
Defense Report

AUSA



Life in the Barracks—A Changing Facet of the Volunteer Army

"Single men in barracks [sic] don't grow into plaster saints," Rudyard Kipling observed in 1892, and things haven't changed a great deal since. Over the centuries since the first barracks was built to give soldiers a place to hang haversack and helmet and to keep dry between wars and maneuvers they remained essentially unchanged. For the most part, barracks were spartan places with few amenities beyond the basic; hardly the sort of place that could be described as "homelike." On payday soldiers tended to bolt from the barracks in support of Kipling's conclusion.

This old system worked pretty well for the United States Army as long as a substantial part of its junior ranks were filled by draftees who were expected to tolerate some deprivation during their two years of service but the advent of the All-Volunteer Army destroyed that rationale. As a lure to longer volunteer service, barracks were made more livable whenever possible. Notwithstanding these cosmetic changes, the barracks remained a focal point of military life where *esprit* flourished and teamwork was polished.

But other changes in the military way of life have been occurring, more in spite of the Army's effort to improve its quality of life than because of them, and one of the most dramatic of these changes is a flight from the barracks. Three phenomena probably contribute most to the exodus from barracks living: The fact that volunteers on long enlistments don't want to wait to marry and start families (more than 60 percent of the Army's enlisted people are married, compared to 49 percent in 1970); the increased contact between male and female soldiers, leading to relationships that cannot be pursued in barracks, and; the Department of Defense policy which seeks to avoid building new military quarters by encouraging people to live "off post."

Escape from the barracks womb is not always what the escapees expect it to be. To leave behind a communal life where bed, board and many recreational activities are available for the asking and to move into a pay-as-you-go atmosphere is often a shock, particularly for the young soldiers in the first four enlisted grades. They find they must live at some distance from their duty station in order to be able to afford the rent and that distance forces them to buy a car and to miss out on commissary and exchange shopping. Thousands of young soldiers must use food stamps.

The drift away from barracks living has already had a profound impact on the Army in terms of increased personnel costs and diminished unit readiness. It may be argued that this is an unavoidable offshoot of the volunteer concept. If so, we need to take a hard look at that concept.