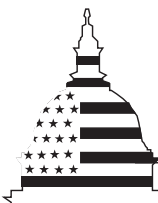**GAO**

April 2004

OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM

Long-standing Problems Hampering Mail Delivery Need to Be Resolved

GAO

Accountability ★ Integrity ★ Reliability

OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM

Long-standing Problems Hampering Mail Delivery Need to Be Resolved

GAO
Accountability·Integrity·Reliability

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.

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.

United States General Accounting Office

Contents

Abbreviations

DOD   Department of Defense
GAO   General Accounting Office

GAO

Accountability * Integrity * Reliability

United States General Accounting Office
Washington, DC 20548

April 14, 2004

Congressional Committees

On March 19, 2003, coalition forces led by the United States began
Operation Iraqi Freedom. The operation required a high level of
coordination and planning, especially in the area of support for the war
fighting troops. One such area of support—and a necessary component in
the maintenance of service members' morale—was postal operations.
Effective postal operations are important to both the troops stationed in
theater and for their families and friends at home. Even though alternative
methods of communicating, such as the Internet and mobile phones,
became available to some troops and their families for the first time during
Operation Iraqi Freedom, the mail remained the main form of
communication and the delivery of goods.

More than 65 million pounds of letters and parcels were delivered to U.S.
Central Command's contingency area of responsibility during calendar
year 2003. U.S. Central Command is the combatant command for
Operation Iraqi Freedom. The largest amount moved in a single month was
April 2003, when over 11 million pounds of mail was delivered. This
represents an average of just over 377,000 pounds per day–the equivalent
of about forty 40-foot-long trailers full of mail.

Problems with the prompt and reliable delivery of mail to troops during
Operation Iraqi Freedom surfaced during the first months of the conflict
and continued throughout. From February 23, 2003, through November 3,
2003, Congress and the White House forwarded to military postal officials
more than 300 inquiries concerned with the delivery of mail to and from
troops stationed in theater. The majority of these inquiries dealt with the
failure of troops to receive mail sent by their families and friends and with
other criticisms of the postal operations. The volume of inquiries served as
an indication that postal operations serving Operation Iraqi Freedom were
experiencing problems.

The Department of Defense (DOD) Appropriations Act, 2004, and also the
Senate Report to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year
2004, directed that we review mail delivery to troops stationed in the

GAO-04-484 Operation Iraqi Freedom

Middle East and compare delivery efficiency issues from Operation Desert Storm with those of Operation Iraqi Freedom.[1] As agreed with your offices, in this report we assess (1) the timeliness of mail delivery to and from troops stationed in the Gulf Region, (2) how mail delivery issues and problems experienced during Operation Iraqi Freedom compare with those during Operations Desert Shield/Storm, and (3) efforts to identify actions to resolve problems for future contingencies.

To address these objectives, we obtained and reviewed DOD guidance for military postal operations. We collected, analyzed, and assessed the reliability of transit time data. We interviewed DOD and Joint Staff officials in charge of developing policy for postal operations and key postal officials stationed at various postal agencies in the United States, Iraq, Kuwait, and Bahrain about their views on the implementation of postal operations. We conducted discussion groups with a non-representative sample of 127 soldiers and marines serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom to obtain their opinions on the quality of mail service during the conflict. We conducted our review from August 2003 through March 2004 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Further information on our scope and methodology appears in appendix I.

Results in Brief

The timeliness of the mail delivery to troops serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom cannot be accurately determined because DOD does not have a reliable, accurate system in place to measure timeliness. Transit time data reported by the Transit Time Information Standard System for Military Mail show that average transit times for letter and parcels into the theater consistently fell within the 11- to 14-day range—well within the current wartime standard of 12 to 18 days. However, we determined that the method used to calculate these averages consistently masks the actual times by using weighted averages that result in a significant understating of transit times. A second source of data—test letters that were sent to individual service members at military post offices by the Military Postal Service Agency from February through September 2003—indicate that mail delivery, on average, met the wartime standard during all but 1 month. However, we found that a significant number of test letters were never returned and that test letters do not accurately measure transit time to the individual service member because they are sent only to individuals

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[1]Pub. L. No. 108-87, 117 Stat. 1054 (2003); Sen. Rep. No. 108-46, at 308 (2003).

located at military post offices. It could take several more days for mail to get to forward-deployed troops. Even though the data show otherwise, military postal officials acknowledge that mail delivery to troops serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom was not timely. Therefore, in the absence of reliable data to describe timeliness, we conducted discussion groups with a non-representative sample of 127 soldiers and marines who served in theater. While their responses cannot be projected, more than half said they were dissatisfied with mail delivery, many waiting 4 weeks or longer to get mail. Moreover, some troops received certain pieces of mail only after they returned home to their stateside installations. According to this group of soldiers, one of the issues that hampered mail delivery was that postal information was not able to keep up with changing deployment information. Furthermore, these soldiers stated that these problems and delays had a negative impact on the morale of deployed troops, as mail was often their only link with family and friends at home.

Despite differences in operational theaters and an effort by postal planners to incorporate Operations Desert Shield/Storm experiences into the planning for Operation Iraqi Freedom, many of the same problems were encountered. These problems include (1) difficulty in conducting joint-service postal operations; (2) inadequately trained and initially scarce postal personnel owing to late deployments; and (3) inadequate postal facilities, heavy material-handling equipment, and transportation assets to handle the initial mail surge. U.S. Central Command created an operations plan for joint mail delivery, but some of the planning assumptions were flawed and the plan was not fully implemented. This plan included several assumptions that were key to its success, but certain assumptions produced unforeseen negative consequences and others were not implemented or were unrealistic. For example, the elimination of mail addressed to "any service member" increased the number of parcels because senders found ways around the restriction. In addition, plans to restrict the size and weight of letters and parcels until adequate postal facilities had been established were never enacted; and the initial surge of mail exceeded the planned estimate, overburdening the developing mail system. The plan also directed that a Joint Postal Center—comprising postal officials from all services—manage and coordinate joint postal operations in theater. However, this effort was not fully implemented, and joint mail delivery suffered as a result. The Military Postal Service Agency did implement one strategy that proved to be successful as a result of lessons learned from Operations Desert Shield/Storm. Dedicated contractor airlift of mail into the contingency area was employed, avoiding the necessity of competing for military air cargo capacity, which greatly improved the regularity of mail service to the theater.

No single entity has been officially tasked to resolve the long-standing postal problems seen again during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Military postal officials have begun to identify solutions to some of these issues. However, despite early efforts made by the Military Postal Service Agency to consolidate problems and identify solutions, this agency does not have the authority to ensure that these problems are jointly addressed and resolved prior to the next military contingency. During our meetings with dozens of key military postal officials serving during Operation Iraqi Freedom, we collected memoranda, after action reports, and their comments regarding the postal issues and problems that should be addressed to avoid a repetition of the same postal problems in future contingencies. These issues include: improving joint postal planning and ensuring joint execution of that plan; early deployment of postal troops; preparing updated tables of organization and equipment for postal units; improving peacetime training for postal units; and reviewing the command and control of postal units in a joint theater. The Military Postal Service Agency hosted a joint postal conference in October 2003 to discuss postal problems with dozens of key postal participants in Operation Iraqi Freedom and is currently in the process of consolidating these issues into a single document with the intent of developing plans to resolve the issues. In addition, the service components and the Military Postal Service Agency have taken some initial steps in employing alternative mail delivery and tracking systems.

We are making several recommendations aimed at (1) establishing a system that will accurately track, calculate, and report postal transit times and (2) designating responsibility and providing sufficient authority within the department to address and fix long-standing postal problems identified in this report. In written comments on a draft of this report, the Department of Defense stated that it concurred with our recommendations and has directed the Military Postal Service Agency to (1) implement a more accurate system to track and report postal transit times and (2) facilitate and track corrective actions taken by DOD entities specified in the Joint Services After Action Report following the Joint Service Postal Conference held in October 2003.

Background

The Postal Reorganization Act of 1970 created the independent U.S. Postal Service and authorized it to make arrangements with DOD regarding the performance of military postal services.[2] Each military service managed its

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[2]Pub. L. 91-375, 84 Stat. 719, 724 (1970), codified at title 39 of the U.S. Code.

own mail program until 1980, when DOD and the U.S. Postal Service entered into an agreement for the joint provision of postal services for all branches of the armed forces. The agreement created the Military Postal Service Agency, which acts as an extension of the U.S. Postal Service beyond the boundaries of U.S. sovereignty and must provide full postal services, as nearly as practicable, for all DOD personnel overseas where there is no U.S. Postal Service available.[3] The Military Postal Service Agency is DOD's single manager for military postal functions. Although this joint service agency is organizationally located under the Army Adjutant General and depends on the Army for funding and staffing, the Under Secretary of Defense (Acquisitions, Technology, and Logistics) is responsible for the agency's policies and oversight.

