

# STARS AND STRIPES

The G.I.'s uniform, sewn with conviction, by *Ian Urbina*

Throughout its much-touted missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. military has enjoyed perhaps its greatest acclaim among Americans since the Greatest Generation shipped off to World War II. But seldom recognized are the more than 21,000 workers who manufacture much of what the U.S. fighting man wears into battle—from the helmet on his head to the shirt on his back, to his underwear and his pajamas, to the robes of his military pastor and the gowns of his battlefield surgeon. If one peers closely into the clothes and accoutrements of a U.S. soldier, one might perceive, in the seams and hems and weaves, the unflagging endeavor of the workers back home who construct them. One might scent the sweat of the men and women who, in 111 facilities from Miami to Phoenix to Sandstone, Minnesota, work in the service of their country not for glory, or for personal gain, but simply because they are compelled to do so.

These craftspeople work ceaselessly, never pausing to savor victory. In April, as U.S. soldiers helped to pull down the statue of Saddam in Baghdad's al-Fardus Square, 265 federal prisoners in the sleepy burg of Greenville, Illinois, near the shores of Governor Bond Lake, continued to produce 1,000 of these battle-dress uniform shirts every single day. Scores of inmates at the prison shop in Edgefield, in South Carolina peach country, spend their days repairing uniforms that have been torn. At prison laundries in Florida, Alabama, and Texas, soiled uniforms are cleaned and pressed, then returned to nearby bases. When necessary, prisoners have been engaged to make flak jackets and even to repair damaged parachutes. The men and women who do this work expect little reward: their pay is 23¢ to \$1.15 per hour. With the nation at war, they have only freedom on their minds.

"City of Opportunity" is the apt motto of Seagoville, Texas, where the low-security federal prison bestows on its residents, roughly three fourths of whom are in on drug charges, the opportunity to churn out these desert battle trousers. The mobilization of such men and women nationwide is accomplished by Federal Prison Industries (FPI), a for-profit corporation owned by the U.S. government. FPI, the federal government's thirty-ninth largest contractor, sells more than \$400 million worth of products annually to the military. Since its founding in 1934, FPI has enjoyed "mandatory source" status, which means that federal agencies are required to buy from the company even if the same item can be purchased cheaper elsewhere. FPI's goal is to keep 25 percent of the federal prison population as busy as possible, and as that population has grown—by a factor of five, in fact, since 1984, due in large part to the War on Drugs—both FPI's product lines and its sales have expanded admirably.

In Beaumont, Texas, amid lush Gulf Coast rice fields, 300 inmates have made 150,000 of these Kevlar helmets in the past two years, more than \$11 million worth. Despite such valuable contributions, there are some who denigrate the work of these men and women as bad for America. One critic is Propper International, a St. Louis-based company whose non-incarcerated workers make the same trousers as FPI, and offer them to the military for \$2.39 less per pair. Another is organized labor, which complains that jobs are being lost to an employer that pays its workers a sub-minimum wage; does not pay taxes, benefits, or Social Security; and is not bound by OSHA guidelines. But former attorney general Edwin Meese, now chairman of an organization called the Enterprise Prison Institute, disagrees, noting that prisoners need something "constructive to do." Meese is a natural mentor for these workers, in that he helped to create the federal drug policy that has allowed so many of them to land their jobs in the first place.

One area of growth has been electronics, such as components for these microphone headsets. Electronics are made in fourteen FPI factories, employing some 3,000 men and women from Lompoc, on California's Central Coast, all the way up to Otisville, New York, in the foothills of the Catskills. FPI's factories are the ultimate American melting pot. For example, two of the conspirators in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing—Mohammad Salameh and Mahmud Abouhalima—say that even they were pressed to serve in the FPI factories at Leavenworth. Like Salameh and Abouhalima, three in ten federal inmates are not legal residents of the United States. Some people have alleged that the U.S. war effort in Iraq received inadequate support from citizens of other nations; but such cynics might consider the demonstrable support that foreign nationals lent that effort inside the nation's own prisons.

Although our prisoners are not yet allowed to manufacture guns, they do supply components for artillery, from 30mm pistols all the way up to 300mm anti-aircraft weapons. In Marion, Illinois, inmates manufactured cable assemblies for the Patriot missiles that proved so decisive in the 1991 Gulf War. Having removed regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States nevertheless faces a world still fraught with danger, and in the subduing of that world, the prison workers of FPI form a secure line of supply. Today, new foes lurk on the horizon, some of which possess even more secure lines of supply than we—North Korea, for example, with hundreds of thousands of prison laborers, or China, with millions. In the face of such adversaries, one cannot doubt that America's prisons will grow to meet the challenge.

*Ian Urbina is a reporter at the New York Times. Previously he was an associate editor at the Middle East Research and Information Project.*

