Executive summary

Informed choice?

Armed forces recruitment practice in the United Kingdom

David Gee

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An independent report by David Gee
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Introduction

A career in the armed forces can provide young people with opportunities. It also involves significant risks and legal obligations that are unfamiliar in civilian life. It is therefore vital that potential recruits are empowered to make an informed choice about whether to enlist. This report assesses whether potential recruits and their parents are provided with an accurate and full description of a forces career, including its potential benefits and risks. The concluding section proposes changes to current policy in order to protect the rights of potential recruits more effectively. [See p. 135]

1. Meeting the 'trained requirement'

The UK is the world's largest military spender after the United States, yet the armed forces are among the most stretched in the world. To meet the 'trained requirement' of personnel, over £2 billion is invested each year in recruiting and training around 20,000 new personnel to replace those who leave.[1] [See p. 14]

The armed forces draw non-officer recruits mainly from among young people with low educational attainment and living in poor communities. A large proportion join for negative reasons, including the lack of civilian career options; a survey in the Cardiff area in 2004 found that 40% of army recruits were joining as a last resort.[2] [See p. 15]

The recruitment environment is becoming more challenging as the pool of potential recruits shrinks. Demographic changes, improvements in civilian education opportunities, and negative publicity from Afghanistan and Iraq are among the main barriers to recruitment. Efforts to attract young people to a forces career are intensifying and diversifying, particularly among those below recruitment age. [See p. 17]

Meeting the trained requirement currently depends on attracting a large number of minors. The UK is the only European Union state to recruit from age 16; of those EU states that have traditionally recruited from age 17, some have phased this out or are doing so. By changing some existing policies, it could be possible to phase out the recruitment of 16 year-olds in all UK

forces relatively easily without detriment to the current trained requirement of personnel. The phasing out of 17 year-old recruitment could then follow. [See p. 20]

2. Promotion and recruitment

Recruitment literature for army careers emphasises potential benefits: career interest and challenge, comradeship, the active lifestyle, travel and training opportunities. It omits to mention or obscures: the radical change from a civilian to a military lifestyle, ethical issues involved in killing, risks to physical and mental health, the legal obligations of enlistment, the state's legal and moral obligations to its armed forces personnel, and the right of conscientious objection. By suggesting that soldiers are highly satisfied with army life, the literature also glosses over the ambivalent attitudes of the majority. The omissions conspire against the potential recruit's right and responsibility to make an informed choice about whether to enlist. The literature also does little to enable parents to ask searching questions of their children and of recruiters in order to assure their children's best interests. [See p. 27]

The primary target group for armed forces marketing are children and adolescents. This involves schools visits, literature and internet resources, and local cadet forces. As the pool of potential recruits shrinks, outreach to children is expanding, including to those as young as seven years old. Key messages are tailored to children's interests and values: military roles are promoted as glamorous and exciting, warfare is portrayed as game-like and enjoyable, and outreach to the young is described as serving their personal growth and education. Children are introduced to the potential benefits of a forces career but not to its risks. [See p. 41]

It is policy that staff in recruitment offices 'explain the recruits' rights and responsibilities and the nature of the commitment to the Armed Forces'.[3] Recruiters commonly develop close relationships with potential recruits and experience a personal duty of care. However, there is a conflict of interest between the duty of care to potential recruits and the pressure on staff for new enlistments. Specifically, whilst staff are generally willing to answer questions honestly, information that might dissuade potential recruits from enlisting is not routinely volunteered. Direct contact with parents of minors is often minimal or absent and the applications process does not reliably ensure that applicants fully understand their legal rights and obligations. [See p. 49]

3. Terms of enlistment

On enlistment, recruits enter a legally binding agreement to serve for a minimum period, which can be up to six years in the case of minors joining the army as soldiers. Reserve liability follows regular service and usually lasts at least six further years. For a short period after enlistment recruits have the right to discharge themselves but this time usually falls during training and before they experience military operations. Some recruits who apply for discharge during this period report being pressured to change their minds. In the case of the army, the outflow data show that a disproportionate number of recruits leave as soon as their minimum term of service is over, suggesting that many recruits would have left earlier if they had not been legally obliged to remain. In 2006, an official, representative survey found that 20% of soldiers [c. 16,750 individuals] wanted to leave the army at the earliest opportunity.[4] [See p. 56]

In view of the significant risks and restrictive obligations of a forces career, the state has a special responsibility to support potential recruits' right of informed consent. It falls short in the following ways: the army in particular does not provide sufficient, accessible information about an army career; the state severely curtails the recruit's right freely to withdraw their consent to enlistment; and some recruiters apply persuasive

pressure to potential recruits in order to meet enlistment targets. [See p. 62]

