



**STRATEGY
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ANALYSIS OF FIRST-TERM ARMY ATTRITION

BY

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines personnel attrition in the United States Army. It seeks to determine why soldiers leave the Army before they complete their contractual obligations. It assesses the impact of attrition on readiness. It describes historic trends, estimates costs associated with early departures, compares attrition in the Army with that in other services, and notes factors that contribute to attrition. It examines these contributing factors in detail. The study then concludes with recommendations to help reduce the unacceptably high attrition rates in the Army and to help retain high quality soldiers to serve in our fighting force.

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ANALYSIS OF FIRST-TERM ARMY ATTRITION

"More than any other single factor of combat readiness, it is the way soldiers feel about themselves, their fellow soldiers and their outfit that is most likely to carry the battle."¹ This kind of readiness in the fighting soldier of America's Army depends greatly on how the force is recruited, trained, and retained.

Since the dissolution of the draft, the military services have recruited hundreds of thousands of new enlistees each year. These enlistees are required to sign contracts committing them to remain on active duty for a specified period of time. However, the Army, like the other services, has found that many do not fulfill their commitment.² This study will examine attrition occurring within the United States Army and assess its impact on readiness. It analyzes trends in attrition, describes reasons why soldiers leave before they complete their contractual service obligation, and cites other factors that contribute to personnel attrition. This analysis then supports recommended changes in personnel policies and procedures to reduce personnel attrition and to improve readiness.

DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM

Attrition refers to "the loss in the personnel of an organization in the normal course of events." Military personnel losses can occur at any stage of the enlistment process. If an applicant cannot come to an agreement regarding MOS (Military Occupational Specialty) or if the prospective enlistee is found to be disqualified at the MEPS, (Military Entrance Processing Station), this individual is essentially lost for the purpose of serving in the Army. Losses that occur prior to swearing in are considered applicant losses. If a recruit decides against joining the Army while participating in the DEP (Delayed Entry Program), then the recruit is considered a DEP loss.

The Army defines attrition as the failure of a soldier to meet his/her first-term enlistment obligation. If during training a soldier is unable to adjust to Army life or unable to meet Army training standards, that soldier will likely be discharged through the Army's Trainee Discharge Program. This program offers a streamlined procedure for discharging initial-entry soldiers in the first 180 days of service if they have clearly demonstrated their lack of fitness for military service. After a soldier completes training and is assigned to an Army unit, the discharge process becomes more judiciously controlled through Army Regulation 635-200. Attrition is classified and

entered into the Army personnel databases as having occurred under the provisions of one of the following eight Inter-service Separation Codes (ISC):

1. Release from Active Service
2. Entry into Officer Ranks
3. Retirement
4. Death
5. Dependency or Hardship
6. Medical Disqualification
7. Failure to meet Minimum Behavior or Performance Criteria
8. Other Discharges

Thus the enlistment cycle begins when the Army Recruiter ships the recruit and ends with a soldier completing his/her term enlistment obligation or otherwise separating from the Army.³

OBJECTIVES, SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

In order to assess the severity the attrition problem facing the Army and the other services, it is important to determine how this issue impacts on readiness. Specifically, this study determines (1) the rate and timing of attrition, (2) the extent of the Army's investment in recruiting and training first-term enlistees, (3) reasons for attrition after training,

(4) soldiers' perceptions of quality-of-life factors that contribute to attrition, and (5) actions the Army can take to reduce first-term enlistees' attrition.

HISTORICAL FIRST-TERM ATTRITION RATES

Historically, about one-third of all enlistees who entered the services between fiscal years 1993 and 1997 did not complete the terms of the contract. Most of these enlistees were separated between their 7th and 48th months of service, after they had been fully trained and were assigned to jobs. Analysis of all enlistees entering the service in fiscal year 1997 showed that these historical trends were continuing and in fact were on the rise. Table 1 below graphically indicates the percentage of

