

High time for the high-readiness reserve

Hugh Smith

Information about the ADF's new High Readiness Reserve (HRR) remains limited, in part because details are still being worked out. Its basic purpose is to enhance the existing reserve system rather than, as some have assumed, to reincarnate the Ready Reserve scheme abolished in 1996 by the incoming Liberal-National coalition government. Nonetheless, there appears to be potential for development of the HRR (or Howard's Royal Reserve as one wit called it) into something resembling the old Ready Reserve (RRes).

Army

For the Army the High Readiness Reserve will be aimed primarily at existing reservists who volunteer for more extensive training. This will include 'gap' training to bring competencies up to the level where they can perform specific jobs in regular units even though they may not have the same number of competencies as regulars. High-readiness reservists will be allocated to an establishment position in a regular unit and will undertake an exercise with it each year. This will be part of their mandated 32-50 training days per annum.

Once qualified, individuals will sign a two-year contract in which they undertake to be available for deployment as required by the Army (thereby obviating the need for formal call-out). They must be able to deploy within 28 days or less according to the level of readiness of their parent unit. On top of normal reserve pay and conditions, a bonus of \$10,000 will be paid for each two years of efficient service, and \$2500 will be paid at the beginning of each year for health support.

The Army aims to build up to 1100 high-readiness reservists by the end of 2008 and 2800 by 2012, although these targets are by no means set in concrete. While the focus is on encouraging existing reservists into the High Readiness Reserve, former regulars will obviously be welcome. Experience suggests, however, that those leaving the full-time ADF mostly want to spend more time with families and concentrate on their new employment. The demands of active reserve service are already seen by many as too great.

Also eligible for the High Readiness Reserve will be newcomers off the street. It is here that the nature and extent of the training to be offered becomes critical. Provision will need to be made for getting these recruits up to regular

standards in the necessary competencies as quickly as possible. This will certainly involve extensive full-time training. At this point the ghost of the former Ready Reserve begins to stir.

Air Force

The Air Force will also use the High Readiness Reserve to enhance its existing reserve force with a strong focus on the range of jobs necessary to support aircraft operations in various contingencies. About 70 per cent of RAAF reservists – Active, Standby and Specialist – are ex-regulars and already highly trained. (the Army's General Reserve, by contrast, attracts a very much smaller proportion of ex-regulars). Reservists with the required level of training will be invited to commit themselves for a period of one year to undertake full-time duty at less than 28 days notice. This commitment can be renewed annually provided competencies are maintained. The same financial incentives apply as for the Army except that the Air Force will pay the efficient service bonus, at the rate of \$5000, at the completion of each year.

It seems quite possible that the Air Force will be able to attract sufficient numbers from among its existing reservists to meet the planned target of 1400 high-readiness reservists. Only limited additional training would be required to bring some of these reservists up to par or to maintain existing competencies. It therefore appears unlikely, though not impossible, that the Air Force will seek to recruit people directly off the street as high-readiness reservists.

The RAAF, however, already offers new recruits the option of full-time training for service as reservist Airfield Defence Guards (ADG). Those wishing to serve as ADG reservists receive eleven months full-time training – alongside those seeking to enter regular service – followed by a period of four years part-time service and training. This system was introduced without fanfare not long after the demise of the Ready Reserve which Air Force had used effectively to expand and maintain its airfield defence capabilities. It is more or less identical to the former scheme and has proved highly successful with more trainees wanting to go into full-time service than the Air Force can take.

The challenges

How the High Readiness Reserve will work in practice remains to be seen. It is certainly a worthwhile experiment but will run up against some of the usual constraints in securing deployable forces based on reservists. On the one hand is the ADF's challenge of providing necessary training of the right kind and at the right time, especially in the case of the Army. This is essential in order to avoid one of the main problems of existing reserve service – it takes too long for individuals to complete many professional training competencies on a part-time, intermittent basis, given that courses are not always available at the right time and student places for reservists are not always available.

On the other hand is the reservist's challenge of being willing to commit to being available to serve at 28 days notice or less. The financial incentive will be stronger than at present: a significant bonus and enhanced medical support on top of the standard reserve benefits for part-time or full-time service. In the event of full-time service being required, reservists would no doubt also feel a strong moral obligation to respond. Despite an individual's best intentions, however, family circumstances, medical treatment or civil employment concerns are always liable to intrude.

Most Active Reservists have a full-time job, whether as employees or self-employed. Securing adequate time for full-time military commitments is rarely easy. The 2001 legislation to protect the civil employment of reservists will apply to high-readiness reservists on deployment at the request of their Service Chief (though some legal queries may be raised). But legislative protection may not be enough to reassure individuals that their civilian jobs will remain secure, especially given that employers now have much greater flexibility under the recent Work Choices legislation.