A large number of personnel, mostly soldiers, go absent without leave (AWOL) each year. The Ministry of Defence estimates that 2,300 [c. 2.5%] soldiers go AWOL every year,[5] of which around 126 will go to court martial and face a possible custodial sentence.[6] Besides malingerers, AWOL can also be precipitated by psychological problems, bullying, or conscientious objection, combined with an absence of faith in the established procedures for addressing these issues. [See p. 64]

The armed forces may discharge personnel at any time. The air force and navy discharge very few personnel in this way; the army discharges approximately 3% [c. 2750] of its soldiers every year, mostly those who have failed to progress up the ranks or have chosen not to do so. [See p. 66]

Safeguards to protect minors considering a forces career are limited. Minors cannot be assumed to be sufficiently mature, or adequately supported by others, to give informed consent to the far-reaching legal obligations that enlistment imposes upon them. The selective information provided to minors and their parents is often misleading, further undermining the right to informed consent. [See p. 67]

All personnel have the right of conscientious objection to military service. Recruits are not routinely informed about this and few can be expected to be aware of it. When personnel experience a conscientious objection, it will not be articulated as such if the term is unfamiliar. There is some evidence that conscientious objection in the armed forces is heavily under-reported, partly because many cases are dealt with informally and not recorded. It is possible that conscientious objection may become confused with post-combat mental health problems in some cases. Recognition of conscientious objection by the chain of command is uneven. [See p. 72]

4. Risks: an assessment

Most personnel in the armed forces report being broadly satisfied with their career. However, there are significant risks related to career and lifestyle dissatisfaction, mental health and relationship problems, death and serious injury, bullying and harassment, ethical challenges, and post-discharge resettlement. The legal obligations of enlistment and the social context of forces life may compound the effects of these risks. [See p. 81]

4.1 Army career satisfaction

An official, representative survey of soldiers in 2006 showed that the job satisfaction rate was fairly high (64%), although lower than that shown in surveys of civilians (76-78%).[7] Relatively few personnel resemble the highly satisfied soldier depicted in recruitment literature: 13% of soldiers reported being 'very satisfied' compared with 35-36% of civilians.[8] 5% of soldiers reported being 'very dissatisfied' [4,189 individuals at the time of the survey];[9] the legal restrictions on leaving the forces compound the effect of lifestyle dissatisfaction and may prompt soldiers to go absent without leave and/or precipitate mental health difficulties. [See p. 81]

Among soldiers there is considerable dissatisfaction with pay, although most believe that their financial package as a whole, including pension, compares favourably with a civilian career at the same level. Information in recruitment literature about some of the financial benefits of an army career is misleading, however. [See p. 85]

Some features of army life are particularly unpopular. These relate to limitations of personal development opportunities, heavy workload, lack of involvement in decision-making, losing leave, limitations to freedom and opportunity, and poor accommodation. [See p. 87]

4.2 Mental health and relationships

The work of armed forces personnel carries a relatively high risk of clinically significant psychological harm. Symptoms of psychological ill-health in the armed forces exceed those in the civilian population 'by a large margin', according to a British study undertaken in 2002.[10] [See p. 88]

A study of forces personnel before the Iraq war found a 2.5% incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms; a second study between 2004 and 2006 found a 4% incidence [equivalent to around 7,110 individuals][11], with higher rates for those in combat roles (6%) than in support roles (3%).[12] A US study in 2004 showed that the risk of PTSD increases in proportion to exposure to the stresses of warfare: the incidence of symptoms of PTSD rose to 19.3% among US troops who had been exposed to more than five firefights in Iraq or Afghanistan.[13] [See p. 90]

Male soldiers under 20 years of age face a 50% greater risk of suicide than those of similar profile in the civilian population; otherwise suicide rates in the armed forces are lower than among civilians. The disproportionately large number of suicides among discharged Falklands veterans suggests that the official statistics understate the true long-term suicide risk among combat troops. [See p. 93]

Levels of alcohol consumption in the armed forces are higher than in the civilian population; levels of smoking are similar. Alcohol consumption rises as symptoms of combat stress increase, and personnel with combat roles are significantly more likely than others to drink excessively.
[See p. 97]

Military operations and exposure to combat increase the risk that personnel will commit domestic violence, according to some US studies. [See p. 98]

There is a stigma in the armed forces associated with psychological problems, partly due to a military culture that often views mental illness as a sign of personal and professional weakness. This increases the risk that personnel will take desperate measures to protect themselves, including going absent without leave. [See p. 100]

