



Negotiating civilian & military lives:

How Reservists manage their military service, families and civilian work

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Background

One of the key pillars of reform within the British Armed Forces is an increase in the number of, and reliance on, Reservists. This brings a range of challenges and opportunities for individual Reservists, their civilian employers and their families. Understanding the everyday experiences of Reservists as they pursue their military service is crucial so that the Armed Forces can maximise their defence capacity by better supporting Reservists, their families and their employers.

The study

The 'Negotiating Civilian and Military Lives: Reserves, families and work' research project explored how Reservists and their families experience the intersecting spheres of Reserve service, civilian work and family life. The research was mixed-methods and conducted between September 2014 and June 2018. This briefing paper focuses on the qualitative interview findings.

Thirty-five Reservists were interviewed in 2015/16, and a second time in 2017. The interview sample sought diversity in terms rank, length of service, ethnicity and gender, and the different paths taken to become a Reservist. Reservist participants were recruited from all three service branches, however most were from the Army (n=26) reflecting the predominance of Army Reservist personnel. The interviews focussed on the Reservist's experiences of their service, their families and their civilian employment. Many Reservists commented that this was the first time they had discussed some of their experiences and thoughts with anyone, suggesting that despite the camaraderie that many experience in Reserve service, each Reservist is tackling the challenges they experience individually.

Key findings

- Reservists' capacity to serve is dependent on their flexibility and skill in continuously negotiating the competing demands on their time and energy from their families, civilian employers, and Armed Forces unit. In turn, many Reservists rely on the enduring flexibility and support of their families and civilian employers to enable them to commit to the Armed Forces.
- Reservists compartmentalise their civilian and military lives, reinforcing and preserving the boundaries. Regardless of the Reservist's circumstances, negotiating the demands of military and civilian life requires incremental sacrifices and compromise for the Reservist, their families, civilian employers and colleagues.
- Reservists often have to make choices about where they want to direct their time, energy and focus – their civilian or military careers – and, indeed, their families. However, as circumstances change, different decisions are made: there are clear temporal and lifecourse dimensions.
- Pay is not a major motivation for Reservists but is nonetheless important in their negotiations with their families. Some Reservists shape their civilian careers around their military employment.

Findings: negotiating military & civilian lives

The organisational flexibility of the Future Reserves 2020 (FR2020) programme is mirrored by how Reservists themselves negotiate their military and civilian lives. Reservists' capacity to serve is ultimately dependent on their flexibility and skill in continuously negotiating the competing demands on their time and energy from their families, civilian employers, and Reservist Unit. Some Reservists are more adept than others at negotiating with these various groups, or are in a better position to be able to do so.

There is remarkable diversity in the type of people who are Reservists. Reservists vary in terms of their biographical history, age, family configuration, occupation, as well as, of course, by gender, ethnicity and sexuality. This also means that Reservists have diverse pressures and responsibilities at home and work, which in-turn affects the time and energy they are able to commit to the Reserves at any given point in their lives. What unites them, however, is their inspiring motivation, resilience, and tenacity to commit part of their lives to the military. Yet it would be naïve to suggest that there are not challenges and costs. To carve out time and space in their lives to fulfil their commitment, Reservists draw on a wide range of strategies, to 'make Reserve service work', often with a degree of compromise and sometimes with detrimental impact on other areas of their lives. Therefore, regardless of their strategies and skill, these negotiations require incremental sacrifices for the Reservist, their families, civilian colleagues and employers.

Reservists compartmentalise their civilian and military lives, and reinforce boundaries between them

One remarkable feature of how many Reservists manage their military and civilian lives is the separation of 'military life' from 'civilian life'. This compartmentalisation varies in degree, and is created both by the Reservists' everyday practices as well as by the ways that civilian and Reservist organisations are structured and operate. Many Reservists talked about their military service as a "second life", a "second marriage", or "another family".

