



# The Role of Army Reservists:

An analysis of their experiences and the attitudes and perceptions of civilian employers, regulars and significant others

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## The study

A qualitative case study approach was adopted in order to: 1) gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and perceptions of British Army Reserves including positive and negative interactions between their army employment, civilian employment and home lives and 2) explore the attitudes and perceptions of their civilian employers and significant others as well as their British Army Regular counterparts.

The study was carried out across five regions of the UK (Scotland, Wales and North, South and Midlands of England). Participants included five Reserve units along with their paired Regular Units. Methods of data collection included focus groups: five with Reserves (n=30), five with Regulars (n=39) and three with employers across the public, private and voluntary sectors (n=24) along with individual interviews, including: Reserves (n=19), employers (n=17), and significant others (n=2). Interviews were also carried out as part of the preparatory work with representatives from Defence Relationship Management (DRM) (n=3) and informally with Unit command staff (n=11).

The interviews and focus groups explored: 1) employers' expectations and experiences of employing Reservists, and how organisational perceptions and policies surrounding the Reserve service are played out in practice; 2) Regulars' expectations and experiences of working with Reserves, and the main challenges facing Reserves in terms of integrating in the armed forces; and 3) Reservists' reasons for joining the Army, their expectations and experiences of working with Regulars, and the impact of Reserve service upon family and civilian life.

## Key findings

- The MoD needs to clarify what the role of a Reservist is.
- There is a mismatch between the expectations and realities of Reserve service.
- Balancing the demands of home and family lives, civilian employment and military duty is a key challenge for Reserves.
- A review is needed on the fitness for purpose of Reserve training.
- Inflexibility on the part of Regulars in terms of the scheduling of training has a major impact on Reserves and their integration.

## Research findings

### *The role of the Reservist*

Regulars, Reserves and employers were asked what they perceived the role of the Reservist to be, that is, what part Reservists play in the British Army. Participants suggested that the role of Reservists was to provide support for the Army in terms of augmenting or backfilling Regulars. However, the extent and nature of the support varied. For example, some Reservist and employer participants viewed the role of the Reserve as the same as that of the Regular soldier, albeit a less expensive and more flexible option.

Reserves were also perceived by some employers as temporary but being "capable of slotting into a full-time

military role” (Employer focus group 226) and supporting Regulars on the front line. However, added to this is the notion of Reservist as a trained soldier ‘in waiting’; ready to be deployed when needed. Thus, there was recognition that the role of the Reservist had changed significantly over the last 20 years, in particular, their professionalization. Furthermore, the growing importance of the Reserves to the military was acknowledged by employers underlining a shift in perception towards a core element of Army structure:

“It was originally more one of support, with the changes that have been made recently it’s probably more integral than that [...] it’s becoming more of a necessity” Employer interview 123

Across the three participant groups, respondents also referred to Reserves backfilling a Regular unit in terms of providing a specific skill, so that skill gaps in the Army are filled by “somebody with the right background to come in for the job that we can’t fill from within the Regulars” (Regular focus group). However, there was some discrepancy around what sort of ‘backfilling’ roles were suitable for Reserves. For example, Regulars suggested that it was unrealistic to expect Reservists to reach their level of skill in combat, because too much training was involved for individuals to attain that expertise. Medical, IT and cyber security expertise were often suggested as key skills that Reservists could bring to the Armed Forces. Regulars also recognised that Reserves could bring key civilian skills that the Army needed such as human resources, purchasing, logistics, and mechanical engineering. In addition, employers perceived such skills could be provided by Reserves drawn from a wider age group:

“If you’re a cyber-guy, you don’t necessarily have to go climb walls and...jump into freezing... You can be 55-year-old and older and still be a Reservist because your role [...] doesn’t necessarily need you to be in the traditional geographical front line [...] The front is ubiquitous: it’s right here in this room now” Employer focus group 411

### Recommendation 1

- Reservists serve a range of functions and bring broad-ranging civilian expertise to the Army. Thus, there is a need to breakdown descriptions of functions in order to delineate core skills as well as military ranks.