In October 2002, several months prior to U.S. and coalition troops crossing the border into Iraq, a joint planning conference was held at U.S. Central Command—the designated combatant command for Operation Iraqi Freedom. The U.S. Central Command hosted the conference, bringing together postal officials from all four military components, as well as the U.S. Postal Service and the Military Postal Service Agency. The conference led to the creation of a U.S. Central Command postal operating plan that assigned roles and responsibilities for all joint postal operations during the impending contingency.

The DOD doctrine for joint military operations states that postal support for any contingency is coordinated by the combatant command in the region. The combatant commander appoints a single-service postal manager to direct, implement, and manage all postal operations in the joint theater. Since the Gulf War in 1991, the single-service manager for postal operations in the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility has been the Air Force's 82nd Computer Support Squadron, currently assigned to the Air Force's Air Combat Command. However, U.S. Central Command has the overriding responsibility for all operations in theater, including postal operations.

The movement of mail from the Unites States to troops in the Iraqi theater follows several complex logistical steps. Letters and parcels with military addresses destined to Iraq, Kuwait, and Bahrain are sent to one of four International Mail Gateways—New York, San Francisco, Chicago and

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[3]See Single Manager for Military Postal Service, DOD Directive 4525.6 (May 5, 1980) enclosure 2, section E 3.1.1.
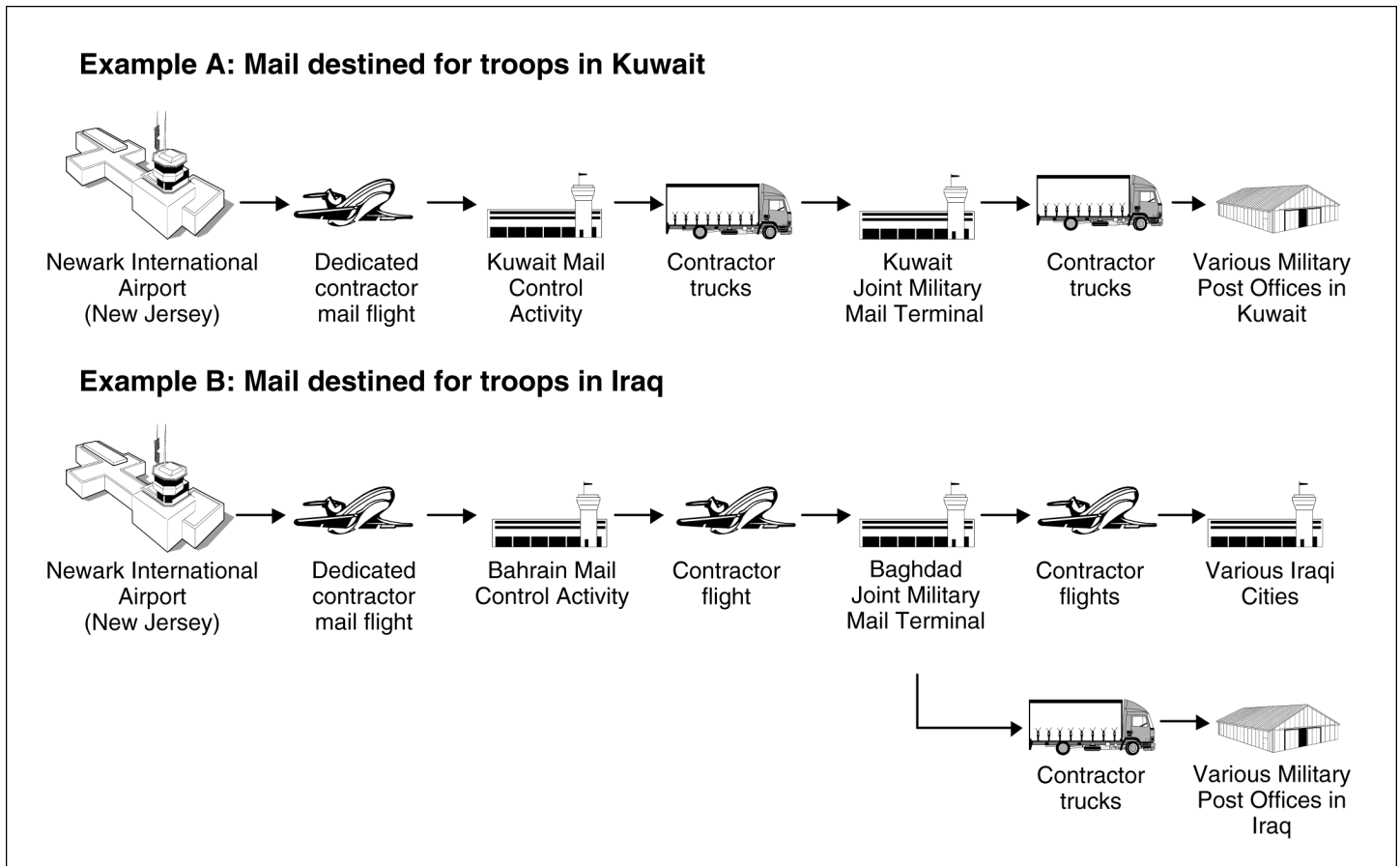
Miami—for processing. According to Military Postal Service Agency data, 90 percent of all letters and parcels for Operation Iraqi Freedom were processed through New York. The U.S. Postal Service delivers letters to the International Service Center at John F. Kennedy Airport, in New York; parcels are delivered to the Postal Service's International and Bulk Mail Center in New Jersey. After the letters and parcels are sorted, they are then packaged, placed into containers, and then transferred to Newark International Airport in New Jersey where they are loaded onto airplanes for transport to the Iraqi theater.[4] Unlike during Operations Desert Shield/Storm, where military planes operated by the Military Airlift Command transported much of the mail, a dedicated contractor aircraft carried mail during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

During the next stage of mail movement, the mail planes fly to aerial mail terminals colocated at the international airports in Kuwait and Bahrain. Once landed, local airport ground handlers offload the mail containers from the planes and take them to an Air Force Mail Control Activity located at the airport, where the mail is staged for ground transportation. In Bahrain, mail for service members stationed in Iraq is processed at the U.S. Air Force Mail Control Activity; mail for service members located in Bahrain or aboard ships is processed at the U.S. Fleet Mail Center. For troops stationed in Iraq, mail is transferred onto a contracted cargo plane and flown directly into Iraq.[5] In Kuwait, all mail is processed at the Joint Military Mail Terminal. Figure 1 illustrates two different examples of how military mail flows from the Newark International Airport into the Iraqi theater.

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[4]Military mail also flies out of John F. Kennedy Airport. However, most mail to ground troops serving in the Operation Iraqi Freedom theater flew on the dedicated contract carrier out of Newark International Airport.

[5]DOD contracted with DHL to provide planes to fly cargo and mail into Iraq beginning in May 2003, when the Joint Military Mail Terminal was established there. Before then, all mail was flown to Kuwait and taken by mail truck convoys into Iraq.

Figure 1: Mail Flow into Iraqi Theater

Example A: Mail destined for troops in Kuwait

Newark International Airport (New Jersey) → Dedicated contractor mail flight → Kuwait Mail Control Activity → Contractor trucks → Kuwait Joint Military Mail Terminal → Contractor trucks → Various Military Post Offices in Kuwait

Example B: Mail destined for troops in Iraq

Newark International Airport (New Jersey) → Dedicated contractor mail flight → Bahrain Mail Control Activity → Contractor flight → Baghdad Joint Military Mail Terminal → Contractor flights → Various Iraqi Cities

Contractor trucks → Various Military Post Offices in Iraq

Sources: GAO and Nova Development Corporation.

The Joint Military Mail Terminal, which handles the bulk of the letters and parcels entering the Iraqi theater, sorts the mail and arranges for its transportation—either by land or by air—to the various regions occupied by U.S. troops. Mail must be delivered to the unit level, designated by ZIP codes provided by the Military Postal Service Agency, before it can be distributed to individual service members. Figure 2 illustrates postal operations and a backlog of mail in February 2003 at the Joint Military Mail Terminal in Kuwait.

