



Reservist motivations to serve

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Background

The Volunteer Reserves are a heterogeneous group. While they show some demographic similarities to their Regular colleagues, such as being predominately white and male, they vary more in age, race, socio-economic status, family configuration and civilian employment. Reservists are now found across the whole Armed Forces in almost every role, and so there is also significant diversity in the types of jobs and roles they can fulfil. Their reasons for joining the Reserves are also varied, but many join their Unit particularly due to geographical closeness. This creates challenges and opportunities for the Armed Forces in terms of how they can frame the Reservist offer to speak to a wide range of circumstances and motivations bounded by geographical reality.

Notwithstanding the range of motivations, what came strongly across in our research interviews was the extraordinary commitment in terms of time and effort that Volunteer Reservists put in not only to serve in the Reserves, but also into negotiating and, thus, carving out the space and time away from their work/business and personal/family obligations in order to fulfil their Reservist commitments. Thus, motivation to serve amongst those interviewed was mainly high. However, we found that there is a wide variety of motivations on why Reservists join and, more crucially, decide to stay in the Reserves. These obligations and negotiations change over time on the basis of where the Reservist's civilian career and personal life are, as well as the increasing demands of the Armed Forces with seniority. Below we list the motivations that were most salient and commonly expressed by Reservists during our interviews.

The study

This Briefing brings together findings from the four separate research projects associated with the Future Reserves Research Programme (FRRP), funded by the UK Ministry of Defence and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

Key findings

- Volunteer Reservists are extraordinarily committed and are motivated to serve by getting something different from their service that civilian life cannot offer, including deep comradeship.
- Reservists want to be valued, useable and are keen to deploy.
- Wasting time during training and poor administration/planning are key negative retention factors.
- The continued Regular-Centric culture does not appear to maximise Reservists' time nor Reservists' accumulated knowledge, skills and experience (KSE).

Given the large variety of Reservists interviewed by the four FRRP project teams, our sample included male, female, and BAME Reservists from all three Services. Our sample of Reservists, who were individually interviewed (n=148) or participated in focus groups (n=80), were at different stages of their study, civilian work and Reserve career trajectory and some were unemployed. They were either single, in a relationship, with or without children or other care responsibilities. This sample included personnel from combat, combat support and combat support service units and their sub-units. The data collection methods employed incorporated semi-structured interviews and re-interviews, focus groups, an online survey, and the systematic review of academic and policy literatures.

Motivations for joining, and staying in, the Reserves

“To soldier”. The thrill of adventure & deployment

Many Reservists want to be, and feel, useful to the military and the epitome of this is to experience the thrill of deploying on operations. They also want to measure up their skills and operational readiness and use their Regular counterparts' skills and readiness as the golden standard of professionalism.

“Many won't say it, but we do look up to the Regulars, they are our reference And we want to be seen as doing a good job compared to our Regulars, or measured against Regular standards.” Harry, Reservist

For some, not having the opportunity to deploy in the short-term, or even medium-term, was a negative retention factor. This was particularly the case for those in the frontline combat services. Whilst testing oneself against the Regulars can be achieved to a certain degree through integrated training and on other joint exercises, many Reservists believed that their utility to the military and operational effectiveness are tested ultimately on operations, that is, as some stated, when they do “proper soldier[ing]” (Ben, Reservist).

Yet, Reservists who are heavily invested in their civilian jobs or are focused on their civilian career prospects also voiced concerns that unplanned deployments could threaten their job security and/or career progression. Moreover, whilst some Reservists were weary of the potential negative impact that deployment could have on their family, particularly those with children or other family members requiring care, most believed that their families would be able to cope and “just make it work” (Pam, Reservist spouse).

Personal development and learning opportunities

Many Reservists were attracted to and remained in the Reserves, because of the challenges, adventure, learning and (self-) development opportunities that for the most part their work could not offer. Going on adventurous training – involving, for example, ski/snowboarding trips on the Alps, or scuba diving in some exotic location – whilst also getting paid to do this was something no other employer could offer. The opportunity for developing their military specific skills, such as shooting, was also a key attraction for many. Even executives, lawyers and those from other high calibre professions saw the Reserves as a place in which they could develop and learn skills, very often unrelated to their work or profession. The clear reward and career progression opportunities and rank structure that the Armed Forces offered Reservists was also a positive motivating factor as many felt that their civilian employers were less transparent in matters relating to career progression and recognition.

Reservists also highlighted the fact that the physical and mental challenges that they often had to endure during training, and even more so during deployment, really helped

develop their self-confidence and for many could not be compared to the challenges in their civilian workplace. Reservist Sharad admitted that:

“In my daily line of work I would never be in a situation where I have to think that quick[ly] on my feet and have to be so physical.... This is why I'm enjoying the Reserves, this is the kind of thrill that I don't get in my day to day job.”

Furthermore, the physical challenges and the expectation of needing to maintain certain fitness standards within particular service roles were also motivating factors of Reservists who see the Reserves as a means for getting/remaining fit. As one senior NCO admitted,

“I'm surrounded by people that are young, they're fit, they push me so I'm always constantly challenged, because I've got keep up with the kids.”
Steve, Reservist

Remuneration/Bounties

Reservists appreciated service pay and annual bounties (as well as more recent perks, such as the HM Forces Rail Card discount, introduced in 2014) that they are given for their service. However, for the majority of those interviewed, such financial and material benefits were not the primary reason for joining or staying. For some – mainly students, part-time workers and those on low income – Reservist pay helped top up their individual or household income. For those not reliant on Reservist pay for topping up their income, such pay and particularly the annual bounty were often used to spend on discretionary expenses, such as holidays and gifts. It is often thought that since pay is not a primary motivating factor for Reservists then pay and administration problems should not be a threat to their continued service. However, as highlighted in the Negotiating Civilian & Military Lives research, Reservists often used such holidays and other gifts to buy/negotiate support with their families and so pay is important in maintaining the Reservists' legitimacy for removing themselves from the family during weekends and Annual Continuous Training.

