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Reserve Component
Unit Stability
Effects on Deployability and Training

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Summary

Personnel stability is highly valued by all military forces, particularly in combat units and other formations that deploy to a theater of operations. The Army in particular aims to maximize unit stability—that is, the degree to which a unit’s membership remains constant over time. Yet, RC units typically experience a surge of personnel turbulence as they approach mobilization and deployment. Some members leave the unit, and new personnel are cross-leveled into the unit to reach its target for deploying strength. This inflow of personnel undercuts the effectiveness of training because new arrivals miss training events that have occurred before they join. As a result, units must repeat some training, making pre-mobilization preparation less efficient and impeding the training of successively higher echelons.

How widespread is this problem, what causes it, and what might be done about it? RAND research was undertaken to address those questions, focusing on these issues:

- stability levels of personnel in deploying RC units
- how long units are stabilized before deployment
- the major factors that generate instability
- the potential effect of instability on unit training
- policy options that could help manage the situation.

The research was based on longitudinal data assembled from DoD monthly records for all personnel who were in any Army component from 1996 through 2008. We used that database to trace the preparation and deployment of three classes of units in the Army National Guard and U.S. Army Reserve: infantry battalions, military police (MP) companies, and truck companies. The resulting analysis included 153 RC unit deployments, representing more than 40,000 authorized positions. The selected classes of units span the major types of Army units (combat, combat support, and combat service support), and they are generally representative of elements that deployed as whole units.

Instability Is Widespread

As a unit approaches mobilization and deployment, one might expect that it would maintain a stable cohort of members to permit efficient and sequential training of the myriad tasks that must be mastered before deployment. However, the data showed that instability, rather than

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1. The three classes of units generated five different types of units for analysis: National Guard infantry units, MP units in both the Guard and Reserve, and truck units in both the Guard and Reserve. The Reserve contains very little infantry.
stability, is the rule. Across five types of RC units that we studied in detail, covering deployments from 2003 through 2008, RC units experienced substantial instability in their run-up to deployment. Of all the soldiers who actually deployed with those units, 40 to 50 percent were “new arrivals” who had been in the unit less than one year.2

This picture of instability is no fluke. We found that it is widespread across all types of deploying units, even those that initially enjoyed high fill rates (e.g., more than 90 percent of authorized positions filled one year before mobilization). Similar levels of instability also exist in active units; in some cases, active units are less stable than their RC counterparts. In addition, pre-deployment instability affected all grade levels—not just junior enlisted personnel but also noncommissioned officers (NCOs) and officers. In fact, officer instability was the highest of all grade groups, owing to the tendency for officers to be transferred out of a deploying unit into another unit—often “cross-leveled” into a unit that deployed even earlier than their source unit.

Causes and Effects of Instability

What accounts for this instability? We identified several factors—primarily, personnel losses during the year before deployment and the presence of numerous “nondeployers” (personnel who did not deploy with their unit). These two factors prompted a large influx of new people before mobilization. In fact, so many people were moved that, by the deployment date (“D-day”), the units were manned at rates of 115 to 125 percent of authorized positions.

A major role was played by personnel losses—soldiers leaving the unit because of moving to another unit or leaving the service entirely. Across the five unit types studied, between 25 and 40 percent of personnel who were assigned to the unit 12 months before mobilization had left the unit during the subsequent year. However, these loss rates may be more benign than the numbers might suggest. First of all, these loss rates appear “normal.” The fraction of people leaving the service has remained almost constant since the year 2000, and it was no higher during the year before deployment than it was during the preceding year. So, losses did not rise appreciably as deployment approached. Second, many of the losses from the unit were not losses from the Army. Particularly among officers and NCOs, a majority of those leaving the unit had transferred to another unit; often, those same soldiers deployed with their new unit, sometimes even before their source unit deployed.

The other major factor was nondeployers. About 30 percent of soldiers in the RC units at D-day did not deploy. Many different conditions contribute to this picture. Some did not deploy with the unit but then moved to another unit. Some remained at home station and later deployed to their unit in theater, and some were activated and remained at home station, evidently as part of a rear detachment. Some had recent prior activations and so were probably exempted from another deployment for a period of time. Some were new recruits who had not yet completed initial training. And some were not even activated.