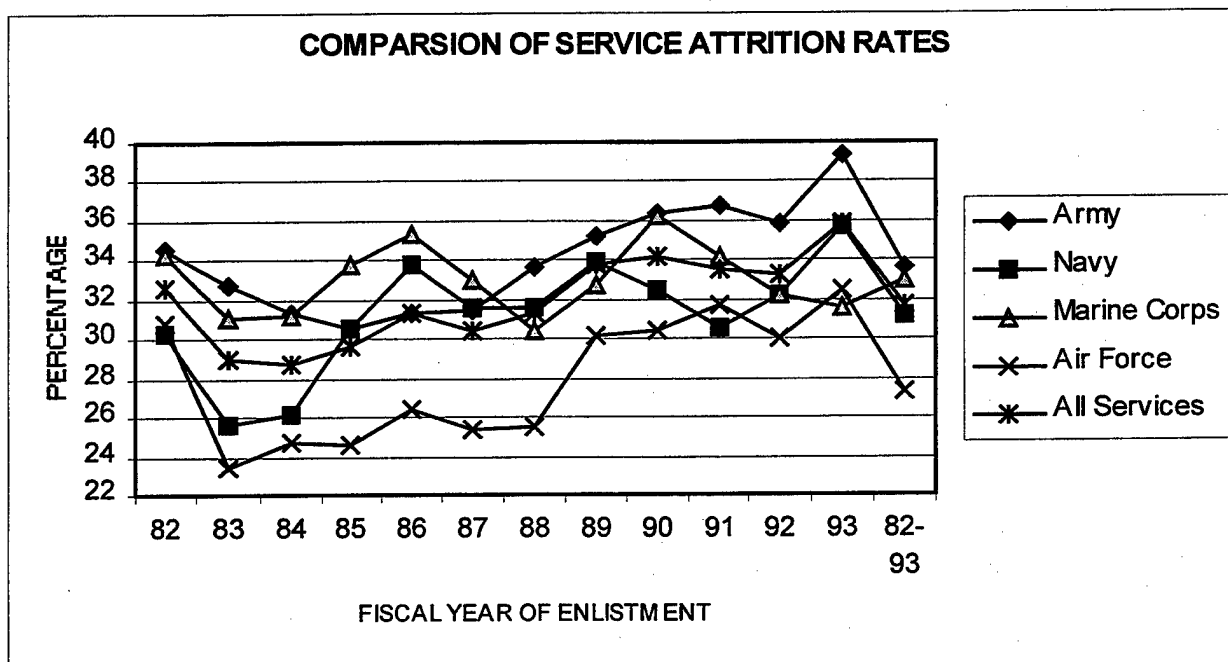


Table 1

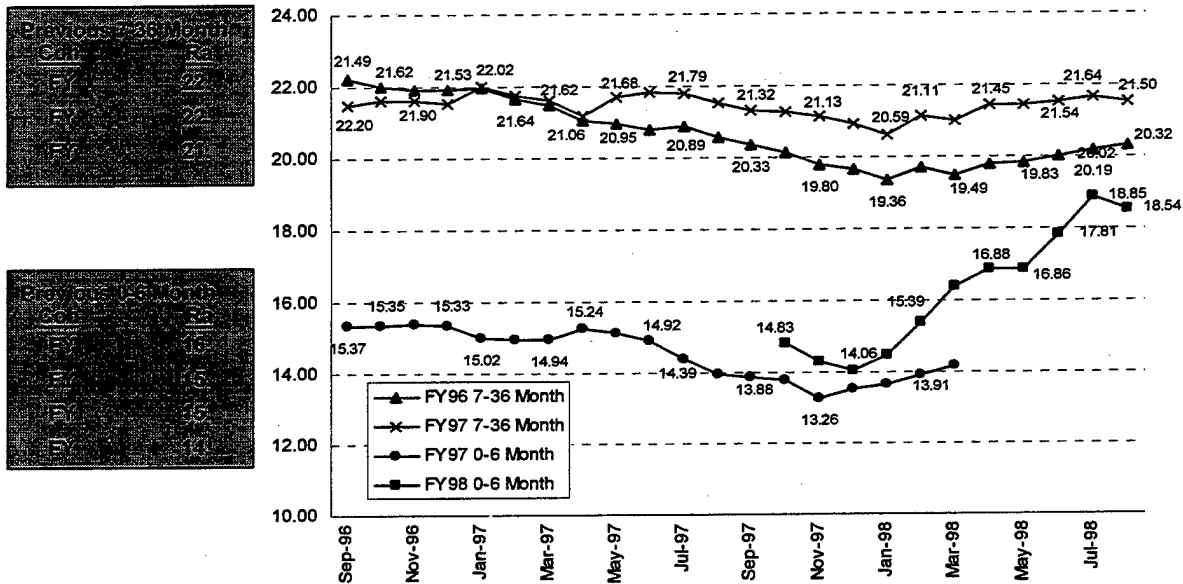
enlisted personnel who were separated from each service between their first and forty-eighth month of service.⁴

As table 1 reveals, those attrition rates increased in the Army, Navy, and Air Force for those entering the service between 1982 and 1993. The Marine Corps had the lowest attrition rate. Data further indicates that most of the increase in attrition for the Army, Navy, and Air Force occurred during the first six months of service.⁵

Enlistees who entered the services in fiscal year 1993 experienced their highest concentration of attrition in their first six months of service. Of the 72,670 enlistees who did not complete their first terms, 27,624 were separated in this initial period. Between months 6 and 12, additional 7,607 enlistees were separated. During these enlistees' second, third, and fourth years of service, attrition dropped gradually. In the second year of service, 14,922 enlistees were discharged. In the third year of enlistment, 12,395 soldiers were separated, and in the fourth year, 10,122 soldiers were discharged.⁶

Analysis of the 35.8 percent attrition rate for enlistees who entered the services in fiscal year 1993 indicates that 13.6 of all enlistees were separated before they had completed their first six months of service. The remaining 22.2 percent were separated after they had served six months but before they had completed their first terms.⁷

First-term attrition in the Army has ranged between 31 percent and 39 percent over the past ten years. The increase in projected attrition rates since January 1989 translates into 1,500 additional losses from the fiscal year 1996 and 1997 cohorts. The most recent 0-to 6-month attrition rate of 18.5 percent for a fiscal year 1998 cohort size of 68,300 soldiers will result in 2,400 more losses than a normal historical attrition rate of 15 percent. Table 2 below



The attrition figures above represent the monthly best estimates of the final 0-6 month attrition rates for FY 97 and 98 accession cohorts and the final 7-36 month attrition rates for FY 96 and 97 accession cohorts. Each figure is based on the observed attrition rate of the cohort to that point in time and a forecast of the expected final rate of attrition based on historical attrition experience. The August 98 estimates are the most current estimates, all others are historical estimates.

Table 2

graphically depicts the Army's challenge with first-term attrition and its growing impact on readiness.⁸

IMPACT ON READINESS

High attrition has serious consequences for Army operations: Army readiness is reduced; recruiting and training costs increase sharply; personnel remaining in undermanned units are required to do more than their fair share of work (which could contribute to further attrition); and turbulence empties classroom seats and brings about inefficiencies in training. The Army incurs recruiting and training costs for soldiers leaving early, but also bears the costs of out-processing, providing unemployment compensation, recruiting and training replacements and, in some cases, providing veterans and medical benefits.⁹

According to DOD, in fiscal year 1998 (FY98), the average cost of recruiting each enlistee was \$6,732, and the average cost of training was an additional \$28,800, for a total of \$35,532. Using this FY98 cost figure, the Army invested approximately \$1 billion to recruit and train the 32,000 enlistees who joined the Army in fiscal year 1993 and did not complete their first contract terms.

