



U.S. Department of Defense

Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs)

News Transcript

On the Web:

<http://www.defenselink.mil/cgi-bin/dlprint.cgi?http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2006/tr20060607-13196.html>

Media contact: +1 (703) 697-5131

Public contact:

<http://www.dod.mil/faq/comment.html>

or +1 (703) 428-0711

Presenter: Commandant , U.S. Marine Corps, Gen. Michael Hagee

June 7, 2006

DoD News Briefing with Gen. Hagee from the Pentagon

GEN. HAGEE: Good afternoon, and thank you all for coming this afternoon.

First, I would like to talk briefly about what it is to be a Marine and what we Marines hold dear.

You know, we recruit some of the best young people in America. We only promise them one thing. If they are good enough, morally, mentally and physically, they could become a Marine. They too could wear the eagle, globe and anchor. They too could join the most elite military organization the world has ever seen.

We severely challenge them in boot camp and in officer candidate school. Those who succeed in becoming Marines know we have high standards on the battlefield, off the battlefield, on liberty, on leave, wearing the uniform, discipline. We really want to be the best at whatever we do.

Our recruits are taught -- and it is constantly reinforced -- that an important part of being a Marine is accomplishing the mission while adhering to our core values of honor, courage and commitment.

Our high standards, mission focus and selfless service are what enabled Marines to attack successfully in the Belleau Wood in June of 1918, after being told that the war was lost and their attack was futile.

These same military virtues resulted in the successful assault on Iwo Jima in February of 1945.

They're also what enabled the 1st Marine Division to conduct a successful withdrawal from the Chosin Reservoir when surrounded by 10 Chinese divisions during the Korean War.

And since 9/11, they have also enabled an estimated 180,000 Marines to perform so superbly in the very dangerous, complex and stressful environments of Iraq and Afghanistan.

While Marines are proud of our high standards, they also know that if they violate these tenets, they will be held accountable. Without accountability, standards would be nothing more than goals. Where compliance with our standards is in question, we use well-established processes to determine as accurately and expeditiously as possible what happened and why. But make no mistake; a Marine who has been found to have violated our standards will be held accountable. It is an important part of who we are, and all Marines expect it. High standards and accountability define Marines.

As Commandant, I am gravely concerned about the serious allegations concerning actions of some Marines at Haditha and Hamdania. I can assure you that the Marine Corps takes them seriously. As Commandant, I am the one accountable for organization, training and equipping of Marines. I am responsible, and I take these responsibilities quite seriously. We are committed to fully supporting the investigations of both incidents. We want to ensure the investigations are complete with respect to what actually happened on the ground and actions taken or not taken by the chain of command.

I have told the commanders who are responsible for the investigations that the Marine Corps will provide any resources necessary to help. While we want to complete these processes as expeditiously as possible, we are committed to ensuring they are thorough, that no avenue of investigation is left undone, and that due process and the rights of the affected individuals are protected. If it turns out that an individual violated rules or regulations, he will be held accountable, regardless of grade or position.

I need to stress that the investigations are ongoing within the operational chain of command. Once finished, they will go up the operational chain to the final adjudicating authority, in this case the commander of Marine Forces Central Command. Until they are complete, it would be inappropriate for me to comment on any aspect of the investigations. I refer all these questions to the operational chain of command for comment at the appropriate time. We intend to keep you informed to the fullest extent possible without interfering with the legal process.

As you know, I recently returned from visiting Marines in Iraq and North Carolina. Among other things, I took this trip to emphasize our ethos, standards and traditions. I was gratified, but not surprised, to discover that Marines have no confusion on these subjects. In the near future, I will visit with Marines in Southern California, Hawaii and Japan. I will tell them, as I did the Marines in Iraq and North Carolina, how proud I am of their performance and service to our corps and our country. I will also talk with them about how I expect them to adhere to our regulations and high standards. As I did in Iraq and North Carolina, I will talk with senior commanders and their sergeants major about their responsibilities with regards to training, teaching, mentoring and setting the example. This is what Marine commanders have been doing for over 230 years, and we will continue to provide this leadership.