Figure 2: Mail Handlers at the Joint Military Mail Terminal in Kuwait

Source: U.S. Army.

According to the Military Postal Service Agency, more than 65 million pounds of letters and parcels were delivered to U.S. Central Command's contingency area of responsibility during calendar year 2003 at a cost of nearly $150 million. The largest amount moved in a single month was April 2003, when over 11 million pounds of mail were delivered. This represents an average of just over 377,000 pounds per day—the equivalent of about forty 40-foot-long trailers full of mail. Figure 3 illustrates a convoy of trucks carrying 40-foot trailers of mail leaving the Kuwait Joint Military Mail Terminal.

Figure 3: Truck Convoy Carrying Mail outside of Kuwait City

Timeliness of Mail Delivery Cannot Be Accurately Determined

The timeliness of mail delivery to troops serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom cannot be accurately determined because DOD does not have a reliable, accurate system in place to measure timeliness. Data collected by military postal units using the Transit Time Information Standard System for Military Mail indicate that average delivery times met the Army wartime standard of 12 to 18 days.[6] However, the methodology used to calculate and report these times consistently masks the actual time it takes for service members to receive mail, thus significantly understating actual delivery times. Test letters sent to individuals at military post offices also have produced unreliable data because many test letters were never returned, and letters were sent only to individuals located at military post offices. Military postal officials acknowledge that mail delivery to troops serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom was not timely. In addition, more than half of the 127 soldiers and marines we talked with during informal meetings at their home bases in the United States said they were

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[6]Army Field Manual 12-6 states, "the standard of service for first class mail is 12 to 18 days from the point of origin to individual soldiers worldwide."

dissatisfied with the timeliness of mail delivery while they were deployed. Morale suffered, as mail from home was many service members' only link with friends and families.

DOD Reported That Average Postal Transit Times Met Wartime Standard, but Methodology to Calculate It Is Flawed

The Army's wartime standard for first class mail delivery is 12 to 18 days from the point of origin to the individual service member. According to our analysis of data reported by the Transit Time Information Standard System for Military Mail,[7] average postal transit times for letters and parcels sent to the Iraqi theater ranged from 11 to 14 days from February through September 2003. (See fig. 4.) These times represent the time it takes for a letter or parcel to go from its point of origin (a stateside post office) to a service member's designated military post office, where he or she picks up mail.

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[7]The Transit Time Information Standard System for Military Mail is the official DOD measurement system used to collect, compute, analyze, and report mail transit time performance data. The Military Postal Service Agency selects the activities to provide mail statistics into the system. For Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Army's 3rd Personnel Command is collecting the data in theater and in turn providing the statistics to the Military Postal Service Agency.

Figure 4: Average Transit Times for Parcels and Letters, as Reported by the Transit Time Information Standard System for Military Mail, from February through September 2003
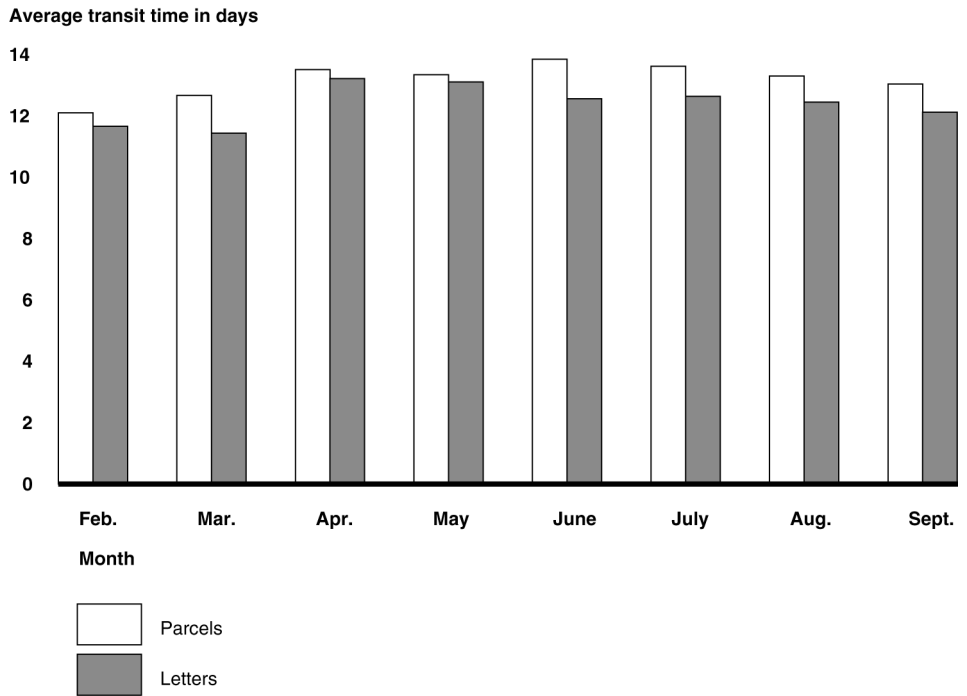
Source: DOD (data); GAO (analysis).

However, on the basis of our analysis, we found that the methodology used to calculate and report transit times significantly understates the actual time it takes for a service member to receive mail. According to Transit Time Information Standard System for Military Mail guidance, transit times should be reported by postal units in theater on the basis of a random sample of all incoming letters and all incoming packages arriving at military post offices in the Iraqi theater. The samples are then divided into three categories according to the date of the U.S. postmark: postmark less than 10 days old, postmark 11 to 15 days old, and postmark over 16 days old. Each of these three categories is given a weight value of 10, 15, and 16, respectively, which represent the break points of each category. The sample size (number of letters or packages sampled) in each category is then multiplied by the weight value and averaged to get the reported transit time. Consequently, regardless of the sample size or the actual number of days the items spent in transit, the resulting average will always be from 10 to 16 days. For example, a piece of mail that spent 100 days in

transit would be counted in the same category and weighted the same as one that only took 16 days. Similarly, a piece of mail that spent 4 days in transit would be counted in the same category as one that took 10, and again weighted the same. (See table 1 for an example of how this methodology is used to calculate transit times.)

Table 1: Example of How Methodology Is Used

Category	Number in sample	Weight value	(sample size) x (weight)
10 days or less	100	10	1,000
11 to 15 days	100	15	1,500
16 days or greater	100	16	1,600
Total	**300**		**4,100**
Average	(4,100)/(300)	=	13.67 days

Source: GAO.

This methodology is even less viable when one considers that during the peak of wartime operations, all mail destined for Iraq was held at the joint military mail terminal in Kuwait for 23 days (late March through mid-April) because of the rapid pace of troop movements.[8] However, this 23-day hold on mail is not reflected in the transit time data, as the "weighted average" methodology masks the calculation, thus significantly understating actual transit time.

Officials at the Military Postal Service Agency and at the Army's 3rd Personnel Command—the Army entity providing in-theater postal support during Operation Iraqi Freedom—could not provide documentation that described this methodology. We reviewed the Transit Time Information Standard System for Military Mail guidance, the standard that explains and prescribes how military postal activities collect mail transit time data, and could not find any mention of this particular methodology. Only 3rd Personnel Command, the source of the transit time data, was aware that the transit times were being reported in this manner. According to a 3rd Personnel Command official, it had always been done this way. We discussed the methodology with Military Postal Service Agency officials. While they acknowledge that the Transit Time Information Standard System is the official tracking system, they were not aware that this

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[8]This 23-day hold was not specifically a part of the operating plan.

particular methodology was being employed, and moreover could not tell us why it was being used.

Test Letter Data Showed Mail Delivery Met Standard, but Information Is Incomplete

In order to collect transit times on retrograde mail (which the Transit Time Information Standard System for Military Mail does not collect) as well as prograde mail,[9] the Military Postal Service Agency sent test letters to individuals located at military post offices within the contingency area of responsibility. The letters contained instructions asking the recipient to mark the date received and then return them through the military postal system. The test letter data—derived from letters sent by the Military Postal Service Agency from February through September 2003—indicate that, on average, prograde transit times met the Army standard of 12 to 18 days during all but 1 month. The only exception was April 2003, when average transit time peaked at 19 days. (See fig. 5.) However, this average obscures the fact that nearly 25 percent of the test letters took more than 18 days to be delivered to the Iraqi theater. Retrograde test letters were not as timely, failing to meet the 12- to 18-day standard during 2 months.