### Recommendation 2

- Given the changing nature of the UK population and that some specialist roles do not necessarily require going out onto the field, the MoD should review the upper age limit and fitness requirements for serving as a Reserve.

### Reservists’ expectations and motivations

Respondents identified a number of reasons for joining the Reserves, including adventure training and travel opportunities. Some participants highlighted a sense of boredom in their civilian life and felt that Reserve service would provide challenges as well as opportunities for travel. As this participant explains:

“...from a young bloke’s point of view and working class, it’s quite exciting, something different from the day to day” Reserve focus group 241

Not all Reservists were able to take part in activities because of family and work commitments. Younger people who were students or did not have demanding jobs rather than those with family responsibilities were identified as being in the ideal position to take up Reservist opportunities as they had more flexibility during the week and weekends to commit to training.

The extent to which Reservist pay acted as an incentive to join the Reserves varied amongst participants in terms of their geographical location, civilian job role and career stage. For example, while the opportunity to earn extra money was identified as an incentive for students to join the Reserves, for individuals with more well paid jobs this was less important. Regulars also recognised that Reservists joined for reasons that went beyond finance, suggesting the Army could do more to provide a “sense of pride, belonging, teamwork, camaraderie” (Regular focus group 331).

Some Reservists who took part in this research appeared to enjoy the weekly drill night with many travelling very long distances in order to attend. Whilst financial incentives, adventure training and travel opportunities are highlighted by some as the main reasons for joining and remaining in the Army, not all Reservists are able to fully take up these opportunities because of work and family commitments.

### Recommendation 3

- The MoD should consider other incentives that promote camaraderie, foster a sense of being part of a team or develop skills that are transferrable to the workplace. These incentives need to appeal to a broad range of Reservists, with and without family and those at different career stages to ensure perceptions of equity and fairness and ultimately to increase participation and retention.

### Managing different roles

In line with previous research (see for example, Drummet, Coleman & Cable, 2003), balancing the demands of Reserve service with that of family life and civilian employment was a key challenge for some. Not all Reservists managed to balance these demands, and in some circumstances, this contributed to the break-up of relationships, the loss of employment, or leaving Reservist service altogether.

Participants made reference to the mantra ‘family first, work, then Reserves’ as an important aspect in managing their different roles. It also served as a warning to Reserves; as a way to avoid a crisis point and of ensuring that Reservists were able to continue as a volunteer:

“Never get to a stage where you’re putting the Reserves before your family [...] because that’s when issues happen and then the guy has to leave the Reserves” Focus group Reserves

Reservists identified a need to respond and plan for each weekend, at the same time as taking into consideration the plans of others: “you’ve got three separate diaries to juggle and make sure everything fits together” (Focus Group Reserves 341). This ‘juggling’ could take time and energy to get right, but at the same time was compensated by the opportunities for the participant to continue in their Reservist role, and by minimizing the negative impact on others such as family members. However, for some Reservists the continuous balancing proved challenging, and was sometimes referred to as “a strain” (Reserves Interviews 352). Nevertheless, generally there was a sense amongst Reservists that managing the expectations of others could reduce any negative impact on the family:

“It’s managing other people’s expectations of you ...and hoping that everyone is somewhere along the lines of 70 per cent happy with what’s going on” Focus group Reserves 341

In addition, the challenges around managing time appeared to become more complex with increasing seniority:

“the more senior you get in a role the more time you need to spend and therefore you are doing a lot more evenings and weekends as well” Reserves interviews 352

Overall, there was a perception that the loss of time with partners or children was compensated by the benefits of taking part in Reservist activity, and by the family’s acknowledgment of their satisfaction, as summed up by one Respondent:

“My family are very proud of what I’ve done to be perfectly honest because they see how [much] pleasure I get out of it” Reserves interviews 354

In the workplace, supervisors or line managers appear to play a key role (see also Sanchez et al., 2004) including in the Reservists ability to take up their volunteering activities. It is often the decision of individual line managers whether Reservists obtain leave beyond their paid two weeks, as the following participant indicates:

“They guaranteed the two weeks.....but if you want to go off and do a six-week course, for example, or a long exercise, then you can request that and, if the Line Manager can release you, then it will be approved. It may be paid, it may be unpaid, because again that comes off the manager’s budget”

Employer interview 121

Balancing roles across the military, civilian employment and home domains is complex for Reserves, and can be stressful at times. Moreover, the Reservist has to deal with a level of ambiguity from all three domains in terms of what demands will be made of them. This has the potential to lead to cynicism and burnout, which in turn are known from other areas of organisational research to impact on performance, withdrawal behaviours, and in the longer term, mental health (Harvey et al., 2018).

#### Recommendation 4

- More research is needed on the longer-term impact of serving multiple roles on Reservists’ performance in their military and civilian jobs, as well as their personal and significant others’ health and wellbeing.

#### Whole force integration

Previous research has highlighted the benefits that result from positive experiences during Reserve service and enriching feelings akin to going on holiday, helping Reserves to get away from their boring civilian and personal lives (Etzion, Eden & Lapidot, 1998). However, a key finding from this study is that both Regulars and Reserves perceive challenges to achieving whole force integration in terms of differences in training and skill acquisition, working practices, perceived inequalities and cultures.

For many participants in this study, integration entailed the Reserves attaining the standards of the Regular Army, rather than a fusion of civilian and Army skills and expertise. Important to this discussion on integration is that some Regulars perceive Reserves as being ‘different’, or having a different mentality, to the extent that “there’s a clear divide between Regulars and TA” (Female, Regular Focus group 431). As highlighted above, the Regular and Reserve Units involved in this study were paired Units. However, not all pairings were accustomed to working together and this may have influenced some of the less positive comments from Regulars about Reserve integration. There was a perception by some Regulars that Reservists had a general naivety about the Army which made fitting into the culture problematic in that they “do not think or do things militarily” (Unit Commander). In some cases Reservists’ attitudes or behaviours were seen as problematic to integration. For example, some Regulars

perceived Reserves as not following appropriate Army conduct in relation to dress codes, demeanour or punctuality during training. Such differences are highlighted to a greater extent when Reservists train alongside Regulars.

One of the defining issues for Reserves and Regular soldiers around working practices relates to the different working schedules between the Army and Reserves. There was a sense that the most important military activity takes place Monday to Friday during the day, and therefore Reserves are located on the periphery. This was perceived by both groups as creating difficulties around training and integration, and in some cases as resulting in extra work for them. Furthermore, such difficulties sometimes brought the reliability and commitment of each other into question. Reserves stressed the importance of exploring alternative and more creative working practices in order to facilitate their integration into the Army. Some Regular soldiers consider flexible working as feasible, to allow them to work with Reserves outside of their normal duty hours. However, it appears that although integration is high on the agenda, there is an absence of clear strategy to promote flexible working, or to support Regulars to work with Reservists outside of 9-5 working hours. Whereas Reserves may use some of their leave to enable them to engage in training on weekdays, Regulars are perceived to make less of a commitment in this way. Furthermore, Reserves perceive some resentment from Regulars when they are required to train at weekends thereby making the process of integration more difficult.

Regulars tended to perceive the Army as a reactive and dynamic organisation responding to the demands made upon it last minute. Reserves, in contrast, were viewed as unwieldy and demanding greater levels of planning and organisation to mobilise. Thus for Regular soldiers, the Army and Reservist practices were, in some cases, difficult to marry. Furthermore, some Regulars were concerned about the impact of these last minute changes on Reserves' commitment to the Army and while Regulars can:

“work with it because we're always [going to] be in camp and we just change the week ...[.] if you're a Reservist and you've booked that time off work and you've allocated it with your family and all the other commitments that you've got, and then we change it, we're [going to] lose that person anyway”

Focus group Regulars 331

#### **Recommendation 5**

- Joint training events are usually scheduled to fit in with Regular Army working hours. In order to enhance integration and better align Reserve and Regular work schedules, greater consideration is needed on flexible working practices that are applicable to both parties.

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## **Authors and Acknowledgements**

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