4.3 Death and serious injury

The mortality rate for the armed forces as a whole is currently lower than that of the civilian population with a matched profile. However, this statistic could mask the relatively greater risks faced by those in combat roles. During a high intensity conflict such as the Falklands War, mortality rates are much higher than those of the civilian population. Fatality rates could also rise if the government continues an interventionist approach to national security as demonstrated in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the armed forces, the risk of serious injury is usually thought to be approximately three times greater than the risk of violent death. [See p. 101]

4.4 Bullying and harassment

Many personnel enjoy close camaraderie with their peers, which some describe as unique to the armed forces. Against this, bullying and harassment are common and under-reported. In official surveys in 2006, 8% of soldiers, 8% of airmen/women and 12% of navy ratings reported having been bullied in the previous 12 months [equivalent to 13,093 individuals at time of survey].[14] There has been some success in reducing bullying and other inappropriate behaviours in armed forces training establishments since 2005. However, results of an official survey in 2006 show that army recruits during initial training were still approximately 40% more likely to report being 'badly/unfairly treated' than those in other armed forces training establishments.[15] The unusual social context of a forces lifestyle can compound the effects of bullying and harassment. A culture of bullying and harassment also risks affecting the treatment

of detainees apprehended on operations. [See p. 104]

Sexual harassment is common in all branches of the armed forces. 15% of respondents to an official survey of female personnel in 2006 said that they had had a 'particularly upsetting' experience of unwanted sexual behaviour directed at them in the previous 12 months [equivalent to 2,700 individuals at time of survey].[16] The rate was higher for those aged 16-23 or those of low rank, each at 20%. The Ministry of Defence appears to be responding urgently to the problems revealed. However, a 'macho' culture impedes progress towards universal acceptance of women as equals with men in the armed forces.[17] [See p. 110]

Those with ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely than others to be victims of harassment or bullying, according a study of armed forces training establishments by the Adult Learning Inspectorate in 2005. [See p. 113]

The ban on lesbian and gay people in the armed forces was lifted in 2000 following a ruling of the European Court of Human Rights. It is now a disciplinary offence to discriminate against personnel on grounds of their sexual orientation. The navy (including marines) is the only force to ask personnel about attitudes to working with gay and lesbian colleagues. In official, unstratified surveys, 21% of navy ratings and 41% of marines disagreed with the statement, 'I don't mind serving alongside gay men or lesbians.'[18] [See p. 115]

The House of Commons Defence Committee's *Duty of Care* Report in 2005 concluded that the armed forces have a culture that 'discourages complaint'.[19] Among personnel there is a widespread lack of faith in the complaints system; many fear that complaining can jeopardise their career. [See p. 117]

4.5 Ethical challenges

An armed forces career involves ethical questions associated with the justification of killing, the risk of civilian casualties and the political purposes of military action. In order to make a responsible choice about enlistment, all potential recruits need to have considered these issues before accepting the legal obligations of service, and to continue to do so during their career. In omitting to mention ethical dilemmas, the army recruitment literature and applications process fail to support potential recruits in making an informed decision about enlistment in this respect. [See p. 120]

4.6 After discharge

The majority of those leaving the armed forces resettle into civilian life. A significant minority face difficulties. Socio-economic disadvantage, homelessness and unemployment are more common among ex-forces personnel than the general population. The risk of turning to crime appears to be lower among the ex-forces community, however. [See p. 127]

4.7 Risks assessment summary—army recruits

This report summarises some of the principal risks that new army recruits face, together with their approximate probabilities based on academic studies and official surveys of personnel [see p. 131].

5. Conclusions and proposals
(For full details, see p. 135 onwards)

The evidence collected in this report points to a number of ethical shortcomings in armed forces recruitment practice in the UK. These include: failing to inform potential recruits sufficiently about the risks associated with a forces career; failing to inform potential recruits about vital rights and privileges; severely curtailing recruits' right to withdraw consent from their employment; depending upon those who are socially and economically vulnerable to enlist for negative reasons; and recruiting minors without adequate safeguards. It could be possible to move towards an ethical recruitment policy without detriment to staffing levels by making a number of progressive changes to recruitment and retention policy and practice. An improved recruitment policy could be codified in an Armed Forces Recruitment Charter setting out the state's responsibilities to potential recruits. [See p. 135]