[9]Those articles mailed from the continental United States to service members in the Iraqi theater are referred to as "prograde." Letters and parcels mailed from the Iraqi theater to the continental United States are referred to as "retrograde."

Figure 5: Test Letter Average Monthly Transit Times

Average transit time in days
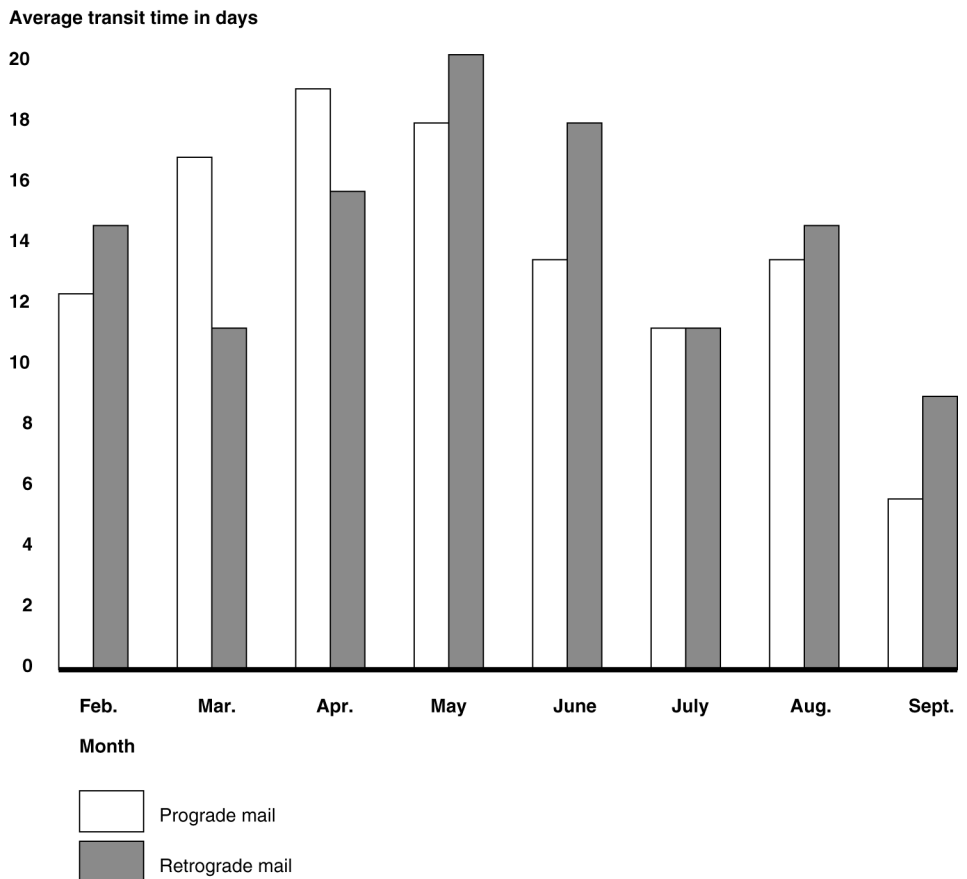
Source: DOD (data); GAO (analysis).

In addition, the Military Postal Service Agency initially only sent test letters to individuals at military post offices in Kuwait and Bahrain. It was not until August 2003 that test letters were sent to locations in Iraq as well. Therefore, the aforementioned 23-day hold on mail bound for units in Iraq would not have affected transit time data as reported by test letters.

Information based on test letters sent to individuals located at military post offices is not a complete measure of transit times because many letters were never returned. Between February and September 2003, the Military Postal Service Agency sent more than 1,700 test letters to service members at military post offices in various locations in Kuwait, Bahrain, and Iraq. Based on our analysis of the agency's data, we found that only 59 percent (1,028) of the letters were returned. In addition, of the more than

700 letters that failed to return, we determined that 25 percent had been sent to individuals located at post offices in or near the northern Iraqi cities of Kirkuk and Mosul. However, only one letter from each of these locations was ever returned out of about 180 letters mailed. Unfortunately, there is no way of telling whether or not these or any of the other unreturned test letters were ever actually received.

There are other drawbacks with this test letters approach. For example, it does not accurately measure the transit time from point of origin to the individual service member. Test letters were addressed only to individuals located at military post offices, and not to service members located in forward-deployed combat units. It could take several additional days for service members deployed elsewhere to receive mail from such locations. Also, this approach used only letters, not parcels, and parcels comprised the bulk of mail sent into the theater.

Service Members Express Dissatisfaction with Mail Service

In the absence of reliable data to describe timeliness, we held discussions with a non-representative sample of 127 soldiers and marines who served in theater, and who were selected prior to our visits to Fort Stewart, Georgia, and Camp Pendleton, California. Almost 60 percent of these service members indicated that they were dissatisfied with the timeliness of mail delivery. Nearly half said that, after arriving in theater, they waited more than 4 weeks to get their mail, and many commented that some mail took as long as 4 months to work its way through the system. When asked, about half the troops we interviewed also indicated that they were not aware of command decisions to purposefully halt mail service. In addition, nearly 80 percent said that they were aware of mail that was sent to them but that they did not receive while they were deployed. In many cases, this mail was finally received after the service members returned to their home stations. Clearly, the non-receipt of mail became a concern for friends and family back home.

Many service members told us that they did not receive certain pieces of mail until they returned to their stateside home installations. For example, starting in June 2003, Camp Pendleton, California, received about 100,000 pounds of military mail that had been returned undelivered and unopened to the U.S. Postal Service gateway in New York—at a cost of about $93,000. Upon receipt in New York, the mail was sent by rail to the U.S. Postal Service gateway in San Francisco and then put in trailers and trucked to Camp Pendleton. Extra space considerations were needed in order to accommodate the returned mail, including two tents staged outside of the main post office for overflow. Many of the returned

packages were damaged and rewrap procedures had to be established in order to try and control packages that were all but destroyed from being mishandled or handled too often. (See fig. 6.) Postal officials at Camp Pendleton did not clear out and deliver all of this returned mail for the better part of 3 months, or until the latter part of August 2003.

Figure 6: Damaged Parcels at Camp Pendleton, California

Source: U.S. Marine Corps.

According to soldiers we interviewed, one of the issues that hampered mail delivery was changing deployment information. Mail delivery to the Army's 3rd Infantry Division was stopped when word was received that the division was about to redeploy. When this plan changed and the division did not redeploy, mail started to flow again. The division was told several times that it would be redeployed and then it did not; each time, when deployment was thought to be imminent, mail delivery was stopped. This created a backlog. When the 3rd Infantry Division finally did redeploy, the 1st Brigade of the 3rd Infantry Division stayed behind and was assigned to the 1st Armored Division. But this information was not disseminated, and the 1st Brigade received no more mail while in theater.

Many Problems Identified in Operations Desert Shield/Storm Continued to Hamper Mail Delivery in Operation Iraqi Freedom

Despite differences in operational theaters and an effort by postal planners to consider experiences from Operations Desert Shield/Storm in planning for Operation Iraqi Freedom, many of the same problems continued to hamper postal operations during Operation Iraqi Freedom. These problems include (1) difficulty with implementing joint-service postal operations, (2) postal personnel who were inadequately trained and initially scarce because of late deployments, and (3) inadequate postal facilities, material-handling equipment, and transportation assets to handle mail surge.

During January 1991, at the height of Operations Desert Shield/Storm, more than 500,000 U.S. troops supported a ground war that lasted a little more than 4 days. These troops were concentrated in camps located in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia near the borders of Kuwait and Iraq. In contrast, Operation Iraqi Freedom involved about half the number of troops (about 250,000), dispersed over a larger geographical area (all of Kuwait and Iraq), and involved a ground war that lasted about 42 days. This greater dispersion of troops for a longer period of time increased the logistical requirements for delivering the mail. Additionally, although the ground war for Operation Iraqi Freedom is officially over, there is an ongoing requirement to provide timely and efficient postal support for a large number of personnel still in theater, fighting the global war on terrorism.

Implementation of Joint Postal Operations Fell Short

Several key planning assumptions used in the creation of U.S. Central Command's postal plan for Operation Iraqi Freedom proved problematic. The embargo on Any Service Member mail[10] produced unintended negative results; mail restrictions for the first 30 days in theater were never enacted; and the volume of mail was grossly underestimated. Table 2 summarizes these key assumptions, the actions taken, and the consequences of those actions.