Among the various groups of losses and nondeployers, it seems likely that, in some cases, they represent an Army accommodation to the service member’s personal circumstances or hardship; the Army may have preferred to defer a soldier’s deployment or permit a move to

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2 Current plans call for units to be notified of an upcoming deployment at least one year beforehand, and they generally execute pre-mobilization preparation and training over that year.
another unit than to lose the person to the Army altogether. In other cases, instability arises from deliberate Army actions (e.g., to fill high-priority deploying units) or from the effects of conditions that are normal features of the reserves (such as the presence of untrained new recruits, who cannot be deployed until they finish training).

Finally, there are many different groups with different conditions that contribute to the overall picture of instability. Most of the groups represent just a small fraction of the problem, and many would be difficult to affect by policy. When we analyzed the probable effects of different possible policy interventions, it was clear that, even with multiple policy changes and reasonable degrees of success, a large gap would remain between the unit’s targeted deploying strength and the number of its members who would be “stable”—i.e., people who have been in the unit for one year or more upon deployment. We concluded, therefore, that RC units are not likely to reduce instability to the vanishing point. The RC will have to live with a substantial amount of instability in the run-up to mobilization and deployment.

How does this instability affect training as the unit prepares for deployment? The key observation is that the rapid buildup of personnel begins at about six months before mobilization. Yet, units have been conducting important training events over a longer period of time, often 12 months or more. When that training is done early, the new arrivals miss key events, and, therefore, the unit must arrange repeat training for them. To examine that process, we plotted the buildup curves of people who eventually deployed, to show the inflow of personnel during the last 12 months before deployment, compared with the major training events in unit training plans. In some cases, training on significant subjects—such as combat training center exercises, combat lifesaver training, urban warfare techniques, and dealing with improvised explosive devices—were conducted early enough that 30 to 50 percent of the deployers would have missed them. That pattern was common across all major types of units studied.

In fact, we saw several unit training plans that included specific “makeup” training precisely for that purpose. That is bound to affect the efficiency of both individual and unit training; the unit’s leadership must manage training sessions and events for the new arrivals, expend training support resources to cover them, and perhaps defer follow-on training (e.g., for more-complex tasks or collective training).

### Options for Managing Instability

What policy options does that leave for DoD? For the near term, we outlined four alternatives that recognize the likelihood of continuing personnel instability:

- **Stretch training over many months (current policy).** The Army could simply accept existing rates of instability, the need to repeat some training for new arrivals in the unit, the concomitant bill for training resources, and limits on the speed with which the unit can be readied.
- **Cluster training just before mobilization.** If the most-intensive training were compressed into the last five months or so before mobilization and finished up during a short post-mobilization training period, that training would reach 75 to 80 percent of the soldiers who deploy with the unit. The inefficiencies of doing training earlier would be avoided, and most soldiers would be together during key training events. However, such a course imposes a greater burden on soldiers, families, and employers, concentrated in one time
period. It could also result in lower participation rates in pre-mobilization events if their 
time demands are seen as burdensome.

- **Increase duration of mobilization.** This option would move much of the intensive training 
into the post-mobilization period, thus relieving the pressure on pre-mobilization and 
ensuring that soldiers are together for training. An obvious drawback is that it would 
require relaxation of limits imposed in recently announced DoD policy, and it would 
keep soldiers away from their homes and civilian jobs for a longer period of time.

- **Reduce boots-on-the-ground (BOG) time.** A fourth option would be to concentrate train-
ing after mobilization as above but retain the 12-month time limit on the duration of 
mobilization. Consequently, it would reduce BOG time in theater. While gaining the 
same training advantages as the third option, it would require a faster unit turnover rate 
in theater and, therefore, more units to cover a given period of operations.

For the longer term, the monograph also considers more-aggressive initiatives with which 
DoD might experiment. Particularly if cyclical deployments continue, the chain of command 
will surely seek methods of enhancing stability and training efficiency. Such initiatives might 
am to foster better unit-level retention, control interunit moves, lower vacancies through 
intensified recruiting, accelerate initial training, and enhance medical and dental screening or 
treatment. In addition, DoD might try other initiatives to enhance training efficiency, such 
as more centralized training, greater use of mobile training teams, and distributing individual 
training to personnel who will move into a deploying unit just before mobilization. Each of the 
above types of initiatives could require substantial investments and would need to be evaluated 
over the long term. If successful, they might reduce instability, make training more efficient, or 
both. However, at present, there are no data that allow us to judge the prospects for success or 
the magnitude of possible savings. Therefore, it would be wise to test such initiatives on a small 
 scale to acquire credible evidence of their actual effects and costs.