
Defense Report

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Unit Rotation—An Inviting Idea That Has Been Tried and Found Wanting

The House Appropriations Committee is looking for ways to cut the cost of maintaining military forces overseas. One of the cost-cutting techniques they are examining is the use of unit rotation—moving entire battalions, brigades or even divisions back and forth to foreign assignments for short tours of duty without the soldiers' wives and children.

On its face, unit rotation does seem to offer a number of advantages over the present system of individual rotation. In the all-volunteer environment, unit rotation would keep the same people together for longer periods of time and reduce turbulence within units by eliminating the need to draw people from stateside units as replacements for soldiers completing overseas assignments. Presumably the state of training within the units would improve and far fewer families would be on the move as their sponsors were deployed to relatively short unaccompanied overseas tours and returned to the same home station.

The committee will undoubtedly take a look at the Marine Corps experience with rotating units to Okinawa and to shipboard deployment. Hopefully, though, the committee will also look at the differences between the Marine Corps mission and that of the Army. Just a fourth of the Marine Corps is deployed overseas at any given time (roughly 50,000 people) while almost half the Army (42 percent or 325,000 soldiers) is stationed overseas. Assuming that the committee would perceive a one year unit rotation cycle as the maximum feasible time to avoid the total breakdown of family relationships and the destruction of troop morale, 325,000 people would be on the move every year. Every other year 42 percent of our soldiers would be separated from their families.

Hopefully, the committee will take a close look at the Army's analysis of past efforts to establish unit rotation. These began in the mid-1950s with Operation Gyroscope and have continued periodically to the most recent effort, Brigade 75/76. The after action reports on these experiments—six of them—show surprising commonality. They did not improve readiness or training and they did not reduce costs. Only one, Operation Gyroscope, improved morale, but it involved moving entire divisions for full overseas tours—and dependents accompanied the troops.

Our national defense should be conducted as economically as possible but pure economy should not destroy the effectiveness of our forces. All the services are having increasing difficulty meeting recruiting goals. The prospect of spending just half a career in the United States military service with one's family will only heighten the difficulty and no money will be saved in the long run.