"I had two lives going on and they both meant equally as much ... you have two lives going: parallel, side-by-side" Toby, Army Reservist

"I kept the two separate ... those circles would not join" Samuel, Army Reservist

Information and activity which crosses the military-civilian boundary are carefully managed; any crossover between them tends to be steered by the Reservists' themselves. Maintaining clear boundaries was therefore a key strategy for Reservists. They often said that they disliked it when these different parts of their lives crossed over in ways that they did not have control over. This worked both ways where

Reservists can also be cautious about sharing family or civilian work details with the military, even in times of crisis¹. The result is a delicate, but unspoken, give and take between the military, Reservists, their families, colleagues, and employers.

"And I was defensive and cagey and didn't want to let too much slip. I was selective about what I let them know" Andrew, Army Reservist

Reservists have to juggle the priorities in their lives depending on the demands of military, family and civilian work

Reservists are highly motivated and goal-driven, often describing themselves in terms such as 'restless souls'. It is of tremendous value to the Armed Forces that Reservists strive to achieve. Yet the competing demands of civilian and military life mean that Reservists often struggle to excel in all their life domains simultaneously, and so tend to prioritise certain aspects of their lives over others. Thus, Reservists make choices about where they want to dedicate their time and energy. For some, those choices were actively and strategically made with full knowledge of what the consequences would be on the other aspects of their lives, while for others it was relatively passive and unreflective.

Prioritising Reserve service over family:

"Sometimes I put, wrongly I think, put the Army Reserves in front of my family ... just so you can turn up for those things" Oliver, Army Reservist

Prioritising family over Reserve service:

"Nearer my children's birthday's ... there is often [training] weekends about there, so often I'll miss those weekends because of the kids' birthdays." William, RAF Reservist

Prioritising civilian employment over Reserve service:

"I've always said my joining the Reserves is purely... a selfish thing because ... I'm not seeing this as a career ... it really has got to get outside my working life because my work comes first"

Sharad, Army Reservist

"At my stage of life with [my] business... there are other priorities... there are other things which are more important [than Reserves]."

Bruce, Royal Marines Reservist

¹The control of information flow by the Reservist is also supported by other research on Reservist family members. See Connelly, V, Morrison, Z., Fear, N., Hennelly, S. & Smith, J. (2017). Support to the Families of Reservists: An Investigation of Needs, Current Provision and Gaps. Final Report DHCSTC.

Prioritising Reserve service over civilian employment:

“I didn’t pick a job that I thought would impact the Reserve side of life. And I didn’t take promotions because I thought it might have an impact... Most of this has been at financial cost to be honest.”

Jeremy, Army Reservist

“This completely took over. I ended up dropping out of uni... I just didn’t go, I was so absorbed with this [Reserves].” Alistair, Royal Marines Reservist

Our study sought the views of a diverse range of Reservists, and so not all Reservists were partnered, or had children or were engaged in civilian work at the time of interview. Yet the more responsibilities on the Reservist, the more difficult it was for them to negotiate and maintain an equilibrium in, and between, all aspects of their military and civilian lives. Reserve service is so much more than a way to fill ‘spare time’: time has to be created, time and again, against competing priorities.

Priorities change over the lifecourse

Reservists make choices about where they want to direct their time, energy and focus. The majority of our participants prioritised either their civilian or military career, while engaged in both simultaneously, and with family commitments often organised around the periphery of those two key commitments. However, their choices are made within familial and employment constraints and are not static. Different choices are made at different times because the context and priorities in which Reservists make those choices are dynamic. As such, Reservists may increase or decrease their commitment to the Armed Forces at different times. This switching of priorities may be temporary (e.g. an illness in their family; project deadlines at work) while others can be longer lasting (birth of a child, a new job or promotion).

“I’m going to be a Nan... and when said bundle of joy arrives I think that weekends and stuff [with the Reserves] may change because my priorities definitely will change, same as they were when my kids were little” Freya, Army Reservist

The consequences of those choices

At any given time the choices Reservists make have consequences. For example, some Reservists who prioritised their military career stated their loyalties to their family or their civilian employment were sometimes questioned by

family or colleagues. Conversely, Reservists who prioritised their civilian careers had their loyalties and commitment to their Unit questioned by comrades and superiors. Those who do not prioritise Reserve service sometimes feel that they are subject to antipathy by their Unit, and seen as unreliable².

