
Defense Report

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Pay for Junior Military Personnel is Higher than Ever—But is it High Enough?

One of the first points usually brought up in discussions about the All Volunteer Armed Forces is the fact that, concurrent with the end of the draft and the beginning of total volunteerism, the Congress approved large pay raises for the lowest enlisted and officer grades. Overnight the pay for the lowest grade in the Army more than doubled. In the intervening years inflation has driven the basic pay for a private to more than \$400 per month, compared to just over \$100 in 1971, the last full year of draft calls.

But now we are hearing reports of the extreme difficulty being encountered by junior enlisted personnel who attempt to bring their young families along on overseas assignments. The loss of the power the U.S. dollar once had on foreign exchange markets means the service person's money no longer buys enough German marks or Japanese yen to make ends meet in those countries. The services and the defense department have taken a number of actions to ease this situation, such as changing the basis on which cost-of-living allowances are paid and even permitting families to buy low cost meals in mess halls, but these actions have not solved the problem.

In a recent interview the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower said that one of the main reasons for the continuing problem is that military personnel and their wives are unable to find second jobs to augment their incomes while overseas. This is a common practice in the United States. In the Washington, D.C. area, for example, more than 60 percent of the junior enlisted people "moonlight."

The younger members of our armed forces see friends with whom they graduated from high school working at civilian jobs, getting married, buying cars and homes and, in our best tradition, reaching out for the "American Dream." But with military pay for junior people still hardly more than the federal poverty standard and, with increasing instances in which they must compete for expensive civilian housing and fund medical care for their families out of their own pockets, this group of young people is being "left out."

The Department of Defense, the President and the Congress should take a long hard look at the way they want junior military people to live. If they simply want people to perform "just another job" then those military employees could be paid competitively with their civilian counterparts and left to take care of their own needs. But if they want a force of people dedicated to national service they should provide fair pay, along with the housing, the medical care and all the rest of the vanishing benefits that once made military service something special.