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Providing the Strength During Our Nation's War on Terror

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Abstract

With plenty of negative media coverage, an unpopular presidential administration, and plenty of bad press, it looked as though the already challenging job of recruiting and retaining quality soldiers in the Army National Guard could turn to nearly impossible. Non believers both inside and outside of our organization were betting against us. What they did not count on was the resolve and creativity belonging to the professional recruiting forces in our fifty four states and territories. What could have resulted in a hollow, non quality Army National Guard, turned out to be one of the most astounding runs of success this or any other recruiting organization had ever experienced.

When the World Trade Center was attacked on September 11, 2001, I was already a seasoned recruiter. With nearly eight successful years of recruiting for all three Army components, I felt I was up to any challenge. I had done well in rural, urban and affluent suburban areas in the notoriously tough recruiting market of New Jersey. There was success in good and bad economic times. I was successful during heavy executive support of the military and times when we were almost ignored. I was a confident, competent recruiter who enjoyed passing on my experiences to help educate and motivate those who seemed to struggle. It always seemed like there was a lot of struggle

When the towers went down, the ugliness of the situation gave rise to a huge surge in those volunteering to enlist. Although this kept us busy, the reality was that many of those volunteers were not able to meet the increasingly tough standards to enlist in the military. For many, the temptation to waste time attempting to qualify those who lacked, either physically, mentally or morally was too much. Many recruiters were filling their calendars but were not filling empty boots. The focus had to remain on the quality recruiting market. High schools and colleges were still the best place to prospect for future soldiers. Many in our prime market were very motivated by the events of 9-11 and our country's looming response to the situation. Their parents were not as thrilled, and as the war in Iraq dragged on they became even less enthused. In fact many became quite hostile.

National debate over our courses of action and our resolve to win became a roadblock in our ability to attract the best and the brightest. With the conflict in full swing, the active Army stretched thin and the coming need to rely heavily on the Guard inside and outside the country, it soon became clear that our country's senior leaders were committed to our efforts. We received huge influxes of money, and were given the opportunity to double the size of our

recruiting force. It was during this ramp up that I was promoted into the role of a recruiting area supervisor. I was given four sizable counties and nineteen field recruiters. In the past it was customary for someone in my position to supervise eight to ten, and carry a mission of twenty per month. With the additional personnel came an additional mission. Along with the extra personnel there were increases in incentives and fewer restrictions were put on who would receive those incentives. On the surface this looked like a slam dunk. Increase recruiters on the street, lower the standards, raise the stakes and we will raise an army.

Although well intentioned, the plan was not successful. In New Jersey our surplus of inexperienced hired guns, whose sheer numbers made serious supervision and training nearly impossible, created more problems than solutions. Couple that with pushing incentives over service during war time, and lower standards luring recruiters away from the quality market and you have a recipe for failure. It became clear what was really needed was to get creative with funding and getting senior NCOs serious about the need to make this work.

The focus on my team became a return to the basics, setting the standards, self discipline, and plenty of training and supervision. I was determined that those who recruited on my team would be the most committed to not only doing the job, but doing the job right. The first order of business was an immediate return to recruiting exclusively in the quality markets. High school and colleges would yield the best applicants. We had to choose who we wanted and convince them that becoming a soldier was their best course of action. In the past recruiters were doing it the other way by allowing substandard applicants to convince them that they wanted them. The result of this is often a huge investment of time and failure to enlist in the long run. Honest dialogue with applicants, parents, teachers and other members of the community became a must.

Credibility is the key to long term recruiting success. Loosing one enlistment by giving the hard facts, will often result in the eventual gain of several.

I had to work long hours to ensure each recruiter got the attention they needed. I would listen and watch them at work as often a possible. I encouraged accompanying one another on interviews and speaking engagements, in order to learn from one another. As time wore on my team was beginning to click, production was beginning to return to pre war levels, but the best was yet to come.

There was kind of a revolution going on in the recruiting world at NGB. Senior leaders were listening to ideas from NCOs in the field. Ideas that were previously dismissed as illegal, unsustainable, and not likely to work were now being entertained as a possible solution. Although I give full credit to those at NGB for selling and funding these programs that changed the business. It is the very nature of them that could not succeed without the full commitment of NCOs at all levels of recruiting in the field. These programs had the potential to do nothing but get many in trouble and entice the force into unethical situations that may have meant a severe setback in recruiting and the Army National Guard.

The first idea was one that was taboo for as long as I can remember; monetarily rewarding recruiters for any success above and beyond the norm among their peers. This program was called the Recruiter Incentive Program (RIP). The concept was simple, calculate the national average amount of monthly enlistments per recruiter and award a recruiter a set amount of money for each enlistment above the national average. Combine that with quarterly and annual bonuses for consistency and you have now given recruiters another reason to strive for excellence. In New Jersey this program was an instant success. Of course it was imperative for

the NCOs to educate the force on this program as well as keeping them clear of inappropriate practices for profit.

The incentives for recruiters did not end there. The next idea was to discontinue bulk shipments of promotional items and literature to states for mass distribution and come up with a way to reward those who are succeeding, as well as keeping the best armed with sales products. This idea became known as Mission Zone. Recruiters were given point values for each enlistment and the ability to purchase promotional items from an online catalog. Recruiters were now in charge of what items they would receive and how much would be based on performance. This plan was long overdue since recruiters no best what works well in their respective zones.

Mission Zone worked so well that it spawned many spin off programs like earning funding for events. Recruiters can use points to order party packs and food gift certificates to hold informational events for potential soldiers. Recruiters can use points to fund upscale banquets for educators and administrators. The future potential for Mission Zone is unlimited. Again this is a program that has the potential for waste or abuse. Our professional NCOs in the field are again responsible for ensuring that this program is used as intended, is not abused and remains a combat multiplier for recruiters for years to come.

The final program I would like to talk about is perhaps the most controversial. Guard Recruiter Assistant Program (GRAP) is a program that financially rewards Guard soldiers for referring someone to a recruiter and that referral enlists. The GRAP gets a cash reward upon enlistment, and another when his or her referral ships. Soldiers are encouraged to sign up for GRAP online. They are given a brief class on ethics, and eligibility and the opportunity to make an initial order of promotional material. They are then eligible to receive payment for referrals. GRAPs also are rewarded with more promotional material based on enlisted referrals. This

program has become the biggest winner of any program created for recruiting. It has made a big difference in the success of our organization. Again this program has the potential to be misused and I give credit to the NCOs in the field for policing it and making sure it remains viable.

Changes in attitude in the field and some very innovative programs have catapulted the Guards end strength past any ones expectations. By the time I was assigned as the command's operations SGM (Dec 08), the guard was well above authorized end strength. Despite numerous deployments, and efforts to curtail recruiting numbers by continuing to increase eligibility standards, the New Jersey Army National Guard continues to enlist quality soldiers every month. The high op tempo, and the need for recruiters to often work autonomously and with little direct supervision, makes recruiting a very challenging field. I am very proud to have contributed to recruiter development, and to have assisted in facilitation ground breaking programs. A strong commitment from the NCOs in the field will always be the vital link to providing the strength in any environment that is thrust upon us.