

THE SOLDIERS

Reservists Who Refused Order Tried to Persuade Superiors

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and JOHN KIFNER

JACKSON, Miss., Oct. 18 — Members of the Army Reserve platoon in Iraq that disobeyed orders to deliver fuel to another base last week had tried to persuade their superiors for hours against the mission, relatives of the soldiers said Monday.

That defying an order had become an option for 18 members of the 343rd Quartermaster Company seemed to signal a worsening of the low morale that had plagued the unit.

The 13th Corps Support Command, which the 343rd belongs to, and its commander, Brig. Gen. James E. Chambers, have been singled out for repeated criticism on the Web site and column of David H. Hackworth, a retired Army colonel and decorated veteran of the Korea and Vietnam wars. The Web site, www.hackworth.com, serves as a channel for complaints against military leadership, and Colonel Hackworth calls himself "the voice of the grunt."

The soldiers who refused their mission had complained to relatives in months past about the poor quality of their trucks and equipment, though they never indicated they would do anything other than pursue changes through the chain of command, the relatives said.

But Kathy Harris said she received an e-mail message from her son, Specialist Aaron Gordon, in which he asked about possible repercussions for disobeying orders. According to the time on the e-mail message, Ms. Harris said it was probably sent between 1 a.m. and 2 a.m. on Oct. 13, Iraq time.

The platoon had returned from a fuel-delivery mission that lasted four to five days, according to accounts of relatives who spoke to the soldiers. The cargo of jet fuel was rejected because it was contaminated with diesel, relatives said. The military has denied that the fuel was unusable.

Some of the trucks, which were due for repairs, broke down on the

journey, said Stephanie Parks, the fiancée of Johnny Coates, father of Specialist Major Coates of Charlotte, N.C., a member of the platoon. The platoon returned late on the evening of Oct. 12. At 4 a.m. the next day, they were roused to take the fuel from their base in Tallil to Taji, much farther north, family members said.

"That's when everything went haywire," said Ricky Shealey, father of Specialist Scott Shealey. "My son says they argued for three hours trying to get some sense into them people. They utilized their chain of command. They even had a civilian out there. He said it was contaminated."

The soldiers also feared for their

Relatives said soldiers argued for hours against the mission.

safety, saying their trucks lacked armor and the convoy lacked a proper armed escort, relatives have said.

Soldiers have complained bitterly on Colonel Hackworth's Web site about low morale at the 13th Corps Support Command, and about General Chambers himself. General Chambers said on Sunday in Baghdad that he had ordered a safety review of the 343rd's equipment and trucks. He also said an inquiry had begun into the actions of the soldiers.

Pentagon officials indicated efforts were under way to defuse the situation. For example, the Army is considering returning all but five of the unit's members to duty, one senior official said. But two who may face discipline have past instances of wrongdoing in Iraq, in particular of substance abuse, the official said. He did not give names and the accusations could not be confirmed.

The accusations have incensed relatives of the soldiers. "They have to make them look bad," said Stacy Shealey, Specialist Shealey's sister. "It's just another reason to mess with them."

Ariel Hart contributed reporting from Atlanta for this article, and Thom Shanker from Washington.