
Defense Report

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Is the Volunteer Army Being Oversold?

A recent study released by Congressman Robin Beard (R-Tenn.) deals in great detail with the Army's all-out effort to find enough volunteers to fill its ranks. The study found that the Army has chosen a devoted group of its very best people to "sell" enlistment in the Nation's senior service. The recruiting force knows it is being judged on its performance and that failure to meet quotas will be chalked up as a professional "minus" the next time promotion selection comes around.

It is only natural, then, that the recruiters paint an Army enlistment in the brightest colors possible, holding out promises of specific kinds of duty, education, travel and recreation. It is to the Army's credit that the vast majority of those promises are made good.

Unlike his draftee predecessor today's new soldier has a contract with the Army. The draftee knew he was going to serve just two years then be sent home but that was about the only sure thing he could count on. Although some effort was made to fit round draftee pegs into properly shaped Army jobs the need of the service was foremost and the individual's desires secondary at best. Today's recruit has a whole shopping basket of guarantees in his pocket before he is sworn in. He knows where he will be sent for training and the kind of job he will be trained for. He often knows where he will be stationed after the training is complete. When he steps up to be sworn-in the volunteer's head is still ringing with promises of off-duty education, 30 days a year of paid vacation to travel and see the world—and a barrage of glossy, full color recruiting ads has provided a mental picture of off-duty good times in quaint German towns or on the sands of Waikiki.

Unfortunately the Army cannot always deliver the bigger-than-life image the recruiters and the ads have created. Sometimes soldiers who have scored well in aptitude tests simply cannot absorb the training they contracted for. More often the new soldier finds that the exciting 8 to 5 daily job he envisioned really lasts from 6 to 6 or later and continues uninterrupted for weeks at a time. He is hard up against one of the oldest military realities—his commander has more missions to perform than he has people to perform them. The net result of coming to grips with all these realities is the failure of almost 40 percent of the Army's enlistees to make it to the end of their first enlistment.

Military service has traditional rewards—both real and intangible—that transcend recruiters' promises and ad-men's hoopla. If service to the Nation cannot be "sold" to enough volunteers on the basis of those traditional rewards—and if the President and Congress cannot be convinced to maintain them—volunteerism and military reality have proved themselves incompatible.