

Fort Bragg: Deserters on increase, but will get caught

By HOLLY HICKMAN, , Associated Press Writer

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) - A man gets pulled over for running a stop sign. The police scan his record. Within days, plucked from his jail cell, he is staring at a company commander who will determine his fate.

Army Lt. Col. Susan Danielsen at Fort Bragg has heard multiple versions of this deserter scenario. The post's provost marshal has a message for those who have fled the Army without permission.

"They should turn themselves in, because eventually they'll be caught," Danielsen said. "That federal warrant remains valid for 40 years."

"That federal warrant" is issued the moment a soldier crosses the line between absent without leave and desertion. A soldier who does not show up for duty is classified as AWOL for 30 days. After that, he or she becomes an official deserter. During a time of war, the 30-day grace period disappears.

Col. Billy J. Buckner, spokesman for the 18th Airborne Corps, said a wartime military does not look kindly upon deserters.

"You sign a contract that says you're going to serve the Constitution and the nation," he said. "We're not going to tolerate it."

He said consequences vary from the minimum of an administrative reprimand to the maximum of a court-martial, with wartime penalties increasing in severity. The commander of the soldier's parent company vets individual circumstances and then makes the call.

"People go AWOL for a number of reasons," Buckner said. "They may have had family problems at home and couldn't reconcile it, or they were stressed out or maybe they just didn't like the Army and are afraid of war."

Danielsen said a Deserter Apprehension Team at Fort Bragg oversees Army deserters throughout North Carolina as part of the 42nd Military Police Detachment of the 16th MP Brigade.

She emphasized that most soldiers - including newly active reservists - fulfill their duties and obligations. She said the Army did not openly discuss desertion until about four years ago.

"(Desertion) had become this underground Internet-based movement from dissatisfied soldiers telling other soldiers how they could get out," Danielsen said.

The Army changed the rules to make it more difficult to pack up and leave. Until about four years ago, a deserter was simply processed out of the military. Now, however, a soldier generally is reintegrated and coaxed into becoming a productive soldier again.

The numbers of those illegally leaving their Fort Bragg-based companies have increased in the past couple of years.

Between September 2002 and September 2003, Fort Bragg listed 235 total reports of AWOL and desertion, up from 107 dating back to September 2001. Danielsen said 133 deserters and AWOL soldiers turned themselves in this year versus 73 the previous year. And 100 were apprehended this year compared to 43 the previous year.

The Army attributes those figures, in part, to an increase in the actual number of mobilized reservists and other soldiers training on post. Thousands of soldiers pass through Fort Bragg annually, especially since the latest military operations in Iraq.

Numbers for the Army as a whole and for the Marines at Camp Lejeune were unavailable Tuesday.

Buckner said the desertion classification besmirches a soldier's record for life. It eliminates the possibility of jobs that require security clearance, sullies credit checks, and can affect his or her children's careers if they want government jobs.

Buckner said desertion also punishes the military, especially during war time when morale needs boosting.

"It's a voluntary Army," Buckner said. "Deserting is an easy way to get out, but it's not the right thing to do. If you don't want to do it, don't sign up."

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