

Low pay leads to poverty in British Army

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A report on the state of the British Army released this month revealed considerable resentment amongst ordinary soldiers over low pay, leading many into financial difficulties, under-nourishment and the quitting of the armed forces altogether.

The findings are contained in a briefing team report prepared for the head of the British Army, Chief of the General Staff Richard Dannatt, and are based on months of interviews with thousands of soldiers and their families between July 2007 and January 2008.

Much of the report is concerned with manning levels in the armed forces in light of the increased military engagement, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan. But new light is also thrown on the levels of poverty suffered by many frontline soldiers.

In a section entitled Pace of Life, the report says:

“It is viewed that the ‘pace of life’ has been compounded by undermanning, the amount of change being implemented and the lack of support and expertise to deliver that change. COs [Commanding Officers] are concerned at the impact this is having on the moral component.”

The report goes on to say that undermanning is “having a serious impact on the retention in infantry battalions.”

Almost half of all troops are unable to take their entitled annual leave as they are forced to cover gaps.

The brief section on pay then reveals:

“More and more single income soldiers in the UK are now close to the UK Gov’t definition of poverty. Thus many married junior soldiers feel that they are being forced to leave because they cannot afford to raise a family on current pay.”

The study also states:

“A number of soldiers were not eating properly because they had run out of money by the end of the month.”

Army COs now enforce “hungry soldier schemes,”

whereby destitute soldiers are loaned money in order to enable them to eat sufficiently.

A scheme known as Pay as You Dine (PAYD) requires soldiers not on active duty to pay for their meals. COs have reported being inundated with angry complaints from soldiers due to the quality of the food and the large amount of paperwork involved. Such schemes are a break from the past when the army provided, as a bare minimum, a staple of three square meals a day, free of charge to all serving soldiers.

According to the *Independent* newspaper, “Now hard-up soldiers have to fill out a form which entitles them to a voucher. The cost is deducted from their future wages, adding to the problems of soldiers on low pay.”

The report contains warnings from senior officers that “there is a duty of care issue” involved. Also the “core meal” on offer “is often not the healthy option.”

Despite the obvious alarm among senior ranks, General Dannatt has made clear that he intends to persist with the current food schemes. He said recently, “I am determined that PAYD must be made to work to both the financial and physical well-being of those who are fed.”

Along with millions of workers, rising costs have made buying a home impossible for many serving soldiers. “The ability to purchase a property was a major area of concern across all ranks. Discussion included an increase in... Buy to Let legislation and the cost of moving from one private home to another private home near their new appointment.”

Also cited as growing concerns amongst soldiers and their families were children’s school fees and the lack of medical support for families, especially dentists.

Previous studies show that, due to their hours of service, UK soldiers are actually paid well below the national minimum wage. Most serving soldiers earn only £16,000 a year, with a “new entrant rate of pay” of just £13,012.

According to the Armed Forces Pay Review Board, a 2007-08 pay increase of 2.6 percent has to be measured against an estimated net increase in charges of 3.9 percent.

The report also touched on the increasing resentment felt amongst the ranks towards the governments' cap on the amount of compensation received by the families of wounded soldiers, as well as the growing incidents of "accidental deaths."

Dannatt said, "I am concerned at the comments from the chain of command, some elements of which clearly believe that they will lose influence over their soldiers and that this will impact on unit cohesion."

Douglas Young of the British Armed Forces Federation was one of a number of military figures who utilised the report to demand an increase in funding for the Army, in line with the demands of fighting wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere.

He told the *Independent*, "People are leaving the armed forces for financial reasons. There's no question about it."

Patrick Mercer, a Conservative MP and former army colonel said, "I've been talking to some very senior officers recently, all of whom privately have said to me that the Army is running on empty; the money has run out. The manpower situation is in crisis, and the so-called Military Covenant is abused at every turn. The thing that really worries them is that the MoD [Military of Defence] seems to be in denial about it."

Colonel Bob Stewart, a former commander of British forces in Bosnia, said that the British Army was "woefully imbalanced, badly equipped, particularly for training, and quite honestly I'm afraid to say it is losing its edge as a top-rate army in the world because it cannot maintain it."

Major Gen Patrick Cordingley, who led the "Desert Rats" into Iraq during the first Gulf War in 1991, said, "I would be very concerned about the strain on the armed forces remaining at this level of deployment in both Afghanistan and Iraq. It cannot be sustained for longer than perhaps another two years."

Colonel Clive Fairweather, former deputy commander of the elite SAS, commented, "I really do think the Army is heading for the rocks and I don't say this lightly."

There has been a concerted campaign, sanctioned by the government, orchestrated by the military, and aided

by the press and the monarchy to "rehabilitate" the British Army which is now associated with the brutal video and photographic images of detainee abuse in Iraq.

The government is, for example, proposing a new law making it a criminal offence to "discriminate" against anyone wearing a military uniform in public. The hostility toward soldiers from members of the public, which the law is supposedly directed against, was largely concocted by the media and the government by amplifying a few isolated cases.

It is one of 40 proposals contained in a report, "National Recognition of Our Armed Forces," ordered by Prime Minister Gordon Brown and drawn up by Quentin Davies, the former Tory MP who switched to Labour last year. Davies has called for a "new era of greater openness and public involvement of the [armed] services."

A new Armed Forces and veteran day is under consideration as a public holiday, as well as more media-friendly parades for regiments returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition, secondary schools are being strongly urged to set up cadet forces. At present only 260 grammar and independently maintained schools have them.

The current report into the actual conditions faced by soldiers in the British Army goes some way to unmasking this grotesque propaganda campaign, whereby princes and aristocrats born into privilege and plenty parade at the head of an ill-fed, poverty-waged army prosecuting wars of imperialist aggression.



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