More than 1.5 million military personnel were deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan between 2002 and 2007, many of them more than once. Deployments often result in personal and work-related stress due to family separation, long working hours, and uncertain schedules. Upon returning home, many service members endure mental and emotional strain as they readapt to civilian and family life.

Despite these multiple pressures, reenlistment rates have remained stable. At the request of the Office of the Secretary of Defense, RAND researchers sought to determine (1) the effects of deployment on service members’ decisions to reenlist and (2) whether such factors as bonus pay and number of months deployed affect reenlistment rates.

Drawing on recent literature, 10 Status of Forces Surveys of Active Duty Personnel administered between 2002 and 2007, and administrative data from personnel and pay files, RAND researchers developed statistical models of how deployed time and bonuses have influenced service members’ willingness to stay in the military. The findings help address concerns about the long-term effects on reenlistment resulting from increased deployments in support of ongoing military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Long Deployments in a Hostile Environment Can Negatively Affect Reenlistment

Studies show that having some deployment experience typically has a positive effect on reenlistment.1 While the high pace of military operations can increase personnel’s stress levels, service members generally appreciate the opportunity to engage their skills and training in meaningful ways.

The frequency and duration of deployments have increased significantly during the global war on terrorism. Prior to September 11, 2001, fewer than 50,000 personnel were receiving hostile-fire pay each month; by 2007, this number had risen to 200,000. Reenlistment remained stable overall, but a detailed statistical examination of first- and second-term decisions made both before and during the global war on terrorism (i.e., 1996–2001 versus 2002–2007) reveals that the increase in deployment has affected the services differently.

Analysis of the survey data indicates that survey respondents who had a deployment involving hostile duty in the year prior to the survey experienced higher-than-usual work stress and higher-than-usual personal stress. They also reported a lower intention to stay in the military.

However, the lower intention to stay was not borne out by analysis of actual reenlistment. Using hostile deployment in the year before a reenlistment decision as an indicator, the study found that the Air Force and Navy experienced no real effect on first-term reenlistment numbers, and the same
Trends in the Effect of Deployment on Reenlistment

The Army's extended use of reenlistment bonuses helped to offset the decreasing and (by 2006) negative effect of deployments on reenlistment for both first- and second-term personnel.

**Policy Implications**

The study found that, compared to having no deployment, soldiers and marines with 12 or more months of deployment in the three years before reenlistment were less likely to reenlist, and those with less than 12 months of deployment were more likely to reenlist. This suggests that, to the extent that it is possible to do so while accomplishing a mission, the services should limit individual deployment to no more than 12 months in a period of 36 months.

Bonuses were valuable in sustaining retention in the face of heavy deployments. This indicates the value of bonuses as a compensation tool and underscores the importance of allowing rapid changes to bonus budgets from year to year, as well as flexibility to reprogram funds to bonus accounts within a fiscal year.

Deployments have an overall positive effect on reenlistment. However, concerns about the mental health of service members who are deployed to hostile locations, especially those deployed for long periods, suggests the importance of monitoring and studying their subsequent performance, behavior, and support needs. This includes the many service members with some exposure to combat who return with sub-threshold symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

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**Reenlistment Bonuses Can Offset Some Negative Aspects of Lengthy Deployments**

One way in which the U.S. Department of Defense has sought to increase retention is through the expanded use and increased generosity of reenlistment bonuses. More than any other service, the Army increased the number of occupations eligible for a bonus as well as the dollar amount of bonuses, raising the number of reenlisting soldiers who received a bonus from 15 percent in 2003–2004 to nearly 80 percent in 2005–2007; in that same period, the average value of bonuses increased by more than 50 percent.

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This research brief describes work done for the National Defense Research Institute documented in *How Have Deployments During the War on Terrorism Affected Reenlistment?* by James Hosek and Francisco Martorell, MG-873-OSD, 2009, 172 pp., $41, ISBN: 978-0-8330-4733-5 (available at http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG873). This research brief was written by Kate Giglio. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.
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