

From tiny Pacific islands comes outsized sacrifice

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Samoans, others flock to military for opportunity

By Gregg Zoroya
USA TODAY

Impoverished young people from remote islands in the Pacific have for years flocked to the U.S. military in search of higher wages and better futures. That has made the islands a recruiter's paradise. Now, the mounting toll of the war in Iraq is making some reconsider.

Nine islanders from the U.S. territories of American Samoa and Saipan and the former territories of Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia have been killed in the war. Six of them have died in the past eight months.

As a percentage of the islands' population, the casualty rate of 36 deaths per million exceeds that of any U.S. state. Vermont comes closest: 16 deaths per million. The national rate is about 5 per million.

The realities of war have slowed recruiting in American Samoa, home to five of the nine servicemembers killed in the war.

"Parents are now feeling it really hard," says Army 1st Sgt. Olympio Magofna, who's based in Guam and supervises recruitment there and in American Samoa, Saipan, Palau, Micronesia, South Korea and Japan.

Army spokesman Gary Stauffer says recruitment in American Samoa is 42% short of projections. Even so, the other islands continue to churn out high numbers of new troops. The Army has raised quotas for these islands in recent years, and goals are always surpassed, Magofna says. On his team are the Army's first-, third- and fifth-highest-producing recruiters of 2004.

The Navy, Air Force and Marines

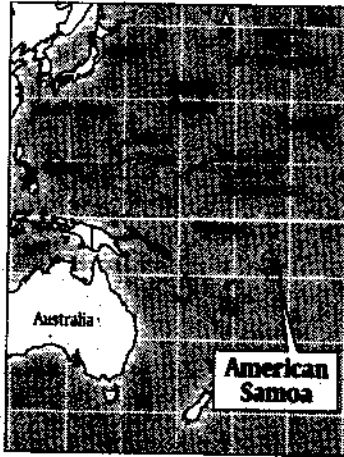
Samoa's casualties

The Iraq war death rate per 1 million population is almost as high for American Samoa as for the 10 highest states combined.

American Samoa	36.4
Vermont	16.1
North Dakota	14.2
Wyoming	11.9
South Dakota	10.4
Oregon	10.3
Nebraska	9.7
Delaware	9.6
Iowa	8.8
Arkansas	8.7
Louisiana	8.6

Source: USA TODAY

By Adrienne Lewis, USA TODAY



USA TODAY

your house and this little rock in the middle of the Pacific Ocean," says Army Sgt. Mark Time, 28, an Iraq veteran from American Samoa. "Job opportunities are really slim."

Average annual incomes in Palau, Micronesia, American Samoa and the Northern Mariana Islands, which includes Saipan, are less than \$10,000 a year. The base wage for a fish cleaner working at a tuna canning factory in American Samoa, one of the biggest employers there, is \$3.26 an hour.

Soldier incomes quickly rise to more than \$20,000 annually within a few years of enlistment.

"When we tell them about the salary, their eyes just open wide," Magofna says.

Entire families enlist. Time is one of four children in his family to join the military. Now, there are only three. His sister, Army Reserve Sgt. Tina Time, 22, died in a head-on collision in an Iraqi dust storm while driving in a convoy Dec. 13.

"I'm proud knowing that my island has played a part in the global war on terrorism," he says. "But it's also sad."

Contributing: Paul Overberg

also recruit from the islands. "People don't realize that there is a population out there that has this strong bond to the U.S.," says Tanya Harris, a diplomat with the Federated States of Micronesia. The nation, a collection of more than 600 islands with about 108,000 people, has lost two soldiers in Iraq since September.

Also, a soldier from Saipan was killed early last year. And a Marine from Palau died in September.

"This is one of the misconceptions that people have about Polynesians being laid-back, easygoing, or that they like to play their ukuleles under the palm trees," says Delegate Eri Faleomavaega, who represents American Samoa in the U.S. Congress. "The fact is, the Polynesians are warriors."

But he and others agree that the benefits of joining the military — good pay, tuition for college and a chance to see the world — are what lure many. "Growing up in the islands, the only thing you know is

U.S. death toll

As of Thursday morning, 1,642 U.S. servicemembers and four civilian contractors had died in the war in Iraq: 1,263 from hostile action and 383 from non-combat-related incidents. Latest deaths identified:

► **Army Sgt. 1st Class Peter J. Hahn**, 31, Metairie, La.; died Tuesday when his observation point was attacked with small-arms fire in Baghdad; 256th

Brigade Combat Team, Army National Guard.
► **Army Staff Sgt. Russell J. Verdugo**, 34, Phoenix; died Monday when an improvised explosive device detonated as he was responding to a report of an improvised explosive device in Baghdad; 767th Ordnance Company.

Source: Defense Department

► For a full list of U.S. military deaths in the Iraq war visit the website soldiers.usatoday.com