



American troops dying younger in Afghanistan

By Vanessa Carr
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Photo: AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana

Troops in Afghanistan are dying younger, from an average of 28 years old from 2002 to 2008 to 25 years old this year, “often fresh out of boot camp,” according to [a report](#) in Tuesday’s New York Times.

This trend may be related to the deadly increase in improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in Afghanistan, according to defense policy expert Michael O’Hanlon of the Brookings Institution.

“My hypothesis is that more people are dying while on patrol,” he wrote in an e-mail. “Patrols involve young people and junior officers even more than do helicopter flights,” which have been the leading cause of casualties in earlier years, he said.

IEDs, like those in the exploding Toyota minivan that killed five American soldiers and 13 others in Kabul Tuesday, are now the leading cause of death for American troops in Afghanistan. Pentagon data reported more than 1,000 IED attacks in April of this year, more than double the number from April 2009. This has contributed to an accelerating death toll, which exceeded 1,000 Tuesday.

But Cato Institute military analyst David Rittgers points to the influx of Marines, the military’s youngest branch, to the Helmand Province, a Taliban stronghold where he says more American troops have died than any other region in Afghanistan.

“The Marines are a perpetually young service,” said Rittgers, who served three tours in the Army Special Forces in Afghanistan. “IEDs are part of it, but the people on patrol aren’t all young ... The presence of Marines in Helmand is where I put it.”

Almost three-quarters of enlisted Marines are 25 or younger, according to military data. In Afghanistan, they represent 23 percent of total troop deaths since 2001 but only 20 percent of the current deployment.

“They had a limited role for the first few years in Afghanistan and in the middle years,” said Rittgers. “But starting with the push in large numbers to the Helmand Province, the Marines have taken the front on that.”

Any views expressed by David Rittgers are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Defense or the Army.

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