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For reservists, reservations

Lengthy service, impact on family worry many

Master Sgt. Gary Brzozowski, left, and Senior Airman Wesley Rock, both reservists with the 459th Security Forces Squadron, prepare to go out on patrol at Andrews Air Force Base, Md.



Lucian Perkins / Washington Post

By Steve Vogel

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 26 — The Pentagon's call-up of tens of thousands of National Guard and reserve troops in response to last year's terrorist attacks — the biggest mobilization since the Persian Gulf War and the longest since Vietnam — is straining reservists and their families. With war against Iraq looming, the mobilization might be just beginning.

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THE PROSPECT of calling up another 100,000 reservists — a figure that analysts estimate could be needed as support to fight and occupy Iraq — is causing anxiety for many of the troops and their families. It is also arousing concern among some military analysts and elected officials, who say the Pentagon is using the reserves inappropriately, risking long-term damage to the morale and viability of the force.

About 130,000 National Guard and reserve troops have been called up in response to the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, the most since 265,000 were activated during the Persian Gulf War in 1991. As of yesterday, 67,680 were still on active duty. Another 4,400 are serving in Bosnia, Kosovo or Southwest Asia.

Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld told Congress last week that there is “no question” a further mobilization will be needed to support any operations in Iraq. They would handle such jobs as logisticians, transportation workers, refuelers, medics and mortuary workers.

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Should the government of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein be removed, reserves would play an even larger role in a postwar U.S. occupation — and that could extend their activation even longer. “It’s going to be part of life in the reserves,” said Jayson Spiegel, a

former Army deputy assistant secretary who is now executive director of the Reserve Officers Association. “You spend a year in Iraq.”

SOURING ON SERVICE

Reservists are all volunteers, and most expected and even welcomed mobilization after the Sept. 11 attacks. A great majority express continued pride in their service. But the duration of this call-up, conflicting signals on when they will return to civilian life and frustration over being assigned what some describe as make-work duties has soured many

on service.

In interviews, reservists expressed frustration with the manner in which they have been used and the length of time they have been kept from their families. Many expressed dismay over the toll being taken on their civilian careers or studies. Others said they have returned from overseas to find they were out of a job. Deep cuts in income for many families have forced some to sell homes or to dip into children's college funds.

"It's clear there's a huge morale problem," said Jay Farrar, a military analyst with the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington and a former Marine Corps officer and Department of Defense official.

Rep. David L. Hobson (R-Ohio), a senior member of the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, sent a letter to Rumsfeld this month accusing the Pentagon of mismanaging the reserve force by extending

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service for too long and using reserves in "backfill" jobs to make up for shortages in the active force.

"Such treatment is rapidly killing the morale of the reserves and eliminating the support of family, friends and employers," Hobson wrote, warning that troops will "burn out" and leave the service and that others will be discouraged from joining.

Numbering 1.25 million troops, or almost half of of the nation's total military force, the reserves play a critical role in most major Pentagon operations. Reservists are essentially citizen soldiers, including many who have prior service in the active-duty military, and others who sign up in exchange for education and other benefits.



National Guard troops in various states and the District can be called to federal duty and are also part of the reserve force. With no draft and its active force of 2 million in 1991 pared down to 1.4 million, the Pentagon increasingly relies on reserves to round out its deployments, from peacekeeping to combat operations.

About one-quarter of the approximately 8,000 U.S. troops on the ground in Afghanistan are reservists. Thousands more are overseas assisting in the war on terrorism, serving with refueling squadrons, as intelligence analysts and other critical jobs. But the bulk of the reservists called up, about 60 percent, are serving in the United States, often in mundane jobs in place of active-duty forces who have been dispatched overseas.

FOR SOME, A SECOND YEAR

While the president has authority to call up reserves for up to two years of duty, service in the past has typically lasted about six months. A decision by the Air Force last month to extend 14,000 Guard members and reservists for a second year — the first time this has occurred since Vietnam — shocked many of the troops. Some of the reservists, many of them military police, are especially angry because at the same time, the Air Force lifted emergency restrictions that had prevented active-duty forces from retiring.

“Somewhere, someone made the conscious decision that it would be okay to keep me, a reservist, away from my family, my home and my career for two years,” said Tech. Sgt. David Ward, an Air Force reservist in Florida who had to sell his home in Tampa. “At the same time, the decision was made to let active-duty life continue as normal.”

Michael Dominguez, assistant secretary of the Air Force for manpower and reserve affairs, defended the decisions and said they represent an attempt an effort to achieve “balance and equity” between the active and reserve forces. But, he added, “We in the Air Force have to do a better job of explaining this to people.”

Dominguez said the service hopes to release most of the 14,000 extended reservists before they finish two years of service.

The services are on track to meet reserve manpower goals for the fiscal year ending Sept. 30, according to Craig W. Duehring, who oversees reserve affairs for the Pentagon.

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“There’s no indication right now that we’ll be facing recruiting and retention problems.”

However, some analysts predicted that this will change as many mid-level officers and senior enlisted troops opt out. “It’s coming down the pike,” Farrar said.

Pentagon officials have been recently cutting the number of mobilized reserves, in part to make sure they are available for Iraq. “We want to make sure our reserves have plenty of gas in the tank,” said Dominguez, the Air Force assistant secretary.

Many families are bracing for this, including members of the Alabama Air National Guard’s 117th Air Refueling Wing. “They’re anticipating that they’re taking us off just long enough to be reactivated for the next conflict,” said Pamela Lacey, family readiness manager for the wing.

Last week in Crystal City, the National Military Family Association sponsored a training session for volunteers working with the families of reserve and Guard troops, the largest such session the organization has held.

Among them was Sylvia Creach, whose husband’s reserve unit, the 290th Joint Communications Support Squadron in Florida, was recently notified that it will be needed for a second year in support of Enduring Freedom, as the Pentagon calls its operations in and around Afghanistan.

“Enduring Freedom is enduring,” Creach said. “We don’t know when the end will come. People are losing their business because they’re not there to maintain them. People are starting to dip in their children’s college funds so they can make ends meet.”

Family members reported that some employers, who were largely supportive after Sept. 11, are losing patience with lengthy deployments. “Employers are saying, ‘Do you want to stay with us, or do you want to be in the Guard,’ ” said Suzy Moser, whose husband serves with the North Carolina National Guard.

Casey Nuckolls, a Navy reservist living in Lorton, came back from seven months in the Middle East this year to find his job with a Virginia-based defense contractor was gone. While employers are required by law to hold jobs for reservists, his company said lack of business had eliminated his position. “The most depressing moment of my life was to come back and not have a job,” said Nuckolls, who recently

‘Somewhere,
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that it would be okay
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