Comradeship

Although some Reservists stated that they joined the Reserves to be part of something bigger (very few mentioned, though, that they had joined because of duty to country) or meet like-minded people, the sense of belonging to a very close-knit peer social group was not something often anticipated when joining. The socialization and cohesion processes associated with training and the military's other activities (e.g., social/mess functions) at unit and sub-unit level over time, though, have helped cement strong familial bonds, which often act as a strong retention factor, amongst Reservists. As one senior officer put it,

“My favourite metaphor about the Reserve, is family, and if we are not a family we are nothing, and I have an immense sense of belonging to that organisation.”

Harry, Reservist

Such bonds very often also motivate many to show up to training and other important events in order to not let their comrades down. Such bonds, on the other hand, were deliberately sought out by many of the ex-Regulars joining the Reserves, who whilst enjoying substantial signing-on bonuses, were nevertheless intent on keeping links with the military/military life, during, or rather, despite their gradual transition to civilian life. As one officer divulged,

“I think, like a drug addict, I am weaning myself off green pyjamas slowly.” Trevor, Reservist

Whilst we have highlighted above some of the positive factors that motivated Reservists to join and more crucially stay in the Reserves, it is important to highlight those factors that we encountered during our research which have clearly had a negative influence on Reservists’ intention to continue to serve at different stages of their Reservist career.

Disorganised administration/Poor time management

Dual-earner households now are the norm in the UK; in 2014 over 68 per cent of couple families both adults were working (ONS 2014). Moreover, there has been a significant rise of a long-hours working culture and of job insecurity in the UK (Taylor 2017). Thus, the most limited and hence most precious resource that the majority of Reservists have is time, or rather, “spare time”. Reservists relinquish their “spare time” knowing that the use of such time could negatively impact both their employer and family. Therefore, commanders at all levels, especially those in Regulars, have to understand that not only is Reservists’ availability highly constrained, but that strenuous attempts need to be taken to ensure good use is made of Reservists’ time. Yet, our research discovered many instances in which the Armed Forces poorly managed and, thus, exploited Reservists’ time contribution.

Several interviewees highlighted the fact that unit level training was often regarded as not very organised. Training was often seen as repetitive given that Reservists who did not show up at certain training events would then be required to undergo the training that they had missed, thus, forcing the whole training cohort to repeat such training. Little effort by the permanent staff to differentiate training cohorts by experience was reported, as well as assumptions that all Reservists should be treated as always being at a very basic level of skill. This was despite some Reservists reporting they had trained in the same roles for many years and with operational experience. There appeared to be little effective record keeping of training experience in order to offer progressive training. On occasion, no

particular training had been prepared on a drill night or not enough trainers were on hand to offer parallel runs through the training serials, leading to waiting around. The most frustrating aspect of such poor management was when Reservists, after a long work week, would arrive (often after rushing from work/home) for weekend training and find much preparation and administration was still to be done. The “hurry up and wait” approach that many Regulars seem to work by is definitely not a modus operandi that Reservists have time and patience for.

“It’s very easy that the enthusiasm of someone joining can very quickly ebb off when you’ve had a hard week at work and you’re trying to get out the door for 7 o’clock to go and sit in an Army centre waiting for transport. It can be utterly ridiculous.” Adam, Reservist

Finishing late on a Sunday at the end of weekend training was not appreciated as it reduced Reservists’ time to recuperate before going back to work for another full working week. Reservists reported they were keen to work late Friday and Saturday nights instead. However, planning that did not prioritise efficient use of time often mitigated against this. In sum, poor administration and time management was often associated with training events. Negative views of these events can, in turn, negatively affect Reservists’ motivation to serve.

Furthermore, Reservists perceived many training and education courses as inflexible, slow moving and, thus, Regular-centric even though some steps had been taken to offer these in a modular format. There were complaints of under-resourcing, e.g. hours waiting around for a driving instructor, and that some key courses were run too few times in a year. Yet, if booking deadlines were missed, often Reservists would have to wait up to 12 months until the next iteration. Reservists were particularly frustrated if such courses were tied to their career progression and/or rank promotion.

Integration or Co-Optation of the Reserves?

There was evidence of some notable progress in Regular/Reserve integration, but many Reservists still perceived a “culture gap” and thought that many Regulars judged them negatively for simply being Reservists. Feeling valued is a key motivation to serve and being valued by Regulars is especially prized.

There was continued resentment over new policy implementations designed for the Regulars first that then ran into problems when imposed on the Reserves afterwards and that did not take into account the geographical limitations of Reserve service. The Regular-centric military culture often leads to a marginalised Reserve experience. Reservists want to be recognised as different and not as a watered down version of a Regular. Our sample of Reservists did not yet feel truly integrated.

Recommendations

- The Reservist experience must continually offer “something different” that cannot be offered in civilian life and that develops a close sense of comradeship.
- Reservist training should maximise time as a key principle and be designed (and resourced) to deliver progressive and differentiated training for Reservists with varying KSE (knowledge, skills and experience).
- Single Service policies and procedures should be designed with both Regular and Reserve in mind from the start, recognise Reserves have different needs, geographical limitations and differentiate where necessary.
- Continue ongoing work on Regular/Reserve integration to avoid Reserve marginalisation.

References

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Authors and Acknowledgements

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