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U.S. ARMY RETIREES — VALUABLE ASSETS

by

Sergeant Major George S. Kulas, USA Ret.

With the military drawdown continuing, and still further cuts proposed to the U.S. Army as a result of the Defense Department's "Bottom-Up Review," the Army must help itself as much as possible. The Army should ensure that the soldiers it will keep on active duty and in the reserve components are those who are the very best qualified of those available for service. Unfortunately, the Army is not always allowed to do this.

Active Retirees and the Reserves

The U.S. Army has available to it volunteers who are highly skilled, trained, motivated and proven soldiers who could contribute substantially to its combat readiness. These soldiers, U.S. Army active duty retirees, are an asset the Army could use in its ready reserve. These retirees spent 20 or more years in the active Army. They knew their jobs well. Most of them were in leadership positions. Many trained junior soldiers during much of their careers. Many are combat veterans.

There are currently over 580,000 Army retirees. This is more than the entire Army active duty force. Though it is likely that only a relatively small number are fully qualified, many of these retirees are prepared to continue serving in the Army on a part-time basis as members of the reserve components. Members of the selected reserve attend paid weekend drills and at least two weeks of active duty for training each year. Ready reserve soldiers are the most likely to be called to active duty during a war or national emergency.

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Under current law, section 269d of Title 10 of the U.S. Code, military retirees are not allowed to join a ready reserve unit unless the Secretary of the Army “makes a special finding that the member’s services in the ready reserve are indispensable.” Additionally, according to Section 684 of Title 10 of the U.S. Code, a soldier cannot receive both retired pay and reserve pay concurrently. Should a retiree be allowed to participate in the ready reserve under the provisions of the statute, he or she will either have to decline reserve pay or forfeit retired pay for the number of days duty is performed.

Retirees Subject to Recall

The same Title 10 of the U.S. Code that virtually bars Army retirees from being in the ready reserve states, in Section 688, that an Army retiree can be ordered to active duty at any time. In fact, the Army’s “Policies and Procedures for Preassigning and Recalling Retired Army Personnel During a War or National Emergency” states that retirees under age 60 are subject to be recalled to active duty within seven days of being notified. These retirees, if fully qualified, can also be assigned to deploying units that will fight the war. Active duty Army retirees are issued preassignment orders directing them where to report when full mobilization is declared. A retiree who fails to comply with the orders may be considered Absent Without Leave (AWOL) and could be subject to disciplinary action by the Army, including suspension of retired pay.

On one hand, retirees are told they cannot join a ready reserve unit to train and maintain proficiency in basic soldier skills and their military occupational specialty. At the same time they are told that they are subject to being called back to active duty. Many of these retirees were senior soldiers and may be required to lead and or manage in areas that have undergone major technological changes since they retired from active duty. It would make sense to keep otherwise qualified retirees that may be called up trained to standards. This can be done through their participation in the reserve components.

Representative Thomas Petri (R-WI) agrees. In a letter dated September 16, 1993, Mr. Petri states that making it easier for an active duty retiree to join a Guard or Reserve unit seems to make sense. He says it is certainly possible for retirees who have been retired for a while to not be qualified physically or current in tactics and technology. Mr. Petri has taken this up with the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee and says, “I will be watching his response but action on this issue does seem warranted.”

Impact On Involuntarily Separated Soldiers

Francis M. Rush, Jr., the principal director for manpower and personnel in the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs, is concerned about the impact of retired volunteers on newly separated active duty soldiers. In a letter dated October 5, 1993, he cites Section

269d of Title 10, U.S. Code as the law which precludes retired members from serving in the ready reserve. He goes on to say that the Department of Defense, however, is also committed to giving priority for membership in the Guard and Reserve to those individuals who were involuntarily separated from the service during the drawdown and who have not yet qualified for retirement.

There is no doubt whom we want to lead America's reserve soldiers into combat: The Army will need outstanding, motivated, experienced leaders who have excelled in soldiering and now want to continue serving the Army and the country. Otherwise qualified soldiers who were involuntarily separated from active service and now serve in the Guard or Reserve are invaluable. But there are also qualified soldiers who have voluntarily retired. The Army should take the best of the best from both groups. The law which says it can't be done needs to be changed so it can be done. If Congress is serious about having the best quality Army with limited manpower, they should consider changing the law to give the Army flexibility in tapping personnel resources to assure the nation of a quality Army.

Impact on Reserve Promotions

There is another argument against allowing active retirees to serve in the ready reserve. It is presented by Army Reservist Sergeant Michael Roskopf of Menominee Falls, Wisconsin. Roskopf believes retirees who would be allowed to join ready reserve units would create promotion stagnation for current members of those units. He feels that because most of the retirees would be in the senior grades they would take up many of the higher grade billets in the units and leave no upward mobility for junior soldiers. He also believes that many active duty retirees are too old and physically unfit for duty.

Sergeant Roskopf's concerns are valid and I am sure he would acknowledge the importance of having the best possible Army. Whether or not members of a unit are career reservists or were career active duty soldiers should not be a factor, as long as they are all physically fit, highly qualified volunteers. Promotion stagnation can be partly overcome because there are many active duty retirees who would agree to serve in the selected reserve at grades far lower than those at which they retired. They just want to continue to serve. Consider also that members of the selected reserve can serve in their units until they are age 60, while retirees, subject to recall to active duty to age 60, cannot.

These experienced active duty retirees could help reserve units achieve and maintain combat readiness, something some units have had difficulties doing. During Operation Desert Storm, some Army National Guard combat brigades were called up but were not fully combat ready. Consequently, these brigades spent valuable time training and did not deploy to the Gulf. The next time, these units may have to fight almost immediately. Perhaps those brigades would have been more ready if former active duty soldiers were assigned, either in regular positions or as augmentees training unit leaders and technicians at unit drills.

Active Retirees as a Resource

With the Army getting smaller, its soldiers must be of the highest quality. One of the best and cheapest ways to do this is to use the highly skilled and trained people that are already available. Active duty Army retirees are among this group. The law could be changed to allow those retirees who meet current standards of the Army and volunteer for duty to be allowed to join selected reserve units where the Army stipulates they are needed. These retirees would be invaluable to the units, the U.S. Army and this country in unit positions or overstrength positions.

If the retirees are good enough for wartime, they should be good enough for peacetime training to prepare for war. Because of the decreased manpower available to the Army to fight in war, the laws of the land should at least allow the Army flexibility to utilize its former retired soldiers. The United States cannot afford to play politics with national defense, especially when many of its players are not in the game.

(Sergeant Major Kulas, an AUSA member, retired from the Active Army in July 1990 after 20 years of military service.)

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