These dollar figures include the cost of the entire recruiting and training infrastructure--that is, the recruiting and training sites, instructors, and recruiters. It is not feasible to expect to save the entire \$35,532 for each enlistee who is not separated.¹⁰ However, the figures do demonstrate the

magnitude of the cost of recruiting and training hundreds of thousands of new recruits each year. Clearly, the longer the Army can keep a soldier, the more of a return the Army will receive on the dollars for readiness investment. Army budgets in general and personnel budgets in particular are going to be extremely pinched for the foreseeable future. The Army is already under considerable pressure to reduce unnecessary costs. Attrition is thus a legitimate policy problem for the Army. How can the Army reduce attrition while maintaining quality in a relatively bare market?

REASONS FOR EARLY SEPARATION

According to the official codes used to categorize enlistees' separations, the reasons for the early discharge of enlistees who entered the services in fiscal year 1993 varies by gender and by service. Services' official separation codes capture general categories of discharge. But services use these separation codes differently, and these codes capture only one of several possible reasons for early discharge. Occasional extreme variations in the percentages of their separations for a given official reason suggest that the services either have very different attrition problems or simply that they interpret separation codes differently.¹¹

The primary reasons that men who entered the Army in FY93 were separated between their 7th and 48th months are shown in

Table 3 in order of magnitude. Over 70 percent of the Army men in this group were separated for misconduct, medical conditions, performance problems, or drug use.¹²

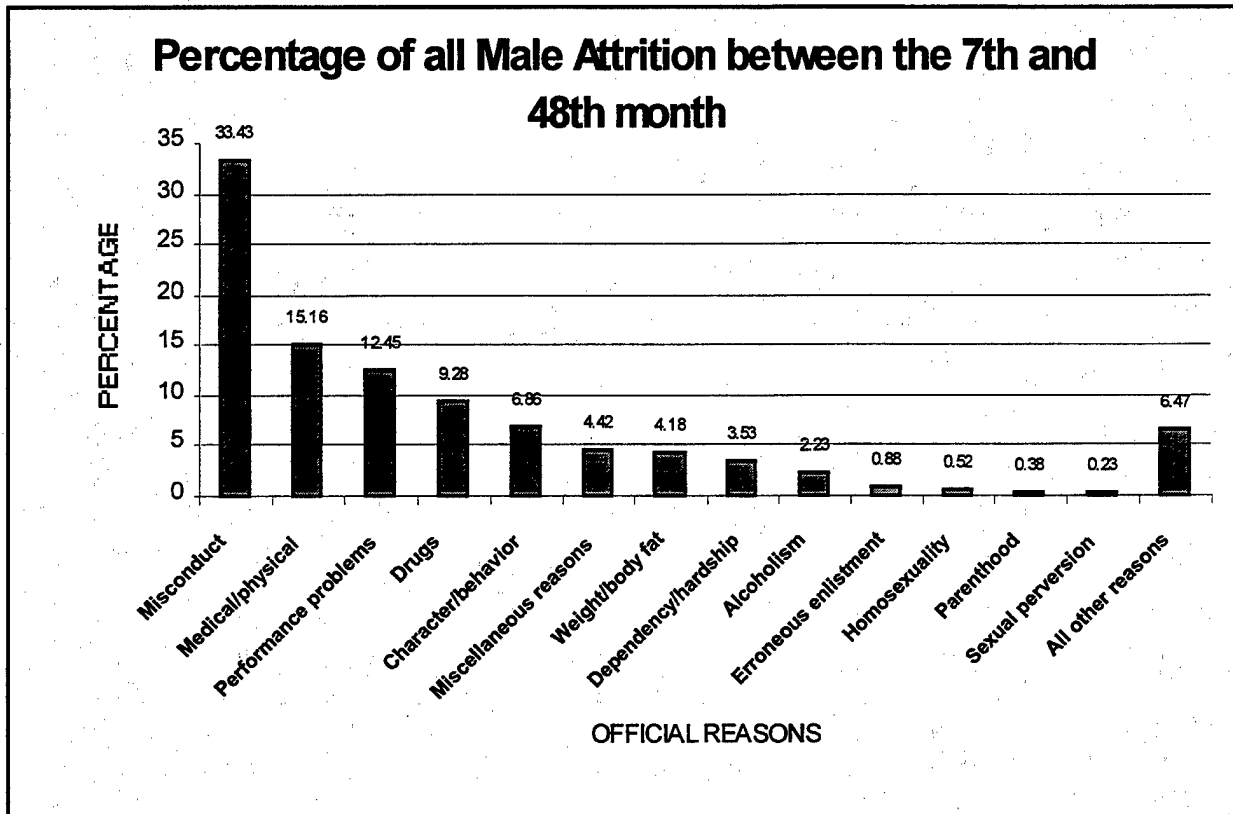


Table 3

The principal reasons that women entering the Army in FY93 were separated between their 7th and 48th months are shown in the table four in order of magnitude: Over 71 percent of all women in this group were separated for pregnancy, medical problems, misconduct, performance, or parenthood. The major reason for female separation from the Army and all other services is pregnancy.¹³

