
Defense Report

AUSA



The Loss of First Term Recruits—An All Volunteer Force Failure

When young men or women enlist in one of our military services we can be sure we will have their services for a full enlistment. Right? Wrong!

In fact 40 percent of those who enlist never complete that first enlistment. Some are discharged within the first six months because they cannot absorb the training or adjust to military life. They are discharged with no black marks on their record. Others get in trouble, go absent without leave or somehow make themselves vulnerable to something less than an honorable discharge. They are sent home with a smudged record and the recruiters must go out and find another candidate to fill the ranks. The drill sergeants must then start all over again to train that replacement. It is an expensive process.

The services recruit 400,000 first termers each year and the 40 percent loss means that 160,000 of them are recruited to replace those who never complete their first term. Ideally then, if every new recruit served the full three or four years agreed to, the yearly enlistment goal could be dropped to 240,000. Obviously there will always be some attrition.

We don't mean to knock the recruiters. They have a next-to-impossible job in trying to find the right number of recruits with the desirable attributes. The fact that they are able to sell the notion of military service to 400,000 young men and women each year is the best possible testimony to their ability and perseverance. But this high loss rate is a drain on recruiting effort and overtaxes the training establishment as well.

Where does the blame fall? Is military service being made too demanding? Is that initial training too tough? Are the recruiters bringing in the wrong kind of people? Well, the training is tough, but not that tough and service life still involves hardships that are not adapted to easily but the biggest contributor to this early attrition seems to be the recruitment of people who probably should not have been signed up.

The services, for example, try to enlist as many as possible who have graduated from high school. The first term attrition rate among the high school graduates is only 28 percent (admittedly still too high) but this is the group of young people most heavily recruited by the colleges, by industry and by the services. There simply are not enough young males in that category to go around. The army would like to have at least 75 percent of its recruits of this caliber but in 1977 it managed just 56.2 percent.

The recruiters find themselves in an ever-shrinking circle—having to accept less-than-ideal candidates to meet quotas inflated by the failure of earlier recruits. And in the last analysis everyone—recruit, recruiter and taxpayer—gets squeezed.