While I remain concerned about the current allegations, I am confident the American people recognize that Marines are men and women of the highest caliber. I ask you to remember that day in and day out, in combat and in various roles throughout the world today and throughout our history, Marines have acquitted themselves with honor, dedication and dignity in some of the most difficult and dangerous environments imaginable. We don't intend to change.

I'll now take questions. And, Bob, start it off, please.

Q Thank you, General. You mentioned a number of times your own accountability for training and for what happens in the Marine Corps. And I'm wondering, given the gravity of what's come to light thus far in the two cases you cited, why shouldn't you resign as an acknowledgment of failure of leadership?

GEN. HAGEE: I serve at the pleasure of the president. And I have not submitted any resignation.

Jim?

Q General, Congressman Murtha said that the allegations of these reported incidents are a sign -- a further sign -- that the Marines and soldiers in Iraq are under tremendous combat stress. Is that the case? If these allegations prove to be true, is that a contributing factor?

GEN. HAGEE: I can -- I visit Iraq about once every two months, and I can only report on what I have

seen in my interaction with the Marines and with the soldiers over there. And I can tell you that their morale is really quite high. The operational tempo is also high. They are very proud in what they're doing. They know they're well-equipped, they know they are well-trained, and they know that they are making a difference.

Q And they know right from wrong, General?

GEN. HAGEE: They absolutely know right from wrong.

Sir?

Q General, some people have made comparisons between the Haditha incident and the My Lai massacre during the Vietnam War. In what ways are these two incidents comparable or not comparable?

GEN. HAGEE: You know, I really believe that it's inappropriate to make any sort of comparisons until the investigations are complete and we know what actually happened in those locations.

Q General, as far as I know, all that we have officially on the record from the military on the Haditha incident is that 15 civilians were killed by a roadside bomb. Can you now correct for the record that statement and tell us if that statement was inaccurate?

GEN. HAGEE: Jonathan, as I've said several times, I cannot comment on anything that has happened in either one of those two incidences until the investigations are complete.

Q So we're going to let stand the press release that went out --

GEN. HAGEE: Tom ? Tom?

Q You were a company commander in Vietnam, and a platoon leader as well. You fought an insurgency. What advice, if any, did you give, particularly to the junior officers, about your experiences, any parallels to Vietnam fighting an insurgency?

And one other thing too. If you think the Marines are doing a pretty good job, why do you feel it's necessary to fly around the world reminding them of high standards?

GEN. HAGEE: First, on Vietnam, I was a platoon commander in Vietnam. And as I have mentioned before, one of the challenges of small unit leadership is to constantly remind the Marines of the standards and that the -- about the people that you are trying to help in this very dangerous, complex environment. And I actually talk about that when I talk with Marines.

And as far as flying around the world, you know, as I mentioned, I go to Iraq every -- just about once every two months. And when I talk with Marines, I talk about what we stand for and what we are as Marines and the importance of doing the right thing on any battlefield, but especially this battlefield.

Q: General, Kathleen Koch with CNN. I know when you were in Iraq, besides talking to the Marines you were listening as well. What did they tell you about their thoughts on these allegations, what they're thinking about them and how it may be impacting their ability to do their jobs?

GEN. HAGEE: First off, I would tell you that they are focused on what they're doing and focused on their mission. But I think the best way that I can capture the feeling over there is, in al Asad, I believe it was, I had -- an NCO stood up and said, "Sir, that's not what we do.

That's not what we're about." And he said, "I want to know what senior leadership is doing, and I want to know what we can do about that." And I told him what he can -- what they could do about that is continue to do what they are doing right now. And they are doing, really, a magnificent job. As the secretary of Defense said, 99.9 percent of the Marines and soldiers are doing fabulously over there.

Q I understand the proscription on you talking about the investigation, but the Marine Corps has taken action against three officers, the battalion commander and two company commanders. Can you tell us what it was that they did that caused the Marine Corps to relieve them of command?