Some Reservists have intentionally not taken promotions or new employment opportunities if they perceived these as potentially interfering with their Reserve service. Others believe they have not been hired, given greater responsibility at work, or promoted because of their service, suggesting that they may experience some disadvantage due to their Reserve service. Some Reservists reported that they experienced relationship problems, even breakdowns, which they attributed to their military commitments; and a few told us that they have chosen not to form romantic relationships at all if they perceived it as interfering with their Reserve service.

“I certainly felt that my loyalties are questioned, you know, ‘what’s more important, [civilian company name] or that you are just going to go off and join the Regulars?’” Ben, Army Reservist

Reserve service as employment

While Reserve service can be understood as ‘quasi-leisure/serious leisure’, or more pejoratively as ‘a hobby’, our research suggests that it is most helpful to view Reserve service as employment. Most Reservists, then, are engaged in dual-employment with all the challenges (and opportunities) this entails.

Reserve service is situated within an increasingly competitive labour market, yet it does not (and cannot compete) on pay. Instead it competes on its:

- Standing as a prestigious institution of which Reservists want to be a part.
- Unique training and adventure opportunities.
- Flexible employment model.

Our research suggests that the value of thinking about Reserve service as employment should not be underestimated just because pay may not be the major motivator. Reservists may shape their civilian career, refuse promotions and resign from civilian employment in deference to their military employment, regardless of financial remuneration, risk, and/or future uncertainty.

While pay is not the reason why Reservists join the military, it is an important source of income for many Reservists, and some told us that they use pay as a negotiating tactic with their family (for example, using military income to pay for family holidays) to barter against their absence. Poor pay

²Reservists themselves may use the derogatory term “Bounty Hunters” to label those who attended less than other Reservists, and that time commitment is often used to judge loyalty to Reserve service. See Connelly, V. (2013) Cultural differences between the regular army and the TA as barriers to integration. Unpublished paper for Army 2020 Team. London, MoD.

administration, last minute changes/cancellations to planned courses, or anything else which disrupts Reservist income also disrupts Reservists' carefully negotiated settlements with their families. Moreover, pervasive accounts of Reserve service as anything other than serious employment (such as 'hobby', 'drinking club', 'weekend warrior') can disrupt how Reservists see their role within the military, and how they negotiate with their family and employer to legitimise their absence from home and work.

Reserve service also provides the opportunity of being more flexible than other employers. Many participants were attracted by the opportunities to serve in the Armed Forces

while maintaining a high degree of autonomy and choice presently unavailable to Regulars. We also identified many examples of reciprocal benefit derived from having both civilian and Armed Forces employment. Some Reservists talked about ways in which they had transferred their learning between their civilian and Armed Forces employment, enabling them to become more skilled and competent employees, as well as better Armed Forces personnel. However, this type of strategic thinking was better articulated, and more actively cultivated by some, while others appeared not to have considered this, and so could be a potential area to develop with Reservists in the future.

Implications for policy and practice, with recommendations

1. Review the Armed Forces Covenant, giving particular attention to how the demands and challenges of Reserve service differs from Regular service. Such a review should recognise and mitigate the sacrifice and potential detriment involved in Reserve service, including the impact on the Reservist, their families and civilian employers.
2. Mentoring and personal development plans should be created for Reservists to empower them to confidently approach their employers and family members to negotiate their absence from work/home while maintaining trust and support. Such a plan would also help Reservists deal with prospective employers in the case of seeking new employment opportunities.
3. Reservists who are meeting minimum attendance standards but who may be attending less than other Reservists may be having to prioritise other aspects of their life at that point in time. The chain of command should support these Reservists rather than questioning their loyalty.
4. Many Reservists have a structured Reservist career plan but some Reservists may benefit from expanding planning to cover their civilian career aspirations, and how to achieve them. Service as a Reservist can benefit employees and employers through enhanced technical, organisational, interpersonal, and leadership skills. Yet some Reservists struggle to articulate these skills, or develop them in strategic and synergetic ways, to the benefit of both their Armed Forces and civilian employers.

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www.future-reserves-research.ac.uk