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[10]"Any Service Member" mail refers to mail that can be sent to any service member serving in a contingency operation overseas. This mail can be held and delivered when deemed appropriate by ground commanders to boost the morale of soldiers.

Table 2: Planning Assumptions, Actions and Their Effects

Assumption	Action	Effect
Any Service Member mail would be discontinued.	Any Service Member mail was discontinued.	Persons and organizations sent multiple packages to individual service members to work around the restriction. Parcel volume increased as a result.
Mail into theater would be restricted to letters for at least the first 30 days of the operation or until the proper infrastructure was in place to handle increased volumes; however, even letters would be stopped if conditions (lack of facilities, transportation, or personnel) warranted.	Mail was never restricted.	The mail flowed into theater unrestricted, overtaxing the limited mail handlers and facilities in place and creating huge backlogs of mail.
Mail volume would amount to about 0.5 pounds of mail per service member per day if restrictions were in place, or 1.5 pounds per service member per day if they were not.	Early mail surges reached about 5 pounds per service member per day.	Only limited facilities were in place; huge backlogs of mail were created owing to lack of manpower, facilities, and equipment.

Source: GAO.

Because Any Service Member mail caused delays in the delivery of other personal mail and stressed the logistical system during Operations Desert Shield/Storm, postal plans for Operation Iraqi Freedom placed an embargo on this type of mail. Defense officials also discontinued Any Service Member mail for security reasons following the Anthrax scares of 2001. During Operations Desert Shield/Storm, Any Service Member mail acted as a morale booster because it provided mail to troops who might not have received mail otherwise. From an operations standpoint, this mail could be separated and set aside until individually addressed mail had been processed. However, the volume of Any Service Member mail taxed transportation and storage capabilities. In order to prevent similar problems during Operation Iraqi Freedom, planners placed an embargo on Any Service Member mail. Despite this, individuals and organizations sending mail developed "workarounds" that overwhelmed the postal system and contributed to a slowdown in service. Instead of addressing mail to "Any Service Member," senders addressed their letters and parcels to specific individuals, enclosing a request that they share the mail with other troops. Because this mail was addressed to specific individuals, postal personnel had to treat it as regular mail and could not separate it and set it aside for later processing. These "workarounds" added to the workload at every stage in the mail delivery process. For example, when we visited the Joint Military Postal Activity in San Francisco, California, we observed one of these "workaround" shipments. It consisted of approximately 40 boxes, each weighing about 8 to10 pounds. They were all addressed to the same recipient and came from a charitable service

organization. This one shipment required its own handcart and almost one-quarter of an airline-shipping container.

A second key assumption that did not have the intended result involved mail restrictions. Drawing from the lessons learned from Operations Desert Shield/Storm, postal planners for Operation Iraqi Freedom assumed that mail would be restricted to personal first-class letters or sound/video recordings that weighed 13 ounces or less for the first 30 days of operations. At the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Military Postal Service Agency and Army postal officials in theater asked that these restrictions be imposed. However, U.S. Central Command officials did not approve the request because, according the U.S. Central Command postal planner, they believed that a sufficient appropriate postal infrastructure was in place to handle the mail. As a result, the mail continued to flow into theater, overtaxing the limited mail handlers and facilities in place and creating huge backlogs of mail.

Underestimating the volume of mail was the third planning assumption that created problems for the mail system. Postal planners in Operation Iraqi Freedom assumed that the volume of mail per person would be less than it actually was. They estimated that there would be from 0.5 and 1.5 pounds of first class mail per person per day based on data from previous contingency operations. Instead, military officials estimate that the initial surge of mail averaged closer to 5 pounds per day, overburdening the developing mail system. According to the Military Postal Service Agency and Air Force Postal Policy and Operations officials we interviewed, of the total volume of mail shipped, more than 80 percent consisted of parcels and the rest consisted of flat mail. The mail volume per soldier was much higher than that seen in Operations Desert Shield/Storm. For example, mail volume reached a monthly peak of 10 million pounds in Operations Desert Shield/Storm for about 500,000 troops compared with a monthly peak of 11 million pounds in Operation Iraqi Freedom for half as many troops. Consequently, during Operation Iraqi Freedom, the necessary facilities and manpower needed to move this higher volume of mail were not initially available in theater.

Coordination of Joint Postal Operations Fell Short

In addition to problematic postal planning assumptions, the single service manager concept was not enacted to ensure the management of joint postal operations. In both Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operations Desert Shield/Storm, the single-service manager concept did not perform as

planned. The single-service manager is assigned by the combatant commander to be the manager and point of contact on all postal issues in the area of responsibility.[11] The single-service manager is normally appointed from one of the military components, generally the component with the most postal resources in theater. During Operations Desert Shield/Storm, the single-service manager was the same for both the peacetime and the contingency areas of responsibility. According to lessons learned from Operations Desert Shield/Storm, the use of the peacetime single-service manager was unsuccessful because of a lack of coordination and cooperation between the components.

To overcome this problem, U.S. Central Command, through its operations plan, directed the establishment of a Joint Postal Center–to be manned by representatives from all components–to oversee all mail operations in the contingency area and assume the duties and responsibilities of the single-service manager. The operations plan states that a Joint Postal Center be established and that the peacetime single-service manager for the area of responsibility

- provide postal personnel, resources, and equipment to support the Joint Postal Center as required;
- continue to oversee military postal operations in the area of responsibility not in the contingency area; and
- relinquish policy and oversight responsibilities of postal operations in the contingency area of responsibility to the Joint Postal Center once it is operational.

U.S. Central Command postal officials told us that neither the Joint Postal Center nor the single-service manager performed according to the approved plan or as expected. The Joint Postal Center did not fully assume the role of the in-theater single-service manager, as it arrived late in theater, was not supported by all of the components, and was undermanned. In the interim, the peacetime single-service manager for U.S. Central Command did not have adequate personnel to assume the role for the contingency area of responsibility. According to representatives from the designated single-service manager, they were unable to provide

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[11]Department of Defense Postal Manual 4525.6-M (Aug. 15, 2002) provides planners with guidance on what needs to be included in the postal appendix to all contingency plans, including a requirement to appoint a single-service manager. Joint Publication 1-0 states that one component command will normally be appointed as single-service manager and serve as point of contact on all postal issues in the area of responsibility.

full-time staff in theater and could not adequately manage operations from their home station in the United States.[12] By the time the Joint Postal Center's personnel began arriving in theater in February 2003, the different components had already been receiving large quantities of mail and had established their own postal operations. In January 2003 the Commander of the Army's 3rd Personnel Command assumed responsibility for postal operations supporting the combined land forces (Army and Marines) and was making decisions that affected the flow of mail for the theater, a responsibility the Army was not resourced to assume.

Postal Personnel Inadequately Trained and Initially Scarce Owing to Late Deployments

