

UK military faces recruitment and retention crisis

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The National Audit Office (NAO) has released a report detailing a series of critical difficulties faced by the British Armed Forces in recruiting and retaining sufficient numbers to carry out ongoing military operations.

While the actual language of the report, *Recruitment and Retention in the Armed Forces*, is restrained, it depicts an army, navy, and air force struggling to cope with the demands placed on them, specifically by the intense military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. It cites as reasons for a recruitment crisis, “demographic changes, changing attitudes to careers, and negative publicity affecting public perceptions of the Armed Forces.”

The NAO estimates that the Armed Forces have been operating beyond planned levels of operating strength for the past five years, primarily to keep troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. The study cites the figure of at least 5,000 fewer men and women than are needed to meet Britain’s current “defence commitments” around the world.

In a comment suggesting the situation is even worse than official figures indicate, the report adds: “Manning requirements have not been adjusted to reflect the current levels of activity.” The report also reveals that disillusionment among servicemen and women has increased to such an extent that 10,000 personnel are quitting the armed forces each year before their period of engagement is up. The main reasons given for leaving early are the pressures soldiers face and the effects on family life. Fewer than one in seven British soldiers are getting the rest between operations that Ministry of Defence (MoD) official guidelines say they need. As a result, service personnel are working longer hours and spending more time away from their families. As many as 14,000 army personnel (14.5

percent) had been forced to breach MoD guidelines in the past 30 months, and in some areas, where the shortages are most severe this figure has risen to 40 percent.

A survey of those who had recently left showed that up to 70 percent did so because of the impact on family life. Forty percent also cited low pay and too many deployments, and 32 percent blamed poor quality of equipment.

Pressures are greatest where troop shortfalls are the biggest, and these include key posts. The NAO report revealed that there are 88 different specialities, or “pinch points,” where staffing shortages are seen as critical. The report cites 70 percent shortages in medical staff (including intensive therapy nurses) and a 50 percent shortage in weapons systems operators (including vehicle mechanics, armourers and recovery mechanics). There is also a shortage of “nuclear watch-keepers,” who are essential for maintaining nuclear-powered submarines, and Royal Marine commandos. Shortages in the Royal Navy have meant ships sailing with crews, on average, 12 percent below strength. The three forces are now officially 5,170 under strength, a shortfall of almost 3 percent. But this should be measured against successive cuts in official “manning requirements” over the past two years, the report adds. It also says that the military has deployed troops at higher levels than in defence assessments in overseas operations in each year since 2001. More than 8,000 troops are at present in Iraq, around 5,200 in Afghanistan and more than 900 in Bosnia. In addition, there are 8,500 British troops deployed in Northern Ireland and approximately 14,000 stationed in Germany.

Mark Andrews, who oversaw the report, said, “The longer [this] goes on, the more strain it puts on

people...clearly the armed forces are under strength.”

Last month, Bill Jeffrey, permanent secretary at the MoD, admitted to the Commons Defence Committee that having 13,000 troops in two long-term campaigns breached the government’s own policy on the “maximum commitment” of the Armed Forces to overseas operations.

In addition to the death toll in overseas campaigns, another factor alienating potential recruits has been the Deepcut barracks scandal, where several suspicious deaths have taken place amidst reports of systematic bullying of recruits. The report says, “The Army’s research found that 42 percent of parents would be less likely to encourage their children towards a career in the Army because of operations in Iraq, while 27 percent said they were put off because of events at Deepcut.”

The NAO report also acknowledges poor health as a problem, particularly related to obesity. It points to research by the army last year that showed that only a third of all 16-year-olds would pass the body mass index (BMI) set for all recruits to the forces. Earlier this year, the army altered the BMI targets for male recruits from 28 to 32.

The most graphic expression of the crisis facing the armed forces, which is ignored by the report, is the levels of troop desertions and soldiers going absent without leave. Up to June of this year, at least 1,000 UK soldiers had officially deserted since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and an average of 3,000 soldiers had gone AWOL every year since 2001.

In return for facing the prospect of a horrible death or injury in wars of occupation that many soldiers don’t agree with, those serving in parts of southern Afghanistan and Iraq are actually being paid less than the UK national minimum wage according to their hours of service.

The base salary of a private soldier in the British army is just £13,421. According to calculations by Mike Warburton, a leading accountant at Grant Thornton, if soldiers were working 12-hour days in a combat zone, this would mean their base pay would be £3.07 an hour. But they are more likely to be working 16-hour days at least, which takes the figure down to just £2.30 an hour, less than half the UK national minimum wage of £5.35 an hour.

An additional payment of £6.02 a day, known as a

Longer Separation Allowance, is paid to those in a war zone, although there is a qualifying period for this. But even if this additional payment is taken into account, to be paid the minimum wage soldiers in a war zone would have to be working just 62 hours a week—about 9 hours a day. Unlike their coalition counterparts, British soldiers also have to pay income tax on their earnings and the rent on their barrack room back in the UK even when they are engaged in operations abroad.

A British officer who recently returned from Helmand province in Afghanistan was quoted in the *London Independent* as saying: “The wages paid to the privates is well below the minimum wage. Frankly, they would make more money emptying dustbins. They are being treated appallingly.”

Anthony Bradshaw, who saw combat as a private in the Pioneer Regiment in Iraq in 2003, said, “Our take-home pay during training was £650 a month after the deductions. When we were in Iraq it rose to £800 a month. Being a current or ex-soldier hardly makes you rich.”

The armed forces were to be brought into the minimum wage structure by the incoming Labour government in 1997. But the proposal was dropped after pressure from then Defence Secretary George Robertson, who claimed that it would put the military into a “financial and legal straitjacket.”



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