidents. The data is gathered from among units as small as a 100-member company and as large as a 4,000-soldier brigade. Commanders can compare the results of their units with others, and Palumbo and his staff can see which leaders are doing well and which aren't.

"We started using 'resiliency' when we surged in Iraq," Palumbo said. "We found as we were rotating units in and out of Iraq primarily, but also Afghanistan, the ratios between 'BOG' -- boots on the ground -- to 'dwell,' their time back home, was one-to-one or less. We were sending folks over there for a year, to come home for 10 months, and go back for a year, then come home for a year, then go back for a year. You need to be resilient to be able to do that over the long term."

The Army is planning to change the "BOG-dwell ratio" to one-to-two -- 9 months deployed to 18 back home -- starting in 2012, Palumbo said. But the Anchorage-based 4th Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), 25th Infantry Division, deploying in December, will be gone to Afghanistan for a full year, he said. The brigade has between 3,500 and 4,000 soldiers.

Currently, of the 15,000 soldiers assigned by the Army to Alaska bases, 5,000 are deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq, he said.

One of the outside experts attending Wednesday's conference, Commander George Durgin, a commissioned officer in the U.S. Public Health Service, said about 500 programs and resources are available to soldiers and commanders to increase their resilience. Some are as simple as breathing techniques or yoga.

"We're not here necessarily to talk about how to prevent a suicide, we're talking about how you provide resilience techniques that a service member can utilize when they encounter stress," he said. "That way, when they encounter a stressor, they'll be able to overcome that stressor and come back down to a lower level, so we don't have the risks that go with a potential suicide."

It's all part of the new Army emphasis on "total fitness" that includes mental health along with physical fitness, he said.

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