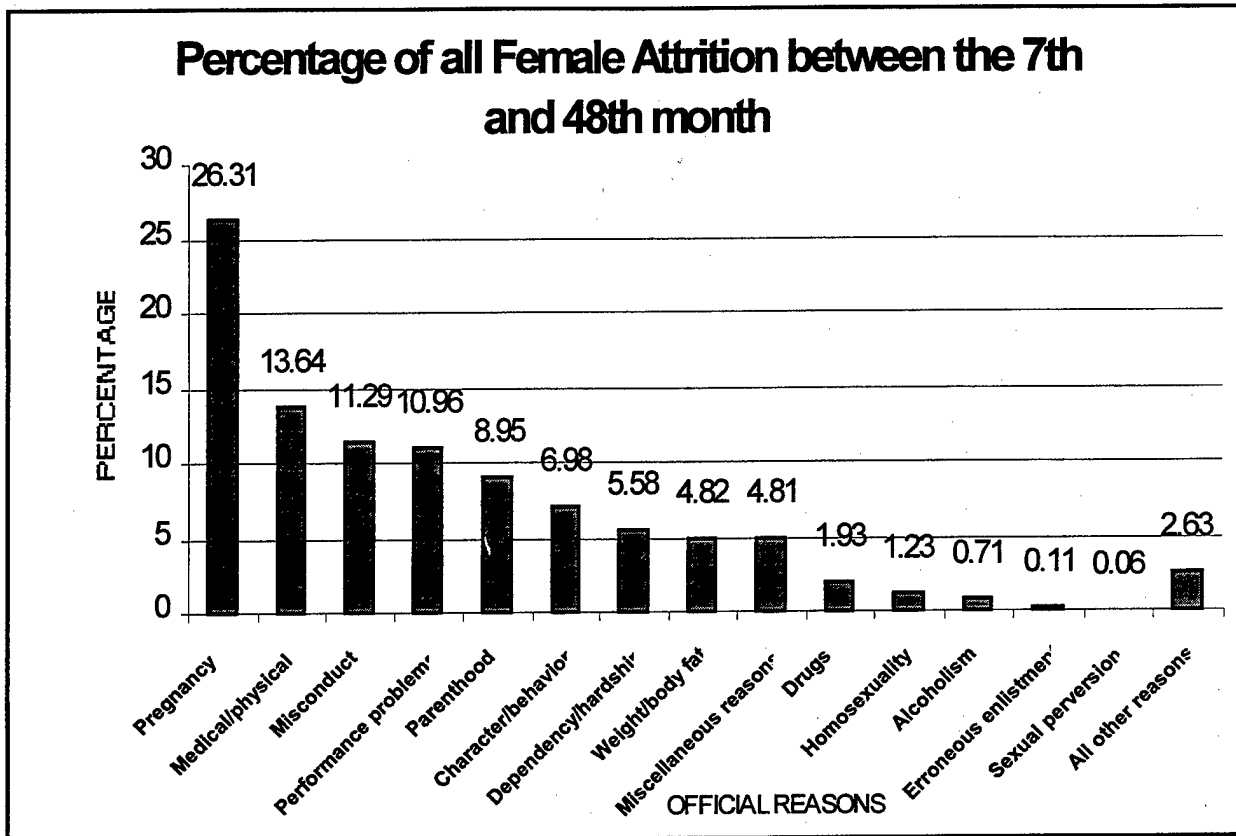


Table 4

Analysis of separation codes suggests the continuing need for the services to review their application of separation codes. First, the services' extreme variations in numbers of separations for different reasons--such as unsatisfactory performance, medical conditions, and drug use--suggest that the services either have different attrition problems or are interpreting the separation codes differently. Second, current separation codes do not provide sufficiently specific information to understand the magnitude of certain types of discharge. For example, the separation code for unsatisfactory performance includes discharges for failure to pass physical

training tests, career development tests, and on-the-job requirements-but they do not distinguish among these various categories of failure. The Army made it clear they do not wish to try to retain individuals who engage in misconduct simply to reduce attrition rates.¹⁴ Also, the Army's Director of Military Personnel Management has emphasized to its major commands that two of the largest areas of separations, discharges for misconduct and discharges in lieu of court-martial, "are areas that are absolutely non-negotiable."¹⁵

Both DOD and GAO have mounted efforts to determine whether there are better ways to screen incoming recruits for criminal backgrounds to ensure that all available information on past criminal behavior is considered in deciding whether to enlist new recruits. In April 1998, DOD issued a report ranking recommendations to improve the quality of its databases and to maintain pre-service arrest information on recruits.¹⁶

Some enlistees now separated for misconduct may be candidates for rehabilitation. Of all services' enlistees who entered in FY93, 12 percent of those separated for misconduct (1,602 persons) were found to have committed "minor disciplinary offenses."¹⁷ According to Army regulations, a bar to reenlistment offers commanders a mechanism for putting enlistees on notice that they may not reenlist unless their performance improves. In December 1996, the Army changed this policy, no longer

1997. However, the decline in attrition was only temporary: latest figures indicate a return to 35 percent attrition.¹⁸

First-term enlistees may also be separated for unsatisfactory performance if they fail physical training tests. Enlistees are being separated because they have failed one part of the physical training test, such as the running portion or the sit-ups portion. Alternate tests are available, but often enlistees being separated for failing the physical training test are unaware of such options. Further, they had not been offered alternate tests.¹⁹

The Army has focused its attrition-reduction efforts on screening out potential recruits with a higher likelihood of separating early. They have focused their recruiting efforts on enlisting young people who are high school graduates and who score in the upper 50th percentile of the AFQT. The services have targeted this subgroup at least in part because it has consistently demonstrated lower attrition rates than other subgroups.²⁰

