

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

A Former Marine Discusses IT in Iraq

By Lee Gomes

July 1, 2008

The U.S. military has been as enthusiastic about information technology as U.S. businesses have been, making computers, email and instant messaging part of everyday life for troops in Iraq.

But the question of whether IT makes people better at what they do seems just as mixed a picture in combat as it is in the office.

Former Marine Tyler E. Boudreau wrote an account for the Industry Standard Web site of his experience with IT as a captain in Iraq. The article attracted a lot of attention for its portrayal of senior officers spending lots of time reading subordinates' emails and second-guessing the officers under them.

Mr. Boudreau, who writes a blog called "Deeper Than War" and whose book on Iraq, "Packing Inferno," is due out in September, talked about his experiences.

What's it like being on a computer while in combat in Iraq?

High tech use is increasingly important to the military in Iraq, but success has been mixed.

It wasn't exactly smooth. It's dusty and sandy, and some soldiers are not exactly computer-savvy guys in the first place. They're pounding away on some ruggedized machine, but they're not good typists, since they're not used to being on a keyboard. Also, the connectivity would come and go.

A lot of civilians might be surprised by the extent to which software tools like IM [instant messaging] are being used by troops.

The goal in war has always been to get as much intelligence to headquarters as quickly as possible, then to process it and get it back into the field. So, obviously, when you're in the military and living in the Information Age, you want to take advantage of whatever technology is available. Radio is still the primary means of communication. With email, though, if anybody writes something, it's a lot easier to read it later.

You write about being second-guessed for several days over a relatively minor incident by someone reading your emails.

While I don't think IT created micro-management, I think it made micro-management a lot easier. It's a tempting thing to do. But the more accessible the chain of command is, the stronger you have to be to not micromanage.

The dangers of micro-management are well-known. If someone is deciding for you every last detail of how you should get your job done, you stop thinking for yourself. Given the type of battlefield the military is dealing with these days, they're in need of a lot of individual initiative. There are so many small units off on their own.

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What are some of the benefits of IT in the military?

There are countless examples of good things IT can do. But I don't necessarily consider them pluses, because it just keeps us on par with changing circumstances. Yes, we can relay information more quickly, but we need to relay information more quickly. With trench warfare, information didn't have to move as rapidly.

So it doesn't necessarily make people more effective in fighting?

I don't think so. If we took this army and put it in World War I, maybe we'd really do great. But this day and age has its own challenges.

Is there any relevance to what happens with IT in war with how IT is used in the office?

I've never worked in the corporate world, but I imagine it's just like the situation with warfare. Yes, we have all these abilities with technology, but at the same time, the global economy is rapidly advancing. So you have to have all that information just to keep up. And you're probably not doing a good enough job keeping up, just like on the battlefield.