Whether the contract making individuals liable for service at the direction of their Service Chief would be legally enforceable might be subject to debate. But for obvious reasons the ADF would not want to be seen prosecuting reservists who fail to meet their obligations. The simple sanction is that those unable or unwilling to respond will not receive their bonus. Ultimately, of course, the government can call out reservists either individually or collectively under the 2001 legislation. But no government since World War II has bitten this particular bullet and the High Readiness Reserve scheme is clearly designed to avoid this eventuality.

This will be the true test of the scheme – will it deliver sufficient capability when required? Are there enough people able and willing to make the necessary commitments? Will they respond when asked by their Service? Or will further development of the scheme be required, particularly along the lines of full-time training for new recruits in the case of the Army? It is worth recalling how the former Ready Reserve sought to tackle the challenge of providing the desired capabilities.

Ready Reserve

First, Ready Reservists undertook exactly the same training as the regular soldier (or Airfield Defence Guard in the RAAF) – a period of 12 months starting from scratch. This made them just as suitable for deployment as regulars

and likely to remain so on the basis of a requirement for 50 days duty per annum over the following four years.

Second, it attracted actual and intending tertiary students who are more likely to be available for deployment than others. Between 66 per cent and 82 per cent of Ready-Reserve recruits planned to go on to tertiary studies and education allowances were provided. Importantly, the length of university vacations provides good opportunities for full-time training while the flexibility of the university system allows students to take 6 months or 12 months away from their studies for full-time service with little difficulty.

The attractions of periodic well-paid military employment to impecunious students are only too obvious. Nor are students as likely to have family commitments as other Active Reservists. While not as immediately available as some full-time forces, Army's Ready-Reserve units would have been capable of providing large numbers of infantry for second and subsequent rotations in a given military commitment. This was particularly so because the Ready Reserve scheme was centred on formed units, and ones with a good backbone of regulars to facilitate a cohesive and consistent approach to unit training and operations.

Third, the Ready Reserve attracted young people who were bright and motivated. They saw an opportunity both to do something for the community and to extend themselves without identifying as career soldiers. That these recruits were sometimes critical of traditional military ways was resented by some regulars but welcomed by the more far-sighted. A particular benefit was that quality recruits allowed the production of high-calibre junior leaders in the Ready Reserve, especially at corporal and lieutenant level. Some of these would also have transferred in time to the General Reserve and helped remedy one of its longstanding deficiencies – the dearth of fully-trained junior leaders. Unfortunately the early closure of the Ready Reserve scheme meant that the full benefits were never seen in either the Ready or General Reserve.

Finally and most importantly, the Ready Reserve tapped a group of young men and women who would otherwise not have considered putting on a uniform. These people did not want to commit to regular service for four years or more. But nor were they interested in part-time service which could take years to get them qualifications on a par with regulars and might not offer interesting opportunities. Some did in fact discover that military life had a lot to offer and transferred to the regular army (though, absurdly, these were counted as attrition against the Ready Reserve). Today, as the recruiting problem deepens, the prospect of uncovering a large swathe of new recruits should be as welcome as discovering a new oil field.

The principal reason given for abolishing the Ready Reserve scheme in 1996 was cost. It is certainly true that individual Ready Reservists cost considerably more than General Reservists at the time, and about 43 per cent of the cost of a regular soldier over five years. A Ready-Reserve brigade cost about 60-65 per cent of a regular formation on account of the need for a regular cadre. Why not put the money into expanding regular units? We now know the answer. The ADF simply cannot recruit enough people for full-time service and must find ways of enhancing its employment of reserves.

Opposition to the Ready Reserve also came from some regulars who objected to the conversion of the regular 6th Brigade (albeit seriously undermanned) to a Ready-Reserve brigade, seeing the scheme as a means of reducing the size of the regular force. As well, many general reservists felt that the Ready Reserve was a threat to their viability and community status and that it was receiving privileged treatment at their expense – a criticism already voiced by the Defence Reserves Association in response to the High Readiness Reserve (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 May 2006). Much of this opposition, on both sides, might have been won over if the first brigade to be converted to Ready Reserve status had been a General Reserve rather than a regular brigade.

Conclusions

The High Readiness Reserve is well worth pursuing. While not neglecting the Active Reserves, the government must focus on increasing the number of genuinely ready and deployable reservists. Nor is the High Readiness Reserve the only means. The extant Reserve Response Forces (RRF) in each state are drawn from the Active Reserve and undertake enhanced levels of training in domestic security competencies. Like the High Readiness Reserve these forces will be at higher readiness but will require formal call-out if sufficient volunteers are not forthcoming in an emergency.

While the High Readiness Reserve is to be welcomed the lessons of the Ready Reserve should not be forgotten. