

# Enforcing the Army Weight Control Program

## Peace versus War

10 Minute Ethics Briefing

MSG Gary R. Smith

Faculty Advisor: CSM Manfred Jerabek, M06  
16 NOV 05

Unclassified

Enforcing the Army Weight Control Standards – Peace vs. War  
MSG Gary R. Smith

Should the Army have different standards for weight control in peacetime and during times of war? The obvious answer is, no. However, that is exactly what we have in the Army today. The expeditionary nature of the transforming Army, and the war on terrorism in particular, has caused serious retention and recruiting problems. The Army has temporarily changed retention policies for overweight Soldiers in an effort to shore up poor retention and recruiting numbers. On one hand, it is a way for the Army to abate the loss of fully trained Soldiers. On the other hand, what good is a standard if it only changes when it is no longer convenient?

The Army is saying that a physically unfit Soldier is unqualified for service during peacetime, but is somehow qualified during wartime. It is obvious to anyone that the physical demands on a Soldier during combat operations are greater than they experience during most peacetime operations.

The retention problems started shortly after the war on terrorism began. Coupled with difficulty meeting recruiting goals, the Army was facing shortages in the long term. In 2004, the Army took steps to curb the loss of fully qualified Soldiers that failed to meet the weight control standards. The Army Reserve and the Army National Guard both took the extraordinary step of targeting these soldiers for recruitment. Under the new policy, if a Soldier is on the weight control program, but completes his or her term of service, they are eligible to reenlist into the Reserve Component.<sup>1</sup> The policy does not apply to Soldiers discharged for weight control. This great Army of ours preaches the concept of “One Army,” meaning the same standards apply to

---

<sup>1</sup> TACC MSG 04-26 and 04-31 “Eligibility Criteria for Transfer to the Army Reserve and National Guard”

everyone. These two policy letters demonstrate that perhaps that isn't always the case. The active component will not retain overweight Soldiers, but the Reserve Component will.

In 2005, the active component took an additional step. The Army elevated the separation authority for weight control and physical fitness separations to brigade commanders. The move took this authority away from battalion commanders. Although this policy does not prevent such separations from occurring, it certainly makes it more difficult. The Army is in a jam and the message is loud and clear: stop discharging fully qualified Soldiers. With the Army at war, retention problems trump physical fitness.

Temporarily changing the separation policy to meet the needs of a wartime Army leads to the question, "What happens when the retention problems go away?" Will we go back to discharging these Soldiers? Will we make an exception and "grandfather" those that served in combat operations?

I once listened as a Battalion Commander told a Soldier, "Son, you're a big boy. The enemy doesn't aim slow bullets at fat people." The Commander was obviously not a motivational speaker, but this was his attempt to motivate the Soldier to work harder to get off the weight control program. The Soldier never did get off the weight control program, but later deployed in support of Iraqi Freedom.

Soldiers like this one are ineligible to reenlist while flagged for weight control, so they must leave the service upon their ETS date. Flagged Soldiers are also ineligible for promotion, yet the Army calls upon these Soldiers every day to put their lives at risk while deployed. These Soldiers fight right alongside their buddies, but can only stand by and watch as their peers are promoted ahead of them. They are good enough to fight and die for their nation, but they are not good enough to promote or reenlist.

This wishy-washy approach to Army standards has a negative impact upon unit morale. It also puts an additional burden upon leaders at a time when they are concentrating on combat operations. Consider the morale of a Soldier that is told his career is in jeopardy because he is overweight. Then consider that same Soldier being told that instead of a discharge, he will deploy and support the same leaders that want to discharge him out of the Army. Add to this scenario, the fact that the Soldier cannot reenlist or compete for promotion either, effectively putting his life on hold.

The Army's active component is now retaining and deploying many overweight Soldiers into combat operations. The results are not the disaster that leaders may have anticipated. The Reserve Component has also deployed many overweight Soldiers into combat. They have not reported a surge in casualties attributed to poor fitness levels either. Neither component is reporting that overweight Soldiers are degrading their unit capabilities.

This is a serious ethical problem. If a Soldier is technically and tactically proficient, and is fit to deploy and fight, then by definition, that Soldier is qualified. A fully qualified Soldier should not be flagged. The Army must allow all fully qualified Soldiers to compete for promotion and reenlistment.

Retention is always a problem during a wartime volunteer Army. The new policies are one tool for solving our current retention problem. Now that the Army has taken these steps, there should be serious consideration to making them permanent. The best that these Soldiers can hope for is to serve in combat and be forced to get out of the Army at the end of their term of enlistment.

The Army needs to establish a regulation that is equally valid in peace and war. Our leaders are left with a choice: rewrite the regulations to reflect the new policies, or rescind the

policies and enforce the regulations. There should only be one standard for the whole Army, during peace or war.