

**SENATE FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE
REFERENCES COMMITTEE**

**INQUIRY INTO RECRUITMENT & RETENTION
OF DEFENCE PERSONNEL**

SUBMISSION

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SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Subject: Whether the current recruitment and retention strategies of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) are effective in meeting the organisation's personnel requirements (including reserves).

INTRODUCTION

I am a former Regular officer with 20 years service and now serve in the Reserve as Commanding Officer of a battalion. In my Regular career I served twice as the senior personnel and logistics staff officer on a Reserve Brigade headquarters.

The purpose of this submission is to provide the Committee with my opinion of Army policy development and its effect on recruitment and retention in the Part Time Army, the Reserve. A dot point summary of the main points is at annex A.

DISCUSSION

Defence is a public policy area inhabited almost entirely by professional officers trained from youth, developed, employed and if necessary, sanctioned within its cloisters and by interests who derive significant benefit from the operation of its individual elements, the Navy, Army and Air Force. On the face of it this may appear to be no different to any other area of public policy. However I believe that in the area of policy development the lack of effective consultation, external involvement and critical examination of proposals has led Army to develop personnel policies that in some cases have adverse, unintended consequences and fail to achieve the original objective.

Failure to correctly forecast the impact of a variety of policy decisions has led to the narrowing of Army's capability and a reduction in strategic depth that is evident in the Reserve's recruitment and retention levels. Meanwhile Army is spending millions trying to boost enlistments and retention in the Reserve. Army's policy development processes and decisions have therefore led to in-cohesive policy outcomes.

To support my opinion I draw the Committee's attention to a policy decision that has had a significant effect on the Reserve, that of combined Regular and Reserve training. Under this policy, Army has been moving to a system where Reserve members receive the same, or very close to the same training as Regular soldiers, bringing them to the same level of competence as the Regular soldier. The need for the change in policy was apparently based on the general agreement of Regular officers that Reserve members were not achieving the required levels of competence.

There are seductive arguments why there should be a single standard, particularly in circumstances where Reservists may go directly from training courses to units on operations and on this basis the policy is pursued. The reality is that Reservists do not go from training to operations. Short of a genuine defence emergency, (not simply a crisis brought about by failing to identifying strategic capability priorities,

leaving Government with limited options other than catch up as appears to be the current situation with infantry battalion rotations in East Timor) the vast majority of Reservists will never serve alongside Regular soldiers on operations. The Reserve's competency levels have also been demonstrated, on operations, to be at the required level.

The original premise on which the policy was based is faulted and the adverse consequences of the policy are being suffered unnecessarily. Some of the adverse consequences of the policy are discussed below.

Recruit Training

The perception of the Regular Army was that regional recruit training did not provide soldiers with sufficient levels of basic soldier skills to prepare them for their subsequent trade training and certainly didn't compare with the arduous Regular recruit training. As far as I know there was no truly independent review of the whole process eg a comparison of the two streams of training at some point following their trade training, on which to make such an assessment. Reviews that occurred were very much of the view that the proposed changes were overdue and their merits self-evident. Their conclusions were predictable.

Recruits must now attend common recruit training in Wagga Wagga. The course is of 7 weeks, compared to the original regional courses of 2 weeks. An employed person would need to give up 7 weeks of annual leave or take leave without pay to attend the course. In other words, forgo recreational leave that takes 2 years to accrue or accept the going recruit pay rate instead of the rate normally earned at work.

A consequence is that Reserve recruiting in this region fell sharply and has remained low since the introduction of combined recruit training.

Trade Training

In some trades the problem is exacerbated when the training progression is considered. Before soldiers are qualified to fill an establishment position and be paid as trained soldiers they must undergo trade training. In the case of Reserve Medical Assistants, the basic course is 20 weeks. If the course were available in modules it would be equivalent to 5 years accrued recreational leave that an employed member must forgo. The course is not yet ready in a modular format but remarkably its predecessor was cancelled before a review was undertaken and the replacement course package agreed. Reserve medics have not been trained for two years, creating a large and completely avoidable capability gap that will move through units with the cohort into the future.

The recruit who wants to be a medic has now forgone 7 years annual recreational leave or 20 weeks without a primary income to attend these courses. This is required simply to become a trained soldier in the Army Reserve.

Pay Rates

During the period before trade qualification course is passed, regardless of the length of time involved, the soldier is paid less than \$60.00 for each attended day. On a 37.5-hour week that is \$8.00 per hour. Given that Army training involves significantly more than an 8 hour Monday to Friday commitment, this figure is actually something closer to \$6.00 per hour. Given that stacking boxes in supermarkets or taking orders at the drive through window of a fast food store pays 16 year olds a similar hourly rate and both will be tax exempt, it is little wonder that recruiting is down and fast food chains have waiting lists of eager recruits.

Recognition of Civil Competencies

Australia is moving toward a national system of competency recognition. It seems however that in Army there is a constant need to justify why civil competencies ought to be recognised, rather than follow logic and the sentiment and intent of a nationally based competency regime and the Commonwealth's *Mutual Recognition Act* and only train where there are important skill deficiencies that cannot be attained on the job. The focus appears to be based on identifying non-existent or minor, unique attributes of particular Army trades, impossible to find in any other form of employment which therefore requires further training, before skills are recognised. To the casual observer it must appear that the purpose of some training is to keep courses and Army schools running, rather than providing the soldiers with new job competencies. We all know of situations where heavy goods vehicle drivers can drive Army vehicles as contract staff but not as soldiers.