Analysis of data on enlistees who entered the Army in fiscal year 1993 indicates that attrition rates continue to be lower for persons with higher educational levels. For example, those who entered the services in FY93 with high school diplomas had an attrition rate of 35 percent, while those with 2 years of high school had a rate of 53.1 percent, and those holding

general equivalency degrees had an attrition rate of 54.8 percent. Similarly, enlistees who score progressively higher on the AFQT continue to have decreasing rates of attrition. Those who scored in the highest AFQT category, category I (scores of 93 to 99) had an attrition rate of 27.5 percent. Those in category II (scores of 65 to 92) had an attrition rate of 32.4 percent; those in category IIIA (scores of 50 to 64) had a rate of 37.6 percent; and those in category IIIB (scores of 31 to 49) had a rate of 40 percent.²¹

Overall attrition rates for first-term enlistees now reflect the fact that the vast majority of the services' recruits hold high school diplomas and score in the upper half of the AFQT. For example, of all enlistees entering the services in FY93, 91.5 percent held high school diplomas, and 71.5 percent scored in the upper half of the AFQT. For these reasons, DOD's overall attrition rate of 35.8 percent closely approximates the attrition rates of high school diploma graduates (35 percent) and of persons who score in category IIIA of the AFQT (37.6 percent). All these statistics indicate that if DOD and the services had not targeted these higher quality recruits, attrition rates would almost certainly have been higher. Efforts to reduce attrition rates below current levels need to focus on finding ways to retain current high-quality enlistees.²²

In December 1996, the Chief of Staff of the Army directed Army leaders to reexamine their procedures to ensure that they were doing everything possible to reduce first-term attrition. The Army has also set numerical targets for reducing attrition. According to Army officials, however, the only formal policy change is that the Army no longer allows enlistees with bars to reenlistment to separate voluntarily. The Army hopes that calling its local commanders' attention to the importance of retaining first-term personnel will result in lower attrition. This kind of attention is critical, but it is unclear how commanders should go about retaining enlistees other than those with bars to reenlistment.

The Army has set the following numeric goals for reducing first-term attrition:

1. To reduce FY96 rates by 10 percent by the end of FY97.
2. To reduce FY96 rates by 20 percent by the end of FY98. This would reduce the attrition rate by 30 percent over a two-year period.
3. To reduce FY96 rates by 33 percent by the end of FY03. This would reduce the attrition rate by 25 percent over seven years.²³

The Army met its goal for FY97. However, first-term attrition rates have leveled off and for FY98, they are on the rise. The tentative, revised goal is to reduce the rate to 30 percent by

2003. This is extremely ambitious considering the historical trend and the lack of significant organizational changes to reduce the rate.²⁴

In an attempt to find root causes for why enlistees have been separating early, DOD interviewed 254 first-term personnel and their supervisors. Many supervisors and first-term enlistees suggested that quality-of-life issues--such as perceived erosion of benefits, pay, and advancement opportunities, coupled with long work hours and frequent deployments--might be a root cause of many separations. These interviews do not comprise a statistical sample of all first-term enlistees and clearly do not provide sufficient evidence about which quality-of-life improvements might lead to lower attrition rates. Nonetheless, they do provide useful insights into underlying reasons for current attrition rates. Currently there is no formalized mechanism for prioritizing the concerns of first-term personnel who are discharged early or for enabling the services to direct their attention to improving quality-of-life issues that have the most effect on retaining first-term personnel.²⁵

Many enlistees expressed the general perception that military retirement and medical benefits are eroding and that their salaries are not competitive with those of the private sector. The belief that they could make more money in the

civilian world was most prevalent in certain military specialties with highly transferrable skills, such as those involving computers. The perception that retirement benefits are eroding was another frequently cited demotivator. This was particularly true when first-term enlistees worked side by side with enlistees who had entered the services before the retirement system was changed and whose retirement benefits were seen as clearly better. Finally, the sense that medical benefits were not as good as they used to be was also frequently mentioned as another reason that a career in the military was no longer appealing.²⁶

Many enlistees expressed frustration with not having more opportunities for career advancement. Many said that they felt that advancement opportunities were limited, that they enjoyed few choices to cross-train to other occupations, and that they had not been allowed to transfer to more desirable locations. Some who had joined the military for college benefits said that their long work schedules and frequent deployments prevented them from taking night courses toward obtaining a college degree.

Enlistees' feelings about their deployment schedules varied, depending on how frequently they were deployed and on whether they were married. In some cases, deployment appeared to be a motivator. Some enlistees complained that they had

joined the service to see the world and had not been able to deploy at all. Army officials indicated that first-term enlistees who deploy generally have higher morale, fewer disciplinary problems, and a greater sense of mission than their non-deployed counterparts. Other enlistees expressed frustration with deployment, especially those in occupations that required extensive and frequent travel away from home.

Single enlistees frequently complained that their married counterparts were treated preferentially because they received housing and subsistence allowances and were allowed to live and eat off base or off ships. Single enlistees believed that, because they lived and ate on base or aboard ship, they were more available and were thus required to perform extra duties. They also said that they did not have equal amounts of time off and privacy.²⁷

All four services have developed surveys to collect information from servicemembers on their perceptions of the quality of military life. However, no service currently administers exit surveys to first-term enlisted personnel or targets the information it collects from these surveys to analysts of the problem of first-term enlisted attrition and ways to reduce it.²⁸

The Army currently administers two surveys to its personnel. First, commanders may administer a "Command Climate

Survey" when they assume a new command, but they have the option of keeping the results confidential. Second, the Army Research Institute has administered a "Sample Survey of Military Personnel" to Army officers and enlisted personnel twice a year since 1943. The latest survey results (Spring 1997) indicate that 52.2 percent of all enlisted personnel are satisfied or very satisfied with the overall quality of Army life. Only 28.9 percent of enlisted personnel, however, were satisfied or very satisfied with their amount of basic pay, and only 28.1 percent were satisfied or very satisfied with their retirement benefits. Two other areas in which less than one-third of enlistees expressed that they were satisfied or very satisfied were in (1) the number of personnel available to do the work (28.9 percent) and (2) the opportunity to select a job, training, or station of their choice (32.8 percent).²⁹

