
Defense Report

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Retention of Good People in the Military — It's Getting to Be a "Dollars and Cents" Issue

There was a time in the not-too-distant past when men and women chose to follow a military career for a variety of intangible reasons — patriotism, adventure, the satisfaction derived from serving alongside other dedicated people — even though that career demanded some special sacrifices. In his much-quoted note to the Secretary of Defense, ordering him to stop pressing for improvements in military pay, President Carter correctly reported that when he was in the Navy in the early 1950s these intangible things were considered more important than pay.

Life on a military installation then was close to the traditional ideal. There were usually enough quarters on the base to house both the married and unmarried service people because few junior enlisted people and only a slightly higher percentage of junior officers were married. The commissary store was *the place* to shop for groceries and it was essentially free from attack. Post exchanges could sell major household appliances. Officer and enlisted clubs could offer low-cost meals and entertainment. A movie at the post theater cost 25 cents. There were no servicemen on relief and few were forced to take after-duty jobs. Inflation, if it existed at all, was minimal.

Those were the last halcyon years of service in the U.S. military. It has all been downhill ever since. Commissary patrons now pay a major portion of the cost of their operation and the stores, as an institution, are frequently under attack. As the exchanges have been required to bear more and more of the support for service recreation activities, they have lost their competitive edge and are often underpriced by civilian discount houses. The atrophied military medical system has forced more and more service families into civilian facilities where they must bear part of the cost.

But the two elements that have contributed most to the disappearance of intangible service benefits have been the selling of volunteer military service as a "job," not as a "calling," and the headlong rush of inflation, unmatched by adjustments to military pay. Today we have about 400,000 military families with incomes below the federal poverty level and \$12 million in food stamps passed through commissary cash registers last year. Because so many of our young volunteers are married, they have been forced to find housing off-post at rates far exceeding their allowances. Each year service families underwrite the cost of making official moves with at least \$1 billion from their own pockets. The working spouse and the "moonlighting" soldier are more the rule than the exception. Because so many more young military people now live in civilian communities, they are more aware of the relative benefits of a civilian career.

Someone once described military family life as one of "genteel poverty." This may have been acceptable at a time when all the benefits of service, both tangible and intangible, were intact, but there is nothing genteel about the money pinch our service people feel today. To get and keep good people in uniform we must adjust their compensation to the realities of today.