A consequence is that trade qualified personnel are presented with obstacles to their enlistment into the Reserve.

New Legislation

New legislation will not make it easier for Reservists to attend longer courses. We may be better able to compensate employers for releasing them, and protect their jobs/interests for their eventual return but it does not create increased personal commitment in the Reservist. This cannot be enshrined by Act of Parliament.

To expect Reservists to be full time soldiers when it suits Defence fails to recognise that Reservists have always had the opportunity to join the Regular Army and be full time soldiers, but choose instead to serve in a very much more limited role as Reservists. The Legislation seems to be based on the notion that all Reservists would sooner be full time members if only their pesky, money-grabbing employer would allow them to do longer courses and deployments.

Policy Consultation

The Army uses at least two mechanisms to assist with policy development. Experienced officers are posted to various staff positions to develop policy and a small number of policy proposals are disseminated more broadly through the Chain of Command, into the Army 'community' for comment.

The effectiveness of the staff model relies on incumbents having the necessary experience and a good grasp of issues relating to their area of staff responsibility. Too often, officers posted to these positions have never served in the Reserve or have had very limited contact, but are nevertheless responsible for developing policy and providing key elements of the advice necessary for more senior officers to support or reject proposals. A consequence is that the policy decisions are often ill informed and padded with the generally held, prejudiced view of the Reserve.

I have also noted that officers at all levels, by selection and through their training and development, are enthusiastic and self-confident and have a tendency to believe that they have the necessary knowledge to assess factors and make decisions. Army holds as quasi doctrine that in the absence of complete knowledge or information, a quick good decision today is better than a perfect decision next week. This view is counter productive in a policy development environment as it discourages or at the very least excuses poor stakeholder consultative processes.

The Chain of Command is a mechanism that allows access a wide range of views on policy proposals. Unfortunately at every step there is a single gatekeeper who determines the breadth and depth of consultation and what resulting comments will or will not proceed. Rarely are a variety of views passed to higher levels in the chain. More often than not the staff process attempts to negotiate the consensus position; perhaps a more palatable, less obstructive comment.

Some members use their command responsibility to overrule or ignore completely rational but contrary advice that does not support their favoured course of action. Too often command seems to be about having the power to say how things are to be done rather than what outcome is to be achieved. This is a disturbing tendency in an organisation where Mission Analysis and assessment of Commander's Intent are central elements of operational decision making and therefore success on operations.

Civilian Skills

In any discussion of the comparative value of Reservist and Regular members, there is a tendency for the civilian skills of the Reservists to be identified and praised. In fact these skills are being held up as a form of compensator for deficiencies in their military skills. The need to raise these valuable skills and experiences highlights further the low regard held for their military skill levels.

CONCLUSION

The individual Army Reserve members deployed on recent operations have been afforded high praise, however their individual effectiveness should not disguise the fact that their parent units are under-manned simply because of the impact of an Army policy. Nor should it be overlooked that the vast majority of Reservists who have recently served overseas and on other operations were trained under the old scheme and should, by all accounts, have been quite incompetent. The fact that a Reserve corporal with 12 years in a trade should be as good on the job as a 4 year Regular corporal should not be a surprise to senior officers. Intuition should lead to that conclusion, unless there is a natural counter-intuitive bias in play.

Senior officers with ultimate responsibility for policy outcomes must seek and properly consider the views of persons with the background and knowledge necessary to provide informed comment on the ways and means to achieve objectives. However unpalatable to some sectors of Defence, this will often include serving members of the Army Reserve.

It has long been my view that if this group of professionals were treated more like knowledgeable and valued stakeholders by their Regular contemporaries, they would be found to be less like the mutinous Rum Corps they are characterised as and more like the effective members of the Profession of Arms that we all aspire to be. Resolution of this ancient argument will allow the Army to focus on the real enemy.....the Air Force.

DOT POINT SUMMARY

The submission discusses the Army policy of bringing Reserve and Regular training requirements closer and the effect the policy has had on recruiting and trade training. The submission also discusses Reserve pay, recent legislative changes, Army policy development skills and the general standing of the Reserve in the Army as a whole.

The main points are:

- Training takes too long and relies on the willingness of the Reservist to use up 2 – 7 years accrued annual leave or go on leave without pay for the duration of training.
- Pay rates for soldiers are very poor, being comparable with casual wages offered to high school students, and do not reflect the levels of commitment required or given.
- Legislation points to a view within Defence that Reservists are looking to do more full time service if they have certain job protection measures in place. If this were so, Reservists would have joined the Regular Army, as they are free to do.
- Army does not appear to have a mechanism to conduct full and proper consultation when developing policy and will often “require” that unworkable and contradictory policies are implemented, supported by commanders and successful.
- The Regular Army holds the Reserve in disdain and will continue to ignore or produce unworkable solutions to real problems and innovative action plans for non-existent problems.