Current recruitment materials do not seriously attempt to brief potential recruits on the character of a forces career. Whilst literature for potential recruits cannot fully describe forces life, it should include unambiguous information about: legal obligations; discharge options for minors; the need to consider ethical issues such as killing before enlistment; some of the principal risks of a forces career; the welfare and psychiatric support available; a description of the military covenant; the right, and its limits, of conscientious objection to military service; and the policy of exclusion of minors from hostilities. Literature for parents/guardians should also include advice about how to support their child by asking questions of recruiters and seeking independent advice. Literature should be more accessible to potential recruits with a low reading age. [See p. 136]

Marketing to children below recruitment age commonly glamorises warfare. Outreach to children and young people should be de-linked from recruitment activity and restricted to older children. While promotional activity continues in schools, children should have the right: not to attend, to hear from a speaker presenting an alternative view, and to have peace and disarmament education integrated into the curriculum alongside education about the military. [See p. 137]

Minors are especially vulnerable to joining the armed forces without due consideration of the risks. Existing safeguards to ensure that minors and their parents make informed choices about enlistment are deficient. A feasibility study into the sustainable phasing-out of the recruitment of minors, based on shifting the emphasis from recruitment to retention, could be commissioned. Raising the minimum age of recruitment to 17 and allowing minors to train as civilians, thereafter enlisting at 18, would be valuable first steps towards reducing the risks to minors. Direct contact between recruiters and a parent or guardian should be a requirement of the recruitment process for under-18s.
[See p. 138]

The minimum term of service is unethical and counter-productive: relaxing it could encourage more people to enlist and improve morale among serving personnel. Changes to the legal obligations of enlistment can be phased in and need not affect recruitment targets. These could include allowing: all recruits under 18 years of age to leave as of right; all recruits in their first year of service to leave as of right; and all other personnel to transfer to the reserve at a year's notice. A short cooling-off period after signing the enlistment papers could be introduced. The chain of command should continue to use discretion to release genuinely unhappy recruits, of any age, before the end of their minimum service, using advice from welfare agencies where appropriate. [See p. 139]

The armed forces have a poor retention record. For every two 16-22 year-olds joining the army, one is leaving.[20] A portion of the £2 billion now

used to attract, enlist and train new recruits might be better used to improve conditions for existing personnel. Valuable improvements could be made to: pay, accommodation, equipment, leave entitlement, workload, and welfare including psychiatric support. All these measures would also benefit recruitment. At the same time, the government must recognise that the sustained over-extension of the armed forces is having an impact on morale, retention and recruitment. [See p. 140]

Bullying and harassment remain major problems for the armed forces in their own right, and also adversely affect retention of personnel. The forces need to: acknowledge the problems, clarify to new recruits the policy on bullying, remove humiliating practices from all aspects of training, and restore faith in the complaints system by providing an independent complaints channel. Progress is being made in some of these areas. [See p. 141]

The right of conscientious objection (CO) is recognised unevenly across the armed forces. The situation could be improved by: improving the policy on CO, including an explanation of CO and the procedure for making a claim in materials given to new recruits, training officers to recognise CO in personnel, and commissioning research into the possible links between CO, post-combat mental health problems and absence without leave. [See p. 142]

1 Outturn costs 2004-05: Navy: £351M Army: £961M RAF: £723M [Total: 2,035M]. MoD, 'Current Funding Position of the Training Regime', in HC Defence Committee, *Duty of Care*, Vol 2, Ev 235. Includes ongoing training.

2 Ministry of Defence: 'Analysis of socio-economic and educational background of non-officer recruits' [Memorandum to the House of Commons Defence Committee, 2004], cited in House of Commons Defence Committee, *Duty of Care*, (Third Report of Session 2004-05), Vol 2, Ev 255-257.

3 Ministry of Defence: *The Government's Response to the House of Commons Defence Committee's Third Report of Session 2004-05, on Duty of Care*, (Cm6620, July 2005), 4.

4 Ministry of Defence (Directorate Army Personnel Strategy), 'Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Surveys: Army Mar-Jul 2006', (nd), Q67b.

5 Ministry of Defence, cited in BBC Online: 'Army fails "traumatised" soldiers' [news article], 27 March 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/panorama/6479769.stm>, accessed 9 April 2007.

6 UK Army web site: 'Army court martial statistics 1997-2004', (nd), <http://www.army.mod.uk/linkedfiles/combined_services_sport/c_m_stats_97___04.doc>, accessed 12 April 2007.

7 Work Foundation, The: *The good worker: A survey of attitudes towards work in the UK* (The Work Foundation, 2006), p. 7; British Social Attitudes Survey Report, p. 53, cited in ibid., p. 9; Ministry of Defence (Directorate Army Personnel Strategy), 'Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Surveys: Army Mar-Jul 2006', (nd), Q67b.

