

Military unreadiness: Soldiers with second thoughts

by [Dennis P. O'Connor](#) in the [December 27, 2003](#) issue

On any given morning, visitors to Fayetteville, North Carolina, can find hearty soldiers in fatigues running in step to a traditional marching ditty. This military town is home to Fort Bragg, headquarters for many of the army's elite Special Forces and airborne units currently operating in Afghanistan and the Middle East. It is in many ways at the heart of our nation's struggle against terrorism.

But Fayetteville also has a rich history of antiwar activities dating from the Vietnam conflict, fostered by nearly a dozen peace groups that conducted protests outside Fort Bragg. An establishment called Quaker House remains the only holdout from that era. Its executive director, Chuck Fager, said he's seeing a groundswell of antipathy to a military operation that is "killing or maiming a dozen troops a day."

Fager is also detecting a trend that Pentagon brass may not want to hear about: members of the military, especially soldiers, are seeking help in getting released from service in record numbers. Fager said requests from GIs and their spouses through the GI Rights Network, in which Quaker House participates, have increased more than 33 percent over a year ago. And as operations in Iraq drag on, he expects that number to rise dramatically.

"Last year, we received 4,000 calls total for our piece of the network," which totaled more than 21,000 calls nationwide, he said. "Now, every time the phone rings, it's a record."

The reasons for the calls are as varied as the people making the inquiries. But Fager said the underlying message is that soldiers are unhappy with the murky picture in Iraq, lengthening deployments overseas and the danger of "being killed in a conflict that these guys no longer believe in."

"These are guys that are miles and miles away from anything that resembles Quaker pacifism," Fager said. "But the message we're getting from them is that they think

this war—and believe me, it’s still a war for those guys over there—is a waste of time and money. They don’t want to waste their courage, commitment and lives in a conflict that they see as having no clear purpose.”

Fager said that he also has seen a sea change in the attitudes of folks in Fayetteville toward the peace rallies Quaker House and other groups have staged. “When all the shooting kicked off, we’d be jeered and people would shake their fist at us from their cars,” he said. “This is an army town, so you’re going to have people who are completely patriotic and bleed red, white and blue. But in recent weeks, when we’ve staged peace vigils, we’re getting people coming to us and saying that we were right after all.”