In 1994 and 1995, the Army administered an exit survey to departing personnel, but this effort was discontinued because Army officials believed that this survey duplicated the Army's other two surveys. The Army Research Institute is currently developing another survey to be administered to all incoming recruits as they enter basic training and then as they either separate from training or continue on to their first duty stations. Evaluation of this data is expected to begin in January 1999.³⁰

Historically, the services have focused their efforts to reduce attrition on recruiting high school graduates with high scores on aptitude tests because these types of enlistees have exhibited lower attrition rates. Because the majority of all recruits are now high school graduates with high aptitude scores, the services must now focus on retaining these enlistees. The services have already taken some steps to address attrition, such as encouraging commanders to examine opportunities to increase retention, setting numerical goals for reducing attrition, and restricting certain voluntary and early separations. However, only rarely have these efforts been driven by an analysis of exactly why attrition is occurring and what separation policies might be changed to improve the retention of specific categories of enlistees.³¹

RECOMMENDED CHANGES TO REDUCE ATTRITION

The first place to start in this effort to reduce attrition is to establish a database that links the reason for separation with the correct standard separation code. In particular, we need to develop a database on medical separations because it is the most prevalent reason for early separation. Until the Army understands more precisely why recruits are leaving, it cannot determine what ways would effectively reduce attrition. Also, consistent standardized separation codes for all services may

reveal some beneficial practices that another service may be using.

The Army can improve the retainability of their enlistees through actions that are taken prior to joining the service. The two most important steps are screening and counseling. Careful screening can reduce attrition by close review of the applicant's characteristics-such as weight or physical fitness, marital status, and employment history. Some studies suggest those recruiters' fear of losing potential recruits in a shrinking market inhibits the services from conducting careful screening. Currently the screening process is used only on perceived high-risks recruits, such as non-high school graduates. Given the costs of first-term attrition and its impact on Army readiness, there should be more such screening. If nothing else, it allows the Army an additional tool for identifying recruits who will require greater scrutiny and more support if they are accepted.³²

The Army can also benefit from better counseling and more effective leading of young recruits and trainees. Experienced recruiters can interview applicants to determine those who are at great risk for early separation. As enlistees progress through the training base, cadre can continue counseling where the recruiter left off and concentrate on time-tested counseling methods. Sergeants can do this by clearly showing the trainees

their observed performance deficiencies, then guiding trainees through corrective procedures, giving them sufficient time to practice the skill, and finally rechecking the trainee for skill development. Early identification of potential problems, monitoring progress in overcoming these problems, offering ways to improve--these are ways to retain soldiers, especially high-risk enlistees.

Studies suggest that positive leadership, such as the services' greater command emphasis on reducing attrition, have the direct effect of lowering attrition. Even so, a lingering "zero defects" mentality still leads to attrition in some parts of the Army. That is, some leaders still believe that the services have no obligation to work with a servicemember at any paygrade to give him or her a chance at rehabilitation. This mentality appears to be related to what some researchers have observed is the "volunteer in, volunteer out" philosophy that came about when the draft ended. During the draft era, some researchers have commented, commanders believed that enlistees had an obligation to fulfill and were more likely to work with enlistees experiencing motivational problems. With the advent of the all-volunteer force, on the other hand, commanders became less patient with below-average enlistees and were more likely to separate them. Accordingly, enlistees continue to take

advantage of separation policies to seek easy ways out of the military with minimal consequences.³³

There is some evidence that positive leadership, including proper motivation of enlistees who have the potential to be rehabilitated, has a direct effect on lowering attrition. For example, in 1984, an Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) study of attrition during training found that "trainee performance is nearly always a function of cadre leadership." During the Command team's visits to training sites, it found that units with lower attrition demonstrated concern for the individual, expected trainees to meet standards and were generally working to produce 'a soldier I'd accept in a unit.' Cadre in units with higher TDP (Trainee Discharge Program) rates tended to be more concerned with statistical accomplishments, to enact the traditional drill sergeant role, and to be preoccupied with 'weeding out the duds.' They emphasized graduating 'the best soldier in the United States Army' or 'one I'd be proud to have in a unit.' Their approach set standards beyond the norm.³⁴

During March 1998 testimony before the Senate Committee on Armed Services' Subcommittee on Personnel, a panel of recruiters stressed the importance of making new enlistees more aware of the commitment they make in signing contracts for military service. They believed that it is too easy for enlistees to get out of their service commitments. One Army recruiter, for

example, said, "Sometimes we have got to hold them, hold their feet to the fire, so to speak, a little longer, and I think in the end they would be happy." Analysis of official reasons for separation and interviews with first-term enlistees confirm that some enlistees who are now being separated might have been retained if they faced stricter disincentives for early separation. Some enlistees now seek "escape routes" by reporting medical problems, by becoming pregnant, by committing minor disciplinary infractions; or by failing their physical training, career development tests, or weight standards. They have many ways to separate early, with little hassle, and with all the privileges afforded by an honorable discharge.³⁵

Medical disclosure is also an issue in attrition. The first step in the revised process of collecting medical information is the development of a new medical history form for enlistees. The current form is 25 years old, relying on archaic medical terms like "lameness," "female disorder," and "nervous trouble of any sort." Further, the services should scrupulously differentiate between trainees with known medical conditions and those who failed to disclose a medical condition at the MEPS. Trainees who disclosed a medical condition that they are being discharged for should be honorably discharged under current procedures. Those trainees who failed to disclose a medical condition at the MEPS should be discharged as a

