
Defense Report

AUSA



The Military Pay and Allowance System—An Irreplaceable Intangible

Despite the pressure from bureaucrats and congressmen to treat military service just like any other job it still retains a special aura that sets it apart as a profession or, in a more abstract sense, as a calling.

Pride in one's unit, the satisfaction of serving one's country, the companionship of similarly dedicated people sharing hardship and danger, all set military service apart.

One of the traditions of U.S. military service that has grown up over the years is that the services "take care of their own." A soldier helps another soldier. Their families help each other in time of grief or need—and the Army looks after all of them.

When a soldier steps up to the pay table at the end of each month or gets a deposit slip from his bank he knows that his total pay represents two things, compensation for service performed (his base pay) and the money provided to house and feed him (his allowances). Combined they are a symbol of the commitment the Army has made to pay him a fair stipend for his work and to take care of his personal needs.

But now the pressure is mounting to change all this. There are some in Congress and in the federal bureaucracy who, alarmed by what they see as unreasonable personnel costs and concerned that military people don't appreciate what they have, want to combine the pay and allowances into a single salary. Since the allowances are now tax-free and the combined salary would be entirely taxable the sponsors of the salary idea promise that the service personnel will be protected from any loss of take-home pay. With that bigger lump sum showing on pay tables, they say, service men and women will better appreciate their generous compensation. For some reason they conveniently overlook the fact that it will cost the government more to prevent the loss of take-home pay than it could possibly gain by increasing the tax base. But their biggest oversight is failing to recognize the loss of military "togetherness."

We have to look no further backward in history than our unfortunate experience in Vietnam to see the effects of a personnel policy that divorces the service member from his home and family. Throughout that war the army of the late Republic of Vietnam paid little or no attention to the personal well-being of its soldiers or their families. Desertion to help with family emergencies, to harvest crops and simply to assure the family's well-being was routine. In the final dark days there was so little feeling of devotion to anything but the family that military structure collapsed.

Military service should not be just another salaried job. It is special and so must be the system used to compensate it.