

National Guard and Reserve forces lack equipment and training

by Robert_J_Caldwell

The Iraq war has demonstrated anew the indispensable role of National Guard and Reserve units as vital augments to America's active duty military forces. Yet, years of inadequate budgets and the stresses of prolonged, repeated deployments on a too-small force have left the Guard and Reserve so short of equipment, training and sometimes personnel that their ability to perform missions at home and abroad is increasingly in jeopardy.

At present, 88 percent of all Army National Guard units now in the United States are so poorly equipped that they are considered "not ready" - meaning they are not prepared for overseas deployments or, in some cases, to respond to domestic emergencies and natural disasters. Equipment levels for these Army National Guard units average only 42 percent of requirements for everything from tanks and other combat vehicles to night vision equipment.

Personnel shortages in many Guard and Reserve units are so severe that the Army and Marine Corps routinely draw heavily from other formations to bring deploying units up to strength. This disruptive practice, dubbed cross-leveling, erodes the unit cohesion so necessary to success in combat.

One, admittedly extreme, example occurred when the Pentagon mobilized the California National Guard's 756th Transportation Company for duty in Iraq in 2005. Of the 170 Guard soldiers required for deployment, only seven were available from the company. Another 163 National Guardsmen from 65 other units and 49 locations had to be "cross-leveled" into the unit. Of these, 100 required additional qualification training in their military occupational specialties.

Personnel shortages are likely to grow still more acute as recruiting and retention rates for Reserve forces fall, primarily due to extended and repeated overseas and combat deployments.

These and many other deficiencies are the findings of the independent, nonpartisan Commission on the National Guard and Reserves. Created by Congress in 2005, the commission is charged with recommending changes in law and policy to ensure that Guard and Reserve forces remain fully capable of performing their assigned missions.

The commission's interim report released last week focused mainly on the National Guard. What it found can only be called alarming. Citing the numerous factors degrading National Guard forces, the commission's report declares flatly that, "the force cannot be sustained over the long term at this level of utilization."

A glance at the structure of America's military shows just how critical these problems are.

The active duty armed forces have declined from 2.2 million when the Cold War ended a decade and a half ago to 1.4 million today. What is known as the Reserve Component - Army, Air Force, Marine Corps, Navy and Coast Guard Reserve plus the Army and Air National Guard - have dropped from 1.2 million to 800,000 over this same period. Thus, the total reserve force constitutes 44 percent of the U.S. military.

For the undermanned and overstretched Army, which has borne the brunt of four years of fighting in Iraq and five years of combat in Afghanistan plus numerous other overseas deployments in hot spots from Korea to Bosnia, its Reserve and National Guard components constitute 38 percent of its total strength.

Moreover, this Reserve and National Guard component includes the full gamut of combat units - tanks, infantry, artillery, military police, aviation and Special Operations forces - along with logistical and support formations.

In 2004, Reserve and National Guard units comprised 40 percent of all U.S. troops in Iraq. As the commission's report notes, the use of reserve components increased from 12.7 million duty days in 2001 to 68.3 million duty days in 2005.

Accordingly, any threat to the mission effectiveness of Reserve and National Guard units threatens the overall combat capability of America's armed forces. The era of the "weekend warrior" National Guardsman is long gone. The fact is, America's smaller, post-Cold War military cannot fight for long, if at all, without mobilizing and deploying its Reserve and National Guard components.

In the spare words of the commission's report, "Today, the DOD (Department of Defense) cannot implement the National Security Strategy without National Guard and Reserve forces."

Yet, according to the Army's own reports, the Army's overall Reserve Component is currently short 22,000 Humvees, 42,000 medium trucks, 53,000 rifles, machine guns and other small arms, 264,000 night vision devices and 50,000 tactical radios.

Recruiting for the all-volunteer military, including its Reserve and National Guard components, depends on a sufficiently large, willing and qualified pool of potential enlistees. A nationwide survey of young people in 2006 found that what the commission called "youth propensity to enlist" had declined for young men from 21 percent in 2005 to 14 percent in 2006. When young women were included in the mix, the propensity to enlist dropped from 15 percent the year before to 10 percent last year.

Better budgeting can help the Guard and Reserves. Why should the Army, for example, allocate only 12 percent of its budget to Reserve and National Guard forces that constitute 38 percent of its total strength?

But the far larger problem is what this country currently chooses to spend, and not spend, on national defense in a time of war. The Defense Department's baseline budget (excluding supplemental funds for combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan) is currently 3.8 percent of America's gross national product - a proportional effort smaller than almost any other in peace and war during the past half-century.

National defense is not immune to the inexorable axiom that you get what you pay for. Just ask the dedicated and courageous men and women sacrificing to serve their country in America's National Guard and Reserves.

Copley News Service

National Guard and Reserve forces lack equipment and training by Robert_J_Caldwell