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Welcome Back to the Front, Soldier

By REBECCA WINTERS

Brown paper envelopes will start arriving this week for 5,600 former soldiers, informing many who thought they had hung up their boots for good that they could be lacing up in Iraq in a matter of months. In a sign of the military's urgent need for personnel as the protracted campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan exhaust U.S. active forces, the Army announced last week that it would draw the extra troops from a rarely used pool of reservists designed for times of national crisis, the Individual Ready Reserve (IRR). The Pentagon's decision to order inactive soldiers back to duty is fueling a growing debate about expanding the Army and inspiring emotional comparisons to the draft.

Soldiers, whose contracts are for eight years, are typically on active duty for three to four years; then they can join the Ready Reserve or else automatically enter the 111,000-member IRR for the remainder of their obligation. Unlike members of the Ready Reserve, those in the IRR do not participate in any further military training and thus do not get paid. Since 9/11, the Army has mobilized 2,500 troops from the IRR; 1,100 went voluntarily, and the rest were directed to go. The last sizable activation of the IRR was a call-up of 20,000 troops for 1991's short-lived Gulf War I.

Artilleryman Joe Penkala, 32, completed his active duty and required IRR time in 2002 yet remained in the IRR by choice. In May, the same week he got engaged, Penkala was given 30 days to report to Fort Sill, Okla., and was told he'd be back in uniform for at least a year. "I supported the President's decision to go to war. I would be a hypocrite if I didn't serve," says Penkala, a lawyer from Bristol, R.I., who is to depart this week for the Middle East. "However, I think [the call-up] shows the need for a larger Army."

With about 140,000 U.S. troops now in Iraq and 20,000 in Afghanistan, the Army ? with an overall troop strength that is about half what it was 40 years ago ? seems stretched to its limit. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has said repeatedly that the military should be made more efficient rather than bigger. Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry thinks it isn't large enough and pledges to add 40,000 active troops if elected. The IRR call-up follows a series of so-called stop-loss, stop-move announcements in recent months, which require soldiers who have fulfilled

their commitments and want to leave active duty to stay on if their units are deployed to Afghanistan or Iraq. Tapping into anxiety about a possible draft, Kerry has likened these moves to a "back door" version of one. After last week's announcement, Kerry's national security adviser Rand Beers said, "Today that back door swung wide open." Retired Lieut. General Theodore Stroup, who directed Army personnel during Gulf War I, remarks, "This is not a draft. There will be some people who are upset, because they had planned on getting on with their lives." But, says Stroup, "you do sign an obligation."

Those most likely to hear from the Army will be soldiers with in-demand specialties, like drivers, mechanics and engineers. A challenge for the Army will be tracking down many of these veterans. When Penkala reported for duty in May, 36 other soldiers should have checked in with him. Only eight of them showed.

Reported by Perry Bacon Jr./Washington and Lori Krsulich/ New York



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