In both Operations Desert Shield/Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom, postal units lacked sufficient training. According to lessons learned from Operations Desert Shield/Storm military postal operations need to be staffed with trained personnel who are familiar with postal operations and the movement of mail. Similar problems surfaced during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Military postal officials told us that Army postal personnel arriving in theater were largely untrained in establishing and managing military postal operations, as they are traditionally not tasked for this type of duty. Usually, Army postal personnel are tasked to support the daily operations of military post offices.
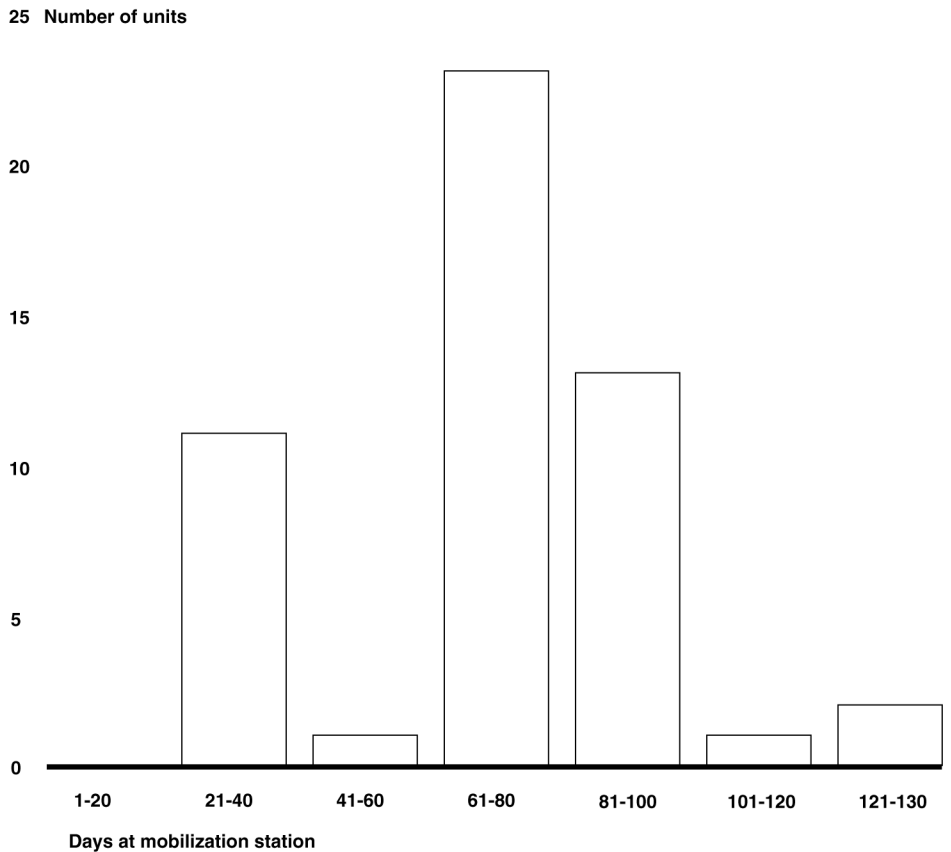
However, even this type of training was lacking. Officials attributed this lack of training to a number of different factors. One factor is that most of the Army's postal units are made up of Army Reserve soldiers, who do not have an opportunity to train in postal facilities during peacetime. This is because there are no military post offices in the United States. Subsequently, if a reserve unit wants to train in a military post office they have to deploy overseas for their annual training. The second factor is that active duty Army postal personnel do not have an opportunity to conduct realistic postal operations during routine training exercises. The third factor is that, unlike the other services, the active duty Army does not have a postal career track. This means that, even if active duty soldiers have attended postal training, they may never work in a postal position.

Moreover, during both Operations Desert Shield/Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom, postal units were initially scarce because of late deployments.

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[12]The postal flight of the Air Force's 82nd Computer Support Squadron under the Air Combat Command, Langley Air Force Base, Virginia, is currently the designated single-service manager for all military operations for U.S. Central Command, U.S. Northern Command, and U.S. Southern Command.

Units should have deployed early enough to establish an adequate postal infrastructure in advance of the mail. During Operation Iraqi Freedom, despite plans to deploy Army postal units early, they arrived in theater after most combat troops. Military postal officials told us that other units had a higher priority for airlift into the Iraqi theater. The Operations Plan specified that postal personnel needed to handle mail would deploy within the first 10 days of the build-up for the contingency. Even though some troops mobilized according to the original plan, our analysis of data received from the Army's 3rd Personnel Command shows that some of these troops were delayed at their mobilization stations up to 130 days (with the average delay being 69 days) before deploying. (See fig. 7.) Postal units did not begin arriving into theater until March 2003. Consequently, early mail operations were conducted with insufficient postal troops to carry out the mission. This decision ultimately affected the timely establishment of postal operations.

Figure 7: Number of Days Army Reserve Postal Units Spent at Mobilization Stations

25 **Number of units**

(bar chart)

20

15

10

5

0

| 1-20 | 21-40 | 41-60 | 61-80 | 81-100 | 101-120 | 121-130 |

Days at mobilization station

Source: DOD (data); GAO (analysis).

Postal Operations Hampered by Inadequate Facilities, Equipment, and Transportation

Inadequate postal facilities hampered postal operations in theater during both Operations Desert Shield/Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom. As the theater grew during Operations Desert Shield/Storm, the facilities proved to be inadequate, and additional aerial mail terminals had to be established in various parts of Saudi Arabia to handle the increasing volume of mail. Although some military postal facilities set up to serve troops during and after Operations Desert Shield/Storm were still in operation in Kuwait and Bahrain, these facilities were inadequate to service the influx of 250,000 troops, which began arriving in January 2003. Key postal infrastructure elements were needed to receive the increased volume of mail and establish a joint mail terminal in Kuwait.

At the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Fleet Mail Center in Bahrain processed mail for all the services even though it did not have the staff or equipment to handle the surge in volume. Because of the increased workload, it took about 5 to 7 extra days for the mail to be delivered. As the theater matured, a joint military mail terminal had to be established in Kuwait to relieve the Fleet Mail Center of Army and Air Force mail and to augment existing postal facilities at Camp Doha in Kuwait. Postal officials told us that even with this additional facility, the biggest hindrance to processing mail was a lack of sufficient workspace. In addition, as troops began to occupy parts of Iraq in the spring of 2003, additional mail facilities and transportation assets were set up to handle incoming and outgoing mail in Baghdad and other cities and towns in Iraq.

The lack of heavy material-handling equipment during the early stages of both conflicts also hampered the processing of mail. Lessons learned from Operations Desert Shield/Storm recommended that modern material-handling equipment be provided to postal units. Operation Iraqi Freedom postal officials also underscored the need to have modern and varied types of material-handling equipment, such as fork lifts and rough terrain cargo handlers available to support postal facilities. (See fig. 8.) Postal workers did not have such equipment in the early days of Operation Iraqi Freedom, so they had to manually break down the containers and sort thousands of pounds of mail per day by hand, adding to the time it took to process the mail for delivery. According to military postal officials, units did not have these types of heavy equipment because either their tables of organization and equipment were not updated to reflect the need, or if updated, were not properly resourced.

Figure 8: Rough Terrain Container Handler (left) and Rough Terrain Fork Lift (right) at the Joint Military Mail Terminal in Kuwait, December 2003

Source: GAO.

In addition to a lack of heavy material-handling equipment, postal units did not have the appropriate postal equipment and supplies to perform routine operations. In lessons learned from Operations Desert Shield/Storm, postal officials recommended that postal units regularly review their equipment and supply needs and assemble prepackaged "kits" for contingency postal operations. They also recommended that, at the earliest indication of a contingency, an advance team of postal experts deploy into theater to determine what postal equipment and supplies are required. Despite these recommendations, postal units continued to arrive in theater inadequately equipped to conduct postal operations during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Postal officials at all levels told us that the lists of authorized postal equipment, such as meters and scales, were outdated and did not reflect the correct types or quantities of equipment needed for modern postal operations. In addition, many deployed units did not have access to the full suite of communications equipment, such as secure radios, cellular and satellite telephones, and "landlines" for their facilities. As a result, postal units were unable to coordinate mail pick-up and truck mail convoys, and communicate with other units.

Moving mail once it got into theater was a challenge because postal units were not equipped with vehicles to transport the mail. The operations plan

for Operation Iraqi Freedom made no special provisions for ground transportation of mail. It assumed that mail would use existing commercial trucks supplemented by military trucks as needed. Postal units at all levels of command (e.g., company through corps) had to compete with other units for vehicles or contract for trucks through local sources. Military postal officials stated that, during Operation Iraqi Freedom, trucks were scarce in theater and carrying mostly ammunition, water, and food. In order to minimize delays in mail delivery, postal officials in January 2003 arranged with a U.S. government contractor to provide 72 trucks and drivers to deliver the mail from the Joint Military Mail Terminal to military post offices in Kuwait and Iraq. Although it took the contractor several more months to obtain all the trucks, this action was a great help, according to U.S. Central Command postal units serving in theater at that time.

Air Transportation Was Improved Based on Lessons Learned

As a result of lessons learned from the first Gulf conflict, the Military Postal Service Agency did implement one strategy during Operation Iraqi Freedom that proved to be successful. At the beginning of Operations Desert Shield/Storm, mail was initially transported overseas by commercial airlines. Because commercial U.S. carriers reduced the number of flights into Saudi Arabia, postal officials decided to switch exclusively to dedicated military flights to transport mail from the United States to the theater. Similarly, at the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom, mail backlogs occurred with existing commercial air service. However, in contrast to Operations Desert Shield/Storm, military postal officials decided to continue using commercial airlines but arranged with the U.S. Postal Service to contract for dedicated postal flights from the United States to Bahrain and Kuwait. According to Military Postal Service Agency officials, this resulted in much more reliable air delivery of mail to the theater.

