

Howard Wheeldon FRAeS - Failed Army Recruitment and Retention Policy

Introduction. Official confirmation that the number of 'Regular' soldiers has now fallen below 80,000 should be a matter of great concern. I recognise the argument that radical changes in how we conduct warfare may require fewer 'boots on the ground' but this debate is far from being concluded for the Army which is now over 2,000 soldiers below the 82,000 target the Government set for Regulars in 2010.

Perhaps my greatest concern is that we could yet see a further downward drift in Army numbers unless the current retention and poor recruitment situation is not better addressed. Meanwhile, the Army continues what can best be described as a long and seemingly uphill struggle to recruit and retain sufficient numbers of full-time soldiers for its immediate needs whilst, at the same time, it attempts to significantly increase the Army Reserve (formally the Territorial Army) and train them to the very high standards required.

These recruitment and retention problems are not a surprise to many who have expressed similar concern for the military generally and the Army in particular. Not least that only a small proportion of army personnel are fully trained and available to deploy on operations at short-notice. So it does not come as any surprise, despite warnings by many, that Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR 2010) aspirations for recruiting, training and deploying the Armed Forces, are undeliverable in the original time frame.

Main Argument. Following publication of SDSR 2010 it was envisaged that Army redundancies would reduce the number of Regular soldiers from a total of 102,000 to 82,000 by 2020. Although this plan required a near doubling of trained Army Reserves from 19,000 to 30,000 by 2018 it was not officially announced that Regulars would be significantly reduced before the increased requirement for fully trained Reservists had been met. Today, two years ahead of the original 2018 target, it appears that the Army has already lost more than 20,000 full-time personnel through voluntary redundancy. In the face of an Army Reserves policy that failed to work as quickly as planned it is regretted that the Ministry of Defence (MOD) has made little effort to accept the need to retain sufficient numbers of Regular soldiers until the agreed level of Army reservists has been recruited and fully trained.

That the Army needs to adapt, change and make itself more efficient in the post Afghanistan era is not disputed. Given that British troops were to be withdrawn from Germany and that MOD no longer had sufficient capability to support more than one international conflict, it made sense, in the eyes of the Government in 2010, to reduce Army numbers. Six years on and another defence and security review later - SDSR 2015 - with the level of threats against the UK having risen substantially, one may be entitled to take the view

that Army personnel numbers have - just as in the Royal Navy (RN) and Royal Air Force (RAF) - been allowed to fall too far. For the record, and leaving loss of military aircraft and ship capability aside, the RN have been forced to lose approximately 5,500 and the RAF around 8,500 personnel. However, the lack of ability to retain trained soldiers when combined with voluntary redundancy has left the Army short of 2,000 personnel to meet the 82,000 level despite also being well short of the promised number of trained Army Reserves.

Cutting full-time regular soldiers and replacing them through increasing numbers of Army Reserves probably looked straightforward in 2010 as a way of reducing the cost of the Army but, as we now know, the plan was in many respects poorly executed. It completely ignored the probability that the cost of training Army Reserves to a similar standard of their full-time peers might well cost more than retaining 'Regulars'.

Back in the real world, the plan to replace 20,000 full-time soldiers with 30,000 fully trained Army Reserve soldiers by 2018 (an increase in Army Reserves of 19,000 over eight years) was in my view fatally flawed and undeliverable from the start. Such a plan required the full support of industry - the main employers of would-be and existing members of the Army Reserves - and the Army to take on and train approximately 2,750 new reservists in each of the following eight years to hit the target by 2018. MOD, in recognition of the recruiting and training problem raised the upper age limit for recruits joining the Army Reserve. Those with specialist skills was raised from 45 to 50 and ex-regular soldiers from 43 to 52 years old which may help but recruitment still remains way below the level needed.

The numbers speak for themselves. By the end of 2013, more than two years after SDSR 2010 had been announced, the Army Reserve had risen by just 60 personnel. It seemed that as fast as the Army managed to find new personnel to join the Army Reserves just as many, including some who found the system to be wanting, departed. A year later, the net increase in numbers of Army Reserve soldiers was reported to have increased by 170. By January 2016 the official line from the MOD was that there were 22,530 'trained' Army Reservists although this figure might be viewed as a touch economical with the truth.

Retention of personnel in the Army, RN and RAF remains one of the most important issues facing the MOD today, especially in a highly competitive world of employment where holding special skills can provide a valuable price tag forcing the armed forces to compete for staff like never before. Changes in the 'Offer' and particular those related to pensions since 2010 have not gone down well with many and this has, not surprisingly, led to a reduction in morale amongst various sections of the military, some choosing to leave.

