
Defense Report

AUSA



What Is It Like To Be A Soldier?

In an effort to determine how soldiers view themselves and their careers the Army recently conducted a survey of men and women scattered at far-flung bases all over the world. When the results were tabulated it was found that two thirds of the personnel who responded thought a military career “. . . is special and demands more devotion than most careers.”

What part of their Army life bothers them most? Well, frequent changes of station and a perceived lack of social status are bothersome. Long and irregular working hours, occasional isolated duty and overseas tours without their families are considered drawbacks to a military career. Strangely the prospect of being killed in combat is not particularly bothersome. It just “goes with the territory.”

In exchange for 24-hour, 7-day-a-week duty and limited control over his own comings and goings the soldier accepts a generous retirement system and other benefits for himself and his family. Although Congress intended his pay to be “comparable” to that received by someone who might be considered his civilian counterpart, the soldier is convinced he is getting the short end. In fact, it is estimated that 137,000 career military personnel (mostly in the middle enlisted grades with families and school-age children) “moonlight” at a second job.

Among the younger soldiers the opportunity for “adventure, travel and new experiences” is a prime contributor to the decision for a military career. As they grow older the perception changes to an emphasis on the retirement system as the motivator to continue serving. Most of those who leave the service prior to retirement cite erosion of the benefits package as the reason.

Slightly less than half of the soldiers who responded to the survey would recommend a military career to a relative or close friend. An almost identical number felt they had made the right decision and would “do it again.” Fifty-five percent of the respondents believed the Army had at least as many favorable aspects as civilian life while 36 percent were convinced that Army life was better. Thirty-nine percent would prefer a civilian career.

The perception of military service begins long before a recruiter makes his sales pitch. The benefits package is an assumed advantage of military service that has been visible to young people for many years, is reinforced by the recruiter and locked into place in the first enlistment. If, in the name of economy, the administration or the Congress destroys this perception, the Nation will pay a price in increasingly difficult recruitment and dwindling retention.