Various Military Postal Units Have Identified Solutions to Postal Problems, but No Mechanism Is in Place to Ensure Their Consolidation and Resolution

Although military postal officials and others have begun to identify solutions to some of the long-standing postal problems seen again during Operation Iraqi Freedom, no single entity has been officially tasked to resolve these issues. Despite early efforts made by the Military Postal Service Agency in this regard, this agency does not have the authority to ensure that these problems are jointly addressed and resolved prior to the next military contingency.

The identification of solutions to long-standing postal problems has begun in a piecemeal fashion. At this time, no single entity has officially been designated to collect and consolidate solutions to long-standing mail delivery problems. After past contingencies, the Joint Staff's Joint Center for Lessons Learned gathered and consolidated the lessons learned and made them available to the field. We spoke to representatives of the military Joint Center for Operational Analysis, formerly the Joint Center for Lessons Learned, to determine if this process would apply to Operation Iraqi Freedom and they informed us that military postal operations have not been identified as an issue area for lessons learned and they do not anticipate that postal operations will become one. Several individual members of entities such as the U.S. Army Reserve Command, U.S. Central Command, and the Coalition Forces Land Component Command have prepared memoranda outlining issues and lessons learned for postal operations during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

We summarized the memoranda, after action reports and comments regarding solutions to postal problems that we collected during our meetings with dozens of key military postal officials. Key military postal officials emphasized that these postal issues must be addressed to avoid a repetition of the same postal problems in future contingencies. These issues represent many long-standing problems that can be directly traced back to Operations Desert Shield/Storm. The issues identified include the following:

- improve joint postal planning and ensure the execution of the postal operations plan;
- anticipate the levels of support and types of activities needed, and deploy postal units early to reduce or eliminate backlogs during the build-up;
- update tables of organization and equipment for postal units to reflect what they actually need in terms of people and equipment to conduct postal operations;
- develop peacetime training programs to prepare postal units for the missions they will be required to perform during contingency operations; and

- review the command and control of postal units to determine if the postal function is in the right place and whether one organization should be responsible to both develop and execute policy.

In October 2003 the Military Postal Service Agency hosted a joint postal conference to discuss postal problems with dozens of key postal participants in Operation Iraqi Freedom. It is currently in the process of developing a final report that will outline plans to resolve issues in the areas of organization, supplies, planning, training, transportation, "Any Service Member" mail, routing and labeling, and transit time data collection. Although the agency has taken this initiative, it has limited authority and cannot direct the services to jointly address the problems, according to the Executive Director of the Military Postal Service Agency. Military Postal Service Agency officials describe their role as primarily the single point of contact between the military and the U.S. Postal Service.

Service components and the Military Postal Service Agency have taken some initial steps in employing alternative mail delivery and tracking systems. For example, the Marine Corps is currently testing an electronic mail system for getting mail delivered to forward deployed troops. In addition, the Military Postal Service Agency has taken steps to solve a long-standing problem regarding transit time data. The agency has developed a mail bar-coding system that could be used to more accurately track the transit time, but it has not yet been successfully deployed for use by ground troops because of connectivity problems. The Military Origin Destination Information System, modeled after the system that the U.S. Postal Service employs, can be used to track transit times of bags of letters and small packages as well as larger parcels. By bar coding these items and scanning them prior to mailing, and then scanning them once they reach their destination, transit times can be easily calculated. According to officials from the Military Postal Service Agency, the Navy is currently using this system with some success. However, the system requires a certain level of connectivity with the Internet, which troops in the field lacked during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Wireless networks may be necessary in order to connect all military post offices to the Internet, which has not been practical on the battlefield. In addition, this system shares a shortcoming with the test letters in that transit times are not tracked to the level of the individual service member.

Conclusions

The timely delivery of mail to troops overseas involved in contingency operations is an important mechanism to boost morale among service members and their families and friends. Without taking action to resolve

the identified issues in planning, building, and operating a joint postal system, mail delivery will continue to suffer in future contingency operations as witnessed by the repetition of delayed mail delivery from one Gulf war to the next. Emphasis needs to be placed on establishing joint postal responsibilities and the subsequent execution of those duties. Past experience has shown that postal operations have not received command attention or been designated a priority. Establishing the needs for postal operations early in the process and dedicating the appropriate resources is crucial for providing the timely and efficient delivery of mail. While our work focused only on Operation Iraqi Freedom, we believe many of these same lessons apply to other combatant commands and theaters of operation as well.

Recommendations for Executive Action

Without clear and accurate data to measure the timeliness of mail to U.S. troops overseas during contingency operations, no meaningful assessment can be made on the quality of mail service. Therefore, we recommend that the Secretary of Defense direct the Under Secretary of Defense (Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics) to work with the Army Adjutant General to improve the quality of transit time data for postal operations by implementing a system that will accurately track, calculate, and report postal transit times.

In the absence of a clear plan for resolving recurring postal problems during contingency operations, we recommend that the Under Secretary of Defense (Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics) designate, direct, and authorize an appropriate DOD agency, unit, or command to determine what long-standing postal issues need to be resolved, and to develop a specific course of action and timetable for their resolution, including appropriate follow-up to ensure that the problems have been fixed. Specifically, these actions should address the issues highlighted in this report, such as the following:

- strengthen the joint postal planning function and specify a body to ensure the implementation of postal operations in theater;
- deploy properly trained and equipped postal troops into theater prior to the mail build-up; and
- dedicate adequate postal facilities, heavy equipment, and transportation assets for postal operations.

An important part of addressing these long-standing problems is to share the results of these lessons learned from Operation Iraqi Freedom with all

of the combatant commands to ensure that future contingencies do not repeat these problems.

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

In written comments on a draft of this report, DOD stated that it fully concurred with our recommendations and has already initiated certain actions. In response to our first recommendation, DOD has directed the Military Postal Service Agency to implement an automated system that will accurately track, calculate, and report postal transit times all the way to troop delivery. In addition, the Military Postal Service Agency is also reviewing manual transit time collection and reporting methods for use when automated collection is not possible. In response to our second recommendation, the Military Postal Service Agency will facilitate and track the corrective actions taken by the Unified Commands, services, service components, and the Military Postal Service Agency, itself, in response to the recommendations developed in the Joint Services After Action Report produced at the Joint Service Postal Conference held in October 2003. DOD's comments are reprinted in their entirety in appendix II. DOD also provided a number of technical and clarifying comments, which we have incorporated where appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to interested congressional committees; the Secretary of Defense; the Executive Director of the Military Postal Service Agency; and the Director, Office of Management and Budget. We will make copies available to others upon request. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO Web site at http://www.gao.gov.

If you or your staff have any questions, please call me at (757) 552-8100. Key contributors to this report were Laura Durland, Karen Kemper, David Keefer, Timothy Burke, Ann Borseth, Madelon Savaides, and Nancy Benco.

Neal P. Curtin
Director, Defense Capabilities
 and Management

Congressional Committees

The Honorable John W. Warner
Chairman
The Honorable Carl Levin
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate

The Honorable Duncan Hunter
Chairman
The Honorable Ike Skelton
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Armed Services
House of Representatives

The Honorable Ted Stevens
Chairman
The Honorable Daniel K. Inouye
Ranking Minority Member
Subcommittee on Defense
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate

The Honorable Jerry Lewis
Chairman
The Honorable John P. Murtha
Ranking Minority Member
Subcommittee on Defense
Committee on Appropriations
House of Representatives

Appendix I: Scope and Methodology

To address overall issues of military mail delivery to and from the Gulf region and determine responsibilities for mail service, we obtained and reviewed Department of Defense (DOD) guidance and operations plans for mail delivery to troops serving in a contingency area, and specifically during Operation Iraqi Freedom. We then met with officials from the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics); Joint Staff for Manpower and Personnel; and U.S. Central Command to discuss these policies. Our review focused on postal operations as they applied to U.S. troops deployed to the countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, and Iraq during the buildup for Operation Iraqi Freedom, the operation itself, and the ongoing military operations in Iraq (January through December 2003).