GEN. HAGEE: The 1st Marine Division commander, over a period of time, lost confidence in the abilities of those commanders to effectively command their units. And he has the authority, he executed it, and he relieved those three commanders.

Sir?

Q General, I understand this is an ongoing investigation. If you have information that these allegations are baseless, what benefit can there be to holding on to it for more weeks, as opposed to getting the facts out now?

GEN. HAGEE: I hate to repeat myself here, but as long as these investigations are ongoing, I am not going to comment on the investigations until I have seen the full investigations.

Q At the risk of getting the same answer, we've been told that there's -- there was a set of photographs that were taken by a Marine -- an exploitation team that came into Haditha after the incident. Can you just tell us whether -- can you confirm the existence of those photographs? Is there anything you can say about what they show?

GEN. HAGEE: I have seen the photographs, but they are part of the investigation, and I'm not going to talk about those photographs.

Q General, those of you who have been in combat can probably understand the stress of the squad or the unit that may have committed the event in Haditha. Are you more troubled by what may have happened up the chain of command if senior leaders away from the stress of battle, you know, may have violated, you know, the Corps' standards by not sufficiently investigating the thing, immediately?

GEN. HAGEE: I'm concerned any time that there are allegations that we have -- we may have not done the right thing, whether it was on the battlefield or up the chain of command, and that's why we're investigating both of those allegations.

Q General, have you considered relieving anyone in the chain of command before the investigation is completed?

GEN. HAGEE: I am waiting for those investigations to be complete, and -- so that I can understand actually what happened both on the ground and within the chain of command.

Q Sir, the troops in theater are undergoing core values training sessions. I believe there's two hours of training. Are the Marines separate, above and beyond, that training that all troops that are receiving -- are Marines undergoing their own separate training? Are there things that you're particularly emphasizing, sir?

GEN. HAGEE: Well, first off, as far as the training that has been directed by the commander over there,

we will participate in that training, of course. We're part of the force.

But as I've already mentioned, when I travel -- and I know commanders do exactly the same thing -- we talk about standards. We talk about values when we talk with the troops. This is not a onetime thing. This is a continuous thing the entire time that you're in the Marine Corps.

STAFF: One last question.

Q General, with several high-profile investigations under way involving U.S. Marines, do you worry about the impact the attention that these investigations are getting may have on your Marines elsewhere in Iraq or in other parts of the world in terms of, you know, the attention that these cases have gotten compared to what they may be doing?

GEN. HAGEE: You know, in the last week -- last week, I talked with probably -- I don't know -- 20,000 Marines. And I tell you what, I was inspired when I talked with them. They are focused on what they're doing. They are making a difference. They are very proud of what they're doing. And I can tell you, their families are very proud of what they're doing.

Are they concerned? Yes. But they know that we are going to do -- we are going to complete those investigations, and if any individual has been found to have violated our standards, rules or regulations, they will be held accountable.

Thank you all very much.

(C) COPYRIGHT 2005, FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE, INC., 1000 VERMONT AVE. NW; 5TH FLOOR; WASHINGTON, DC - 20005, USA. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. ANY REPRODUCTION, REDISTRIBUTION OR RETRANSMISSION IS EXPRESSLY PROHIBITED. UNAUTHORIZED REPRODUCTION, REDISTRIBUTION OR RETRANSMISSION CONSTITUTES A MISAPPROPRIATION UNDER APPLICABLE UNFAIR COMPETITION LAW, AND FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE, INC. RESERVES THE RIGHT TO PURSUE ALL REMEDIES AVAILABLE TO IT IN RESPECT TO SUCH MISAPPROPRIATION. FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE, INC. IS A PRIVATE FIRM AND IS NOT AFFILIATED WITH THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT. NO COPYRIGHT IS CLAIMED AS TO ANY PART OF THE ORIGINAL WORK PREPARED BY A UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT OFFICER OR EMPLOYEE AS PART OF THAT PERSON'S OFFICIAL DUTIES. FOR INFORMATION ON SUBSCRIBING TO FNS, PLEASE CALL JACK GRAEME AT (202) 347-1400.

<http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2006/tr20060607-13196.html>