Fraudulent Enlistment. All applicants should acknowledge having received the following warning: "Any person who enters the military service through concealment of a disqualifying medical condition is subject to administrative discharge and issuance of a discharge certificate under other than honorable conditions." The Army needs to follow through on this warning for individuals who knowingly concealed medical information when they enlisted.³⁶

Studies conducted by Army Research Institute indicate that today's recruits are less fit than those of previous generations. In the last decade, the average trainee has grown heavier (5 pounds for males and 9 pounds for females) while their heights have remained the same. If a trainee does not prepare for the physical demands of Army service, they are more likely to be separated. Studies suggest trainees who do not prepare and who are less physically fit will face both greater mental and physical stress during training. "Falling out of training," repeatedly failing the fitness diagnostics, and remaining on medical profiles fosters a "failure mentality." Many interviewed trainees claimed that they tried and tried again, but eventually lost their motivation and gave-up. Attrition of both male and female trainees appears related to their overall physical fitness level prior to enlisting. Even though physical parity seems to be increasing between genders (with women having greater equality of opportunities to

participate in athletic activities at the high school and college levels), there still appears to be significant differences in physical fitness levels of Army recruits based on gender. The Army still needs an instrument to ensure that all recruits are at a minimal physical fitness level prior to enlisting. To reduce APFT failures, the ARI study proposes the establishment an Enlistment Standard (ES) for Physical Fitness. This ES should be administered at the MEPS.³⁷

Enlistee's physical fitness can be improved in the following ways:

1. Establish a baseline or Enlistment Standard (ES) for Physical Fitness.
2. Require potential enlistees to take a specified amount of physical training with recruiters as a condition of acceptance.
3. Assign a Master Fitness Trainer at the MEPS to work with enlistees.
4. Ensure enlistees understand the rigors of basic training instead of simply selling the slogan of "Be All That You Can Be." Enlistees must know that they will have to pay the price to "be all they can be."

First-term attrition can also be reduced through programs that address homesickness and improve privacy. A 1984 RAND study found that units with effective buddy systems, which reduce

homesickness, tended to have lower attrition. Such units normally paired a trainee with demonstrated superior ability with another trainee with lower aptitude scores. The trainee with the higher aptitude was then charged by unit cadre to assist his buddy. The system tended to enhance motivational levels in the "weaker" buddy through informal peer assistance, extra hands-on training, and informal peer counseling. Since marginal trainees didn't want to "let their buddy down," many exerted extra effort to master required skills. The Buddy System has even greater potential today. The Army needs to expand the use and the role of the buddy system to support and train new recruits. Many trainees who were older, married, or caring for dependents suggested that they had difficulty making new friends in training because they felt outside the "norm". They need a 'buddy' because they are having significantly more difficulty dealing with situational adjustment or homesickness.³⁸

Research on situational adjustment disorders or homesickness suggests that family members can assist trainees in dealing with being away from family and friends for long periods. Training units that involved the trainee's immediate family in the training experience by providing them photographs, letters, or periodic telephonic progress reports tended to have fewer separations. These initiatives demonstrated cadre concern for both the trainee and his immediate family and often resulted

in preventing attrition. These contacts often led to family efforts to motivate borderline trainees to complete training. The Army should distribute a letter to parents and spouses of new recruits through the Army recruiter or mailed prior to their ship date. This letter should specify items that a recruit can bring to training, indicating one or two small personal items that they can bring with them such as family photo(s). The letter to parents and spouses should state that it is normal for trainees to experience difficulty dealing with being away from family and friends. The letter should encourage parents and spouses to send letters and photos early in a soldier's training. The letter should advise parents and spouses on how to prepare and support a recruit while they are in training. Additionally, the letter should identify how to deal with phone calls from recruits who "want to come home." The letter should tactfully suggest to parents/spouses not to overburden the trainee with their own difficulties in dealing with the trainees' being away from home and with their own day-to-day problems. The letter should urge parents/spouses to encourage trainees to complete their training, reminding them the training will not last forever. They should tell their soldiers how proud they were of them when they enlisted in the Army. Many parents and spouses already do these things, but it is important to encourage the rest to support their family members while they

are in basic training. One trainee responded that "The only reason I did not quit during basic training was that I did not want to let my family down. They were counting on me to complete my training."³⁹

The Army has focused its efforts to reduce attrition by screening out potential recruits with a higher likelihood of separating early. They have targeted their recruiting efforts on enlisting young people who are high school diploma graduates and who score in the upper 50th percentile of the AFQT. The services have targeted this subgroup at least in part because it has consistently demonstrated lower attrition rates than other subgroups.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

Keeping good people in service is a perennial problem, with no quick fixes. The early loss of junior grade soldiers reduces current and future combat readiness of our strategic force. It also costs our taxpayers millions of dollars. This study has described the negative impacts of high attrition. Reducing attrition smartly is the key. We must maintain our standards and acknowledge there is a delicate balance between who should leave the service and who should be saved through effective leadership. Standards must be absolutely clear, pertinent, and

not arbitrarily applied or modified. Leaders should retain the latitude to identify and separate those with very little potential for further service. To meet the readiness challenges of tomorrow, we must do a better job of retaining our soldiers through their terms of enlistment.

The senior Army leadership supports this effort to reduce the early departure of our most precious resource---the soldier. The Army must find a way to reduce premature losses of first-term soldiers. We cannot afford to lose 37 of every 100 recruits before the end of their contracted active duty obligation. There will always be some degree of necessary loss for good and or not-so-good reasons. But the Army must motivate, support, rehabilitate, and lead soldiers to success. It is important to recognize that after recruiters identify and accept qualified individuals for military service, these young soldiers still require training to ensure successful completion of their active duty service obligation. The time of recruiting our losses on a one-for-one basis must quickly become a practice of the past.

