



How the military's tribalism erode readiness — count the ways

BY JEFFREY PHILLIPS, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 11/18/18 02:00 PM EST
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In an [article published here](#) on Veterans Day, I examined the military's "tribalism" that profoundly affects resourcing and support within its active component (AC) and reserve component (RC), the Reserve and National Guard. The effects often create inequalities that, in turn, unintentionally erode readiness.

Today's RC is on the front line to an unprecedented extent, relied upon for virtually every military capability. The "part-time" RC is [cheaper than the "full-time" AC](#), an argument made by retired Marine Maj. Gen. Arnold Punaro, a former Senate Armed Services staff director, who wrote in his 2016 book, "[On War and Politics](#)," that "the fully burdened costs of the active military was 70 percent more than that of the Guard and Reserve on an individual basis."

Today's heavily-used RC is essentially a proxy for an inadequately-sized active force. (Recognizing its indispensability, the [FY 2019 defense budget](#) increases the number of full-time Army Reservists, effectively increasing the active force without actually increasing it.)

Nearly a million members of the Reserve and Guard have been activated for the current war; more than 1,200 of its troops have [died in that war](#), and their operational tempo has not decreased.

Yet they are still too often resourced as if they were part-timers. Chief of Army Reserve Lt. Gen. Charles Luckey wrote Congress in his [2017 posture statement](#), "Although the Army Reserve represents nearly 20 percent of the Total Army, it received less than 3.4 percent of the Total Army's equipment procurement budget in FY 2016."

One reservist who serves in Navy intelligence told me, “They expect us to deploy with them, to be a ‘seamless’ part of the total force, but then they give us hand-me-down equipment. We’re like red-headed stepchildren.”

The Air Force’s embarrassing volte-face on the A-10 Warthog is illustrative: digging for dollars to pay for the enormously expensive F-35, Air Force leaders announced the “retirement” of the humble Cold War tank-buster, flown by Air Force Reserve and Guard units and beloved of ground troops. Its demise would buy a few dozen F-35s, which would go (you guessed it) to AC units. The reservists bereft of airplanes would get (you guessed it) older airplanes, none of them capable of the A-10’s ground support performance and some of them likely nearing the scrap yard. Political outcry, and then the A-10’s superior combat performance in Afghanistan, scrapped the Pentagon’s plans to scrap the scrappy Warthog.

Certainly, the past two decades have brought improvement (Air Force Reserve pilots do fly the F-35) and in readiness many RC units are on par with AC units, war being a powerful forcing function. But that is not the whole picture. Budget choices, once the urgency of “things combat” is addressed, slip into the realm of issues that may get less attention — health care, education, quality-of-life, compensation. This is where the inequities become stark and — to those in the RC — irksome.

The purpose of the Basic Allowance for Housing program is to provide fair housing allowances to service members. Both AC and RC members receive a housing allowance; however, the Pentagon reduced the allowance for RC members on active duty orders for less than 30 days.

This reduced RC allowance is referred to as BAH II or BAH Reserve Component/Transit. In its 2008 report, the Commission on the National Guard and Reserves stated, “Current law that limits eligibility for Basic Allowance for Housing only to members on active duty for 30 days or more creates a disparity that impedes implementing a continuum of service.”

In other words, an AC-centric Pentagon established a policy, evidently without an adequate understanding of its impact on virtually half the force. You might forgive an Army Reserve sergeant for asking, “So, I’m performing duty in the same capacity as an active-duty sergeant; tell me (or my spouse and kids) why I’m paid less for housing?”

The tribal dots get easier to connect: The new “blended” military retirement policy has a 401(k) component. The policy reduces the minimum retirement check from 50 percent of base pay to 40 percent, the gap presumably being closed by 401(k) returns. But Reservists can’t take full advantage of the 401(k) plan: they often serve for retirement points only, for which there is no matching. Apparently, no one thought of that.

The Department of Veterans Affairs will bury or inurn “any member of the Armed Forces of the United States who dies on active duty.” According to VA’s website, RC members must meet certain conditions to be memorialized in a national cemetery. The upshot is that if, say a National Guard or Reserve lieutenant is killed riding a motorcycle while off duty and in civilian life, he or she may not meet those requirements and thus would be ineligible for the memorialization rightfully accorded a new AC private first class who dies.

As I wrote last week, some of this is budget-driven. But much is the artifact of a specific tribal frame of reference (which of course influences the budget stuff). It’s time for that to change. That means senior leaders must deliberately transcend the tribal orientation that weakens the very “total force” they tout. It means truly understanding a cohort of the tribe-

of-tribes that traditionally, to borrow a phrase from our warrior secretary of Defense, hasn't been first out the door and at the front of the line.

That's cultural change, and it's tough — especially if you think you've already made the change. But the new reality of a Reserve and National Guard brilliantly serving, fighting and dying alongside their active comrades is imperative enough.

Jeffrey Phillips is executive director of [ROA, dba Reserve Organization of America](#), open to all ranks and promoting a strong, ready reserve force. A retired U.S. Army Reserve major general, he served in the Regular Army for nearly 14 years.

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