
Defense Report

AUSA



Military Commissaries — If We Didn't Have Them We Would Need Another Incentive to Serve

The military commissary system is one of the most frequently attacked activities of our defense establishment. It is also one of the most highly valued incentives to serve in our armed forces. Depending on who does the calculations, savings for the military family shopping in a commissary can range from 12 percent to 20 percent over the cost of the same item in a chain food store. This saving is particularly valuable to the more than 400,000 service people and their families, whose Army, Navy, Marine or Air Force pay falls below the federal minimum wage. Last year the commissary system redeemed \$12 million in food stamps for military families whose low income qualified them for that assistance.

But the subject of this column is not the inadequacy of the military compensation system. That is a subject far too complex for treatment in this limited space. The narrowed subject is the commissary system as a part of the overall system for attracting and keeping enough of the right kinds of people in our military ranks. The most recent attack against the military food sales stores came from the General Accounting Office, which is Congress' watchdog over the executive departments. The GAO recommended closing all commissaries in areas where there is an abundance of commercial food outlets and reducing the federal subsidy for the operation of the stores. They cited their version of the historic basis for establishing the stores in the first place—providing food in remote areas—and claimed that this need no longer exists in many areas.

In response, the Defense Department claimed the original purpose of the stores was to provide economic relief for underpaid military personnel. "That relief," the Department told the GAO, "is a continuing need today, particularly in metropolitan areas." By reducing the federal subsidy, which would raise commissary prices, or by closing commissaries in metropolitan areas, the department said, we would further penalize military families whose buying power, since 1973, has fallen at least 14 percent below their non-federal civilian counterparts.

The greatest contradiction of the GAO report is that this investigative agency would see fit to recommend the diminution of a long-standing military benefit at a time when the armed services committees in both houses of Congress are desperately searching for ways to improve the military manpower situation. They are looking at larger bonuses to attract recruits and increased incentives to keep trained people in the ranks. The GAO recommendation quite obviously runs counter to the intent of Congress.

The chiefs of all the military services have said repeatedly that manpower—getting it and keeping it after it is trained—is their greatest concern. Fortunately, Congress in its wisdom will probably ignore the GAO's recommendations, but the perception of service personnel of continued proposed shrinkage in their quality of life cannot improve their morale or willingness to serve.