ENDNOTES

¹ John A. Wickham, On Leadership and The Profession of Arms (Fort Knox, KY: U.S. Army Recruiting Command, April 1995), 15.

² Thomas J. Martin, Who Stays, Who Leaves? An Analysis of First-Term Army Attrition (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, April 1995), 1-13.

³ Government Accounting Office, Military Attrition: DOD Could Save Millions by Better Screening Enlisted Personnel (Washington, D.C.: Government Accounting Office, 6 January 1997), 38.

⁴ Government Accounting Office, Military Recruiting: DOD Could Improve Its Recruiter Selection and Incentive Systems (Washington, D.C.: Government Accounting Office, 30 January 1998), 58.

⁵ Mark E. Gebicke, Military Attrition: DOD Needs to Better Understand Reasons for Separation and Improve Recruiting Systems (Washington, D.C.: Testimony, Subcommittee on Personnel, Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate. 4 March 1998), 110.

⁶ Government Accounting Office, Military Attrition: DOD Could Save Millions by Better Screening Enlisted Personnel (Washington, D.C.: Government Accounting Office, 6 January 1997), 41.

⁷ Ibid, 42.

⁸ Director of Military Personnel Management, Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, General Officer Steering Committee on First-Term Enlisted Attrition (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Army, 18 March 1997).

⁹ Rudolph G. Penner, Quality Soldiers: Costs of Manning the Active Army (Washington, D.C.: Congress of the United States Congressional Budget Office, June 1986), 19.

¹⁰ Government Accounting Office, Military Attrition: DOD Could Save Millions by Better Screening Enlisted Personnel (Washington, D.C.: Government Accounting Office, 6 January 1997), 39.

¹¹ Government Accounting Office, Military Attrition: DOD Needs to Better Analyze Reasons for Separation and Improve Recruiting Systems (Washington, D.C.: Government Accounting Office 12 March 1998), 112-117.

¹² Ibid, 120.

¹³ Ibid, 121.

¹⁴ Government Accounting Office, Military Attrition: DOD Needs to Better Analyze Reasons for Separation and Improve Recruiting Systems (Washington, D.C.: Government Accounting Office 12 March 1998), 109.

¹⁵ Army Senior Leaders' Conference, Recruiting, Attrition, and Retention (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Army, 21 December 1998).

¹⁶ Government Accounting Office, Military Recruiting: DOD Could Improve Its Recruiter Selection and Incentive Systems Washington, D.C.: Government Accounting Office, 30 January 1998), 59.

¹⁷ Ibid, 63.

¹⁸ Director of Military Personnel Management, Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, General Officer Steering Committee on First-Term Enlisted Attrition (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Army, 18 March 1997).

¹⁹ Government Accounting Office, Military Attrition: DOD Needs to Better Analyze Reasons for Separation and Improve Recruiting Systems (Washington, D.C.: Government Accounting Office, 12 March 1998), 128.

²⁰ Government Accounting Office, Military Recruiting: DOD Could Improve Its Recruiter Selection and Incentive Systems (Washington, D.C.: Government Accounting Office, 30 January 1998), 65.

²¹ Government Accounting Office, Military Attrition: DOD Needs to Better Understand Reasons for Separation and Improve

Recruiting Systems (Washington, D.C.: Government Accounting Office, 4 March 1998), 111.

²² Ibid, 113.

²³ Director of Military Personnel Management, Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, General Officer Steering Committee on First-Term Enlisted Attrition (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Army, 18 March 1997).

²⁴ Ibid, 5.

²⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, First-Term Enlisted Attrition Report (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Army, 23 October 1998), 13-21.

²⁶ Ibid, 23.

²⁷ Ibid, 25-30.

²⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, First-Term Enlisted Attrition Report (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Army, 23 October 1998), 25.

²⁹ Mark E. Gebicke, Military Attrition: DOD Needs to Better Understand Reasons for Separation and Improve Recruiting Systems (Washington, D.C.: Testimony, Subcommittee on Personnel, Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate. 4 March 1998), 112.

³⁰ David K. Horne, The Impact of Soldier Quality on Performance in the Army (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, April 1995), 125.

³¹ U.S. Department of Defense, First-Term Enlisted Attrition Report (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Army, 23 October 1998), 32.

³² Government Accounting Office, Military Attrition: DOD Could Save Millions by Better Screening Enlisted Personnel (Washington, D.C.: Government Accounting Office, 6 January 1997), 43.

³³ Ibid, 45-48.

³⁴ William Lisowski, A Critical Look at Military and Retention Policies (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, March 1985), 32-38.

³⁵ Mark E. Gebicke, Military Attrition: DOD Needs to Better Understand Reasons for Separation and Improve Recruiting Systems (Washington, D.C.: Testimony, Subcommittee on Personnel, Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate. 4 March 1998), 115-121.

³⁶ Government Accounting Office, Military Attrition: DOD Could Save Millions by Better Screening Enlisted Personnel (Washington, D.C.: Government Accounting Office, 6 January 1997), 45-50.

³⁷ David K. Horne, The Impact of Soldier Quality on Performance in the Army (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, April 1995), 128-130.

³⁸ Ross M. Stolzenberg and John D. Winkler, Voluntary Terminations from Military Service (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, March 1984), 25,26.

³⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, First-Term Enlisted Attrition Report (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Army, 23 October 1998), 30.

⁴⁰ Government Accounting Office, Military Recruiting: DOD Could Improve Its Recruiter Selection and Incentive Systems (Washington, D.C.: Government Accounting Office, 30 January 1998), 66.

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