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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-04-484](#), a report to the Senate and House Committees on Armed Services and the Subcommittees on Defense, Senate and House Committees on Appropriations

Why GAO Did This Study

Mail is a morale booster for troops fighting overseas and for their families at home. More than 65 million pounds of letters and parcels were delivered to troops serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 and problems with prompt and reliable mail delivery surfaced early in the conflict. Congress and the White House forwarded more than 300 inquiries about mail delivery problems to military postal officials.

GAO was directed to review mail delivery to troops stationed in the Middle East. In this report, GAO assesses (1) the timeliness of mail delivery to and from troops in Operation Iraqi Freedom, (2) how mail delivery issues and problems during this operation compared with those experienced during Operations Desert Shield/Storm in 1991, and (3) efforts to identify actions to resolve problems in establishing mail operations for future contingencies.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that the Secretary of Defense (1) implement a new system to accurately track, calculate, and report postal transit times and (2) consolidate lessons learned from Operation Iraqi Freedom and develop and implement a specific course of action to resolve them. DOD, in its formal review of this report, fully concurs with GAO's recommendations and has begun taking steps to implement them.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-484.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Neal P. Curtin, (757) 552-8100, curtinn@gao.gov.

OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM

Long-standing Problems Hampering Mail Delivery Need to Be Resolved

What GAO Found

The timeliness of mail delivery to troops serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom cannot be accurately assessed because the Department of Defense (DOD) does not have a reliable, accurate system in place to measure timeliness. In general, DOD's transit time and test letter data show that mail delivery fell within the current wartime standard of 12 to 18 days. However, the methodology used to calculate transit times significantly understated actual delivery times. In the absence of reliable data, GAO conducted discussion groups with a non-representative sample of 127 service members who served in-theater. More than half reported they were dissatisfied with mail delivery, underscoring the negative impact it can have on troop morale.

Despite differences in operational theaters and efforts by DOD postal planners to incorporate Operations Desert Shield/Storm experiences into planning for Operation Iraqi Freedom, postal operations faced many of the same problems: difficulty with conducting joint-service mail operations; postal personnel who were inadequately trained and initially scarce owing to late deployments; and inadequate postal facilities, equipment, and transportation. The operations plan created for joint-service mail delivery contained certain assumptions key to its success but led to unforeseen consequences or did not occur. Also, plans for a Joint Postal Center were not fully put in place. One lesson learned from 1991 was carried out with success during Operation Iraqi Freedom: mail was transported overseas by dedicated contractor airlifts rather than by military.

DOD has not officially tasked any entity to resolve the long-standing postal problems experienced during contingency operations. Moreover, the Military Postal Service Agency does not have the authority to ensure that these problems are addressed jointly. This agency and the military services, however, have taken some steps toward tackling these issues.



Source: U.S. Army.

At the Kuwait Joint Mail Terminal, packages and bags of mail await delivery to U.S. troops participating in Operation Iraqi Freedom.