

Conway says overall health of Marines is good

Wednesday, June 17, 2009, 9:08 PM

By [Brent Martin](#)

West-Central Missouri Congressman Ike Skelton, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, has complained about the strain two wars have placed on America's military. The Missouriinet had a chance to ask the top Marine about Skelton's concern during the Current Strategy Forum sponsored by the [Naval War College](#) in Newport, Rhode Island.

[General James T. Conway](#), Commandant of the Marine Corps, has a Missouri connection. The native of Walnut Ridge, Arkansas is a graduate of Southeast Missouri State University in Cape Girardeau. Conway says he understands the Congressman's concerns. He says the Corps uses about a dozen measurements to gauge the overall health of its force.

"And, frankly, we're pretty pleased with what we see right now with that resiliency," Conway tells the Missouriinet's Brent Martin attending the CSF, "based on the fact we've been at war arguably for seven or eight years."

The measurements include such things as desertion and unauthorized absences, domestic abuse of different kinds, and drunken driving among others. Two measurements concern Conway. Both the number of suicides and divorces are on the rise among Marines, especially upon return from deployment to Iraq and Afghanistan.

"And so we're concerned about the trajectory on a couple of those trends," Conway says. "But, other than those, they are as good now or better than they were in 2001 before this all started. So, we're definitely concerned about it and we are monitoring it to see if there is action that should be taken."

Conway says Marine Corps policy has helped. A Marine is deployed for only seven months at a time, rather than the 12 or more months an Army soldier can be deployed. Also, Marines serve a three or four year tour of duty before being assigned away from the battlefield, sometimes for as long as a full school year so Marines can have long stretches of time with their family.

Credit also goes to the public, according to Conway, who says Marines no longer remark that while the Marines are at war, Americans are at the mall. Conway says Marines have noticed strong support of their mission among the public, something that contributes to the overall mental health of the Corps. He adds that Congress has shown its support through increased pay and benefits.

Congress has authorized a Marine Corps totaling 202,000 troops. Conway says that is adequate to handle its assignments in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as others around the world. Currently 25,000 Marines are deployed in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

The overall health of the Marines was a topic Conway addressed when he spoke to the Current Strategy Forum. Conway, who toured Iraq about a month ago, also told attendees that the Marines' time in Iraq is coming to a close. Conway predicted the Marines would leave Iraq in the spring of Fiscal Year 2010.