

## Close Watch on Casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq

By NOAM COHEN

“EVERY morning I wake up and go looking for dead people,” says Michael White, a computer programmer from Stone Mountain, Ga., who publishes the Web site [iCasualties.org](http://iCasualties.org), which tracks deaths and injuries among coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

It is grim work of trolling through news sites and official releases about each episode, assessing the reliability of those accounts and then entering the details about the wounded and killed into a database.

Mr. White, 54, has done so since the 2003 invasion of Iraq — “when everything was flowers and chocolate,” he said. Yet he had a hunch that events might not continue so smoothly.

He has kept at it, even as the public and news organizations have moved on to other topics, particularly the economy.

Traffic on the site has dropped by at least half since the days of the surge, when the conduct of the war in Iraq was an issue in the 2008 presidential election. Now the site gets about 25,000 to 35,000 unique visitors a day, Mr. White says.

Also, donations have dried up — less than \$1,000, far short of the costs and down from \$8,000 to \$10,000 in a typical year. And no more people volunteer to enter the data and free Mr. White to improve the design of the site. In part, Mr. White says he keeps updating the information on the site because it is a calling, an obligation he wants to see through until the war ends. Ultimately, he would like to create a more permanent record of what he has compiled, maybe even publish a book.

There is another reason: People are counting on him — reporters, that is.

Without exactly trying, iCasualties has become a cog in the reporting from Iraq and Afghanistan. Local newspapers like The Poughkeepsie Journal of New York, wire services like Agence France-Presse and international organizations like the British Broadcasting Corporation routinely use iCasualties data to provide context (the number of New Yorkers who have been wounded in Iraq, 1,503; the total number of British troops killed in Afghanistan, 345).

The indexes for Iraq and for Afghanistan, produced by researchers at the Brookings Institution to track a range of statistics to analyze progress (or lack thereof) in both countries, use iCasualties for their basic indicators about how the fighting is going.

“From our perspective, iCasualties is a pretty invaluable tool,” said Ian Livingston, a senior research assistant at Brookings who works on the indexes. “We count a lot of things, and it takes hours and hours to count things.”

“Having a site like iCasualties,” he said, “someone who has been compiling this data, has been fairly transparent and we can trust is a big help.”

With news organizations making the same calculation about saving resources in a time of cuts, iCasualties has become even more visible.

Mr. White says he wanted to offer the public a way to assess independently the progress of the war:

“I think there is a need for some place you can go and say these are the figures. People have to agree on numbers. Right now, people don’t agree on numbers, whether we are talking about the economy, jobs, the deficit or global warming.”

Mr. White points to 2006 as the year when journalists felt confident enough to use iCasualties’s data as their own. “I had three years of doing it,” he said. “I was not just somebody out there doing a blog, but I took the time to build a database, to build, I don’t know what the word is, my own journalistic standards before putting it out there.”

His acceptance by journalists has left him “surprised and not surprised,” he said, noting that years ago, when he was driving and heard his site credited on NPR, it was “a bit of an ego boost.”

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While Mr. White says he gets fewer calls for detailed data analysis — deaths, say, by improvised-explosive device in a certain province of Iraq — the site’s figures are being used more routinely. A Nexis search would seem to bear this out, with more citations in last six months (842 articles) than in all of 2009 (795), even as news coverage from Iraq and Afghanistan is declining. (The New York Times has quoted the site 82 times since 2004, including 27 times in 2010.)

These days, Mr. White finds himself more frequently in the role of media critic. He says he is continually amazed at how little attention the war in Afghanistan has generated.

“We had 50 U.S. deaths in Afghanistan last month, and we are on course for 50 deaths this month, but it is not talked about,” Mr. White said. “It is not on the nightly news.” He refers to his tables to find months when a similar total of American troops were killed in Iraq, and it was big news.

“If it was in Iraq, it would be on the news,” he said.

He concedes that he was slow to recognize the war in Afghanistan. But with the drawdown of United States troops in Iraq and the transfer of troops to Afghanistan, iCasualties’s focus has shifted. “Afghanistan was the redheaded stepchild of what I did,” Mr. White said. “Now Iraq is.”

His work may be more about trying to keep the events there in the public eye, a form of bearing witness. Shortly after a telephone interview with a reporter, he forwarded an e-mail he said he received last week, “My kid’s in Kandahar Province and I rely upon your Web site to keep up with current data,” the e-mail reads.

Mr. White may be carrying a clipboard and a calculator, but he is still looking for the bodies.