8 Ministry of Defence: 'Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Surveys: Army Mar-Jul 2006', Q67b.

9 Ibid., Q67b.

10 Jones, Margaret et al: 'The burden of psychological symptoms in UK Armed Forces', Occupational Medicine 2006, 56(5): 322-328, <http://occmed.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/reprint/56/5/322>, accessed 5 July 2007, 326.

11 Based on Defence Analytical Services Agency, 'TSP 02 - UK Armed Forces Full Time Strengths and Requirements at 1 April 2007' [table], <http://www.dasa.mod.uk/natstats/tsp2/tsp2tab.html>, accessed 1 June 2007.

12 Jones et al: 'The burden of psychological symptoms in UK Armed Forces', 326; Hotopf, Matthew et al: 'The health of UK military personnel who deployed to the 2003 Iraq war: a cohort study', The Lancet, 16 May 2006, Vol 367: 1731–41, at <http://download.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/0140-6736/PIIS0140673606686625.pdf>, accessed 16 February 2007, 1738. The higher rate for combat troops is partly due to their being of lower rank and younger age in general than troops in combat-support and service-support roles.

13 Hoge, Charles W et al: 'Combat Duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, Mental Health Problems, and Barriers to Care', in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 1 July 2004, 16.

14 Ministry of Defence (Directorate Army Personnel Strategy), *Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Surveys: Army Sep 2006-Jan 2007*, (nd), Q43; Royal Air Force, *Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Surveys: Royal Air Force 2006*, QG12; Royal Navy, *Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Surveys: Royal Navy 2006,* Q34; personnel numbers based on Defence Analytical Services Agency: 'TSP 02 – UK Armed Forces Full Time Strengths and Trained Requirements at 1 October 2006' [data table] [85,360 soldiers, 28,550 navy ratings, 35,470 airmen/women on trained strength]. Notes: the navy survey is not stratified and therefore not held to be representative of the full trained strength, although it is likely to be generally indicative; the navy and air force surveys are only distributed to trained personnel; the army survey does not specify whether it includes untrained personnel, hence personnel numbers given here are based on the trained strength only, and not personnel under training.

15 Extrapolated from Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI): *Better Training: Managing risks to the welfare of recruits in the British armed services: two years of progress* (Coventry, 2007), 33; and ALI: *Safer Training: Managing risks to the welfare of recruits in the British armed services* (Coventry, 2005), 27. The rounded rates for Phase 1 army training establishments visited by ALI were: ATR Bassingbourn, 11% [equivalent to 33 individuals out of 302]; ATR Lichfield, 6% [20 out of 326]; ATR Winchester, 11% [31 out of 280]; ATR Pirbright, 8% [71 out of 891]; AFC Harrogate, 12% [144 out of 1,202]; ITC Catterick, 10% [134 out of 1,343]. The average rate for these establishments was therefore 10%. The rate for all armed forces training establishments was 7%, according to the ALI.

16 Rutherford, Sarah; Schneider, Robin; Walmsley, Alexis: *Quantitative & Qualitative Research into Sexual Harassment in the Armed Forces* [report], (Equal Opportunities Commission and the Ministry of Defence, 22 March 2006), 22. Personnel numbers based on Defence Analytical Services Agency: 'TSP 02 – UK Armed Forces Full Time Strengths and Trained Requirements at 1 October 2006' [data table] [18,000 women on full-time strength including officers and other ranks].

17 Rutherford et al: *Quantitative & Qualitative Research into Sexual Harassment in the Armed Forces* , 9.

18 Royal Navy, *Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Surveys: Royal Navy 2006*, Q30e [714 respondents]; Royal Marines, *Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Surveys: Royal Navy 2006*, Q30e [152 respondents].

19 House of Commons Defence Committee: *Duty of Care* (Vol 1), (London: The Stationery Office, 2005), 15-16.

20 Based on intake and outflow of recruits aged between 16 and 22 in FY2005-06, when 10,230 non-officer recruits aged 16-22 years old joined the army and 5,310 in the same age range left. Defence Analytical Services Agency, 'TSP 19 - Intake to and Outflow from UK Regular Forces (Table 1 – Intake to UK Regular Forces by Age and Service, FY2005-06 and Table 6 - Outflow from UK Regular Forces by Age and Service, FY2005-06)' [data tables], <http://www.dasa.mod.uk/natstats/tsp19/tsp19tab1.html> and <http://www.dasa.mod.uk/natstats/tsp19/tsp19tab6.html>, accessed 5 February 2007.

A career in the armed forces brings opportunities and risks unfamiliar in civilian life. This independent report assesses whether the information provided to potential recruits enables them to make an informed choice about enlistment.

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