For the best part of five years after the original Army Reserves policy was first announced the MOD appeared to deny that its policy would be very difficult to

achieve, leaving the Army significantly weakened. Time and again the message from MOD read along the lines of 'we are confident of delivering the required numbers and a reinvigorated Army Reserve force by 2018'. Recently I noted a change in this date – now quoted by MOD and others to be 2019. Sometimes, figures from MOD suggest that the number of new Army Reserve signings is increasing but the reality is that these data often fail to show the number of those who joined and then leave shortly afterwards. In July 2014 the National Audit Office (NAO) published a highly critical assessment of progress - and in June 2015 they put the net increase in Army Reserve as just 750 between April 2012 and April 2015.

It is right that the Government must always seek to get the best value for money from defence for the tax payer and increasing the involvement of Reserves across all three of our armed forces made great sense. But, in my view, with specific regard to a sound and progressive defence strategy, it does not make sense to base a policy on increasing reserve numbers at the expense of full-time trained soldiers, sailors and airmen. While it is true that the policy to increase numbers of RN and RAF Reserves has worked quite well it is not the same for the Army where the numbers involved are very much larger. Long deployments away as sea and large scale technical training and skill requirements reduce the number of roles that Reserves can play in the RN and RAF as opposed to Army Reservists.

It must be admitted that part of the problem with Army Reserve recruitment is that on joining some reservists have suggested that they do not feel valued by full-time soldiers. The Secretary of State for Defence, Michael Fallon, admitted earlier this year that there are cultural issues at the heart of the armed forces that require more effort to bring reservists and full-time soldiers closer together. Some members of the Army Reserves talk of being treated as second rate or inferior to the full-time soldiers who train them so there can be little doubt that a cultural problem exists, albeit it must be said that many Reservists have been treated with great respect and admiration by Regulars.

However, the whole policy of cutting numbers of full-time Regular Army personnel using redundancy was badly thought out. Not surprisingly, with morale already strained a larger than anticipated number of Regulars sought to leave. Often those exercising their option were the specialist trained people that the Army really could not do without. Although I am unable to confirm the figure my current understanding is that over 80% of Regulars that have left over the last five years have done so through the voluntary redundancy route. This is clearly far too high a proportion on top of the normal outflow from all three armed forces annually - those that have reached the natural end of their careers or choose to leave on premature voluntary release.

Despite the outflow the need to recruit new people to join is ongoing. The problem is that what had once looked to be an exciting and rewarding long-

term career no longer holds and interest in joining the Army and Reserves has waned. The Army recruitment plan to address the problem is 'The Recruitment Partnering Project' - its aim, to enlist 9,000 recruits per year. 'Capita' was appointed by the MOD in February 2012 to head the project but what followed was a catalogue of disasters built around IT issues and money being wasted. One former CEO of Capita, Paul Pindar, told a House of Commons Select Committee, that the recruitment crisis was caused because "there are no wars on". This failure to deliver the Army's recruitment plan led to a former commander of British forces in Afghanistan calling it a 'dysfunctional system'. In a separate report written on Reserve Forces for MOD, headed by Lieutenant-General Robin Brims, encouraged the British Army to launch an urgent review into the £440 million 'Capita' contract due to the failure to deliver on recruitment.

However, if there is blame to be laid it must be shared by both MOD and 'Capita'. Looking at the outsourcing decision with an open mind, I would suggest that the decision taken by the MOD to upgrade the existing recruitment system as opposed to creating a new system is partly to blame and whilst 'Capita' can be chided for failure in some aspects of Army recruitment they are not responsible for the Army's personnel retention issues or indeed, how attractive the 'offer' being made is. While 'Capita' has lost out on performance payments the MOD, it seems, has escaped all blame for the aspects within their control - potential recruits being interviewed in run-down accommodation with a lack of front line professional equipment on display to attract individuals to join.

Conclusion. The latest manning figures show that Army numbers have fallen well below the target level of 82,000 imposed following drastic defence cuts announced in the 2010 defence review. This is despite millions of pounds having been spent on recruiting campaigns and, as the Daily Telegraph pointed out, leaving the British army at their smallest level since the Napoleonic wars. This combined with low morale following years of defence capability cuts and an Army Reserves recruitment policy that cuts little ice with those it is supposed to be attempting to encourage to join, let alone to provide reassurance to their full time employer, shows beyond any doubt that defence recruitment is in a mess.

In part the failed recruitment policy can possibly be blamed on high levels of employment nationally and a society that offers so many competing attractions for young people. However, the choice of a service based career may be deemed as increasingly less attractive than it once was - Sadly, I fear that the underlying reason for this may also be due to a cost based desire to actually encourage service personnel numbers to decline.