To address the issue of the timeliness of mail service to and from troops serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom, we collected, analyzed, and assessed the reliability of transit time data from the Army's 3rd Personnel Command and the Military Postal Service Agency. We discussed the data with military postal officials to ensure that we were interpreting it correctly, especially the methodology used to report transit times from the Transit Time Information Standard System for Military Mail. Within our analysis, we determined that the majority of transit time data we received was for Army mail. Some data were from the Air Force and Marine Corps, but they were not separated out. We did not collect transit time data from the Navy, as their postal operations run separate from and independent of the others.[1] Some data required sorting in order to eliminate irrelevant data elements and to be able to display them on a monthly basis. To determine the effect that the timeliness of mail service had on troops serving in the contingency area, we designed a data collection instrument and then conducted discussion groups with and collected data from a non-representative sample of 127 officers and enlisted personnel—91 from the Army's 3rd Infantry Division (stationed at Fort Stewart, Georgia) and 36 from the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force (stationed at Camp Pendleton, California). The data collected from this non-representative sample cannot be projected for the entire universe of troops deployed. At each location, the GAO "point of contact" selected a non-representative sample of

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[1]The Navy postal system operates separate from the Army system since most of the Navy's mail follows established procedures for delivery of mail to sailors aboard ships. By contrast, the Army must establish and use ground-based transportation networks and routing systems. In addition, Navy postal operations had long been established for the Gulf region and did not need the level of build up required for the Army during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

military personnel who had recently returned from a deployment in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. The sample size (127) is simply the total number of the soldiers and marines who were available to meet with us during our visits. We summarized the data we collected from the soldiers and marines, determined percentages of individual responses for each question, and gathered their personal accounts regarding mail delivery problems.

To address how mail issues and problems experienced during Operation Iraqi Freedom compare with those experienced during Operations Desert Shield/Storm, we obtained and analyzed lessons learned from the first Persian Gulf War and compared these with any available reports prepared by the various offices and commands we visited regarding the postal problems experienced during Operation Iraqi Freedom. We met with numerous officials and personnel from the U.S. Army Reserve Command, the Military Postal Service Agency, the U.S. Postal Service, U.S. Central Command, the Army's 3rd Personnel Command, U.S. Army Central Command, Air Force Air Combat Command, U.S. Marine Corps, Joint Military Mail Terminal in Kuwait, Fleet Mail Center in Bahrain, and Joint Military Mail Terminal in Iraq to discuss the similarities and differences of the postal problems still being encountered and what actions had been taken to resolve any previously identified problems.

To assess efforts to resolve military postal problems for future contingencies, we collected any available after action reports and plans for addressing military postal problems. We attended the Joint Postal Conference—hosted by the Military Postal Service Agency in October 2003—which addressed postal problems encountered during Operation Iraqi Freedom. During the conference, we spoke with military postal officials who had direct responsibility for various aspects of mail delivery to and from the Iraqi theater, and collected pertinent documentation. We summarized information regarding key postal issues that must be addressed to avoid their repetition in the future. We spoke with officials at the Joint Forces Command who are in charge of collecting lessons learned for Operation Iraqi Freedom. We also spoke with the Army Adjutant General in charge of the Military Postal Service Agency to assess the agency's plans for taking actions to mitigate those problems. We then met with a key official from the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics)—the responsible body for military postal policy and oversight—to discuss our findings and to determine what entity is accountable for resolving these issues.

We conducted our review from August 2003 through March 2004 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE
MILITARY POSTAL SERVICE AGENCY
2461 EISENHOWER AVENUE
ALEXANDRIA VA 22331-0006

March 23, 2004

REPLY TO
ATTENTION OF

Office of the Executive Director

Mr. Neal P. Curtin
Director, Defense Capabilities
  and Management
U.S. General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Curtin:

    This is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the GAO draft report GAO-040484, "OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM: Long-standing Problems Hampering Mail Delivery Need to Be Resolved," dated March 8, 2004 (GAO Code 350429).

    The Military Postal Service Agency (MPSA) has been working closely with the Services, Components, and Unified Commands (specifically, U.S. Central Command) on lessons learned and after action reviews. MPSA has already initiated actions with U.S. Central Command to put better processes in place to fix short falls experienced during the build up and conduct of combat operations, as well as current operations. This GAO draft report has reemphasized the importance of mail delivery to the senior leadership in DoD, the Services, Unified Commands, and MPSA. MPSA, in conjunction with the Services, Components, and Unified Commands, continues to work diligently to shorten the timeline and efficiency of processing mail to our troops overseas.

    Detailed comments to the recommendations are enclosed. As directed, technical comments were forwarded directly to the GAO staff for consideration.

                                        Sincerely,

                                        Gina S. Farrisee
                                        Brigadier General, U.S. Army
                                        Executive Director

Enclosure

Printed on   Recycled Paper

GAO DRAFT REPORT – DATED MARCH 8, 2004
GAO CODE 350429/GAO-04-484

"OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM: Long-standing Problems Hampering
Mail Delivery Need to Be Resolved"

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS
TO THE RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1: Without a clear and accurate data to measure the timeliness
of mail to U.S. troops overseas during contingency operations, no meaningful
assessment can be made on the quality of mail service. Therefore, the GAO
recommended that the Secretary of Defense direct the Under Secretary of Defense
(Acquisition, Technology and Logistics) to work with the Army Adjutant General to
improve the quality of transit time data for postal operations by implementing a system
that will accurately track, calculate, and report postal transit times. (p. 30/GAO Draft
Report)

DOD RESPONSE: Concur. The Military Postal Service Agency (MPSA) has been
directed to work on a system to implement the GAO recommendations. MPSA, in
conjunction with the U.S. Postal Service, developed and deployed the Military Origin
Destination Information System (MODIS) after Desert Shield/Desert Storm. This
system consists of a USPS Remote Data Scanner (RDS) capable of scanning barcodes
from USPS MIDAS labels placed on mailbags and oversized parcels. USPS does not
have any barcode date information on individual letters; only on the MIDAS labels on
sacks and trays of mail. The scanned information from Military Post Offices (MPOs) is
transmitted electronically to USPS, and populates a USPS database that provides
transit times on the units using MIDAS equipment.
     This system could not be used during OIF due the lack of connectivity to the
Internet required to transmit the scanned data. Alternative manual methods of
collecting transit times will again be required. MPSA is currently developing the next
generation of equipment for MODIS to be more widely deployed than the original
equipment. It will capture the transit time data and then transmit the data via internet
into MPSA's Automated Military Postal System (AMPS). AMPS will provide a daily
report, broken down by zip code, of transit times from all locations scanning.
     Even the RDS devices are limited to capturing data only to the MPO level, not to
individual troops, since delivery is often affected by unit mail clerks. However, tracking
the transit data will allow MPSA to monitor the progress of mail to ensure it is within the
range of acceptable service standards to destination MPOs. MPSA will work with USPS
on a system to track all the way to troop delivery.
     MPSA is also reviewing manual transit time collection and reporting methods for
MPOs that do not have connectivity, like most in OIF during the first months of the
deployment. MPSA will publish new, manual procedures to all field activities for use
when automated transit time collection is not possible.

RECOMMENDATION 2: In the absence of a clear plan for resolving recurring postal problems during contingency operations, the GAO recommended that the Secretary of Defense direct the Under Secretary of Defense (Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics) designate, direct, and authorize an appropriate DoD agency, unit, or command to determine what long-standing postal issues need to be resolved, and to develop a specific course of action and timetable for their resolution, including appropriate follow-up to ensure that the problems have been fixed. Specifically, these actions should address the issues highlighted in this report, such as the following;

- strengthen the joint postal planning function and specify a body to ensure the implementation of postal operations in-theater;
- deploy properly trained and equipped postal troops into theater prior to the mail build-up; and
- dedicate adequate postal facilities, heavy equipment, and transportation assets for postal operations.

An important part of addressing these long-standing problems is to share the results of these lessons learned from Operation Iraqi Freedom with all of the combatant commands to ensure that future contingencies do not repeat these problems.
(p. 31/GAO Draft Report)

DOD RESPONSE: Concur. A Joint Services After Action Report (AAR) was produced at a Joint Service Postal Conference hosted by MPSA in October 2003. The report was developed by over 100 members of all Services and components to cover every experience possible. The AARs include all of the issues above and recommendations from the postal experts that attended the conference for corrective actions. All improvements must take mail bio-terrorism into consideration. MPSA will facilitate and track the corrective actions taken by the Unified Commanders, Services/ Components, and those that MPSA can implement itself. MPSA shared its OIF after action findings with all combatant commands in other theaters. It will continue to share corrective actions as they take place to preclude similar situations in future contingencies anywhere in the world. Fixing logistical and personnel issues, as identified by GAO, will be key to future postal success during contingencies. Although MPSA will be implementing new joint guidance for postal operations, the Services, Components, Unified Commands, and MPSA will have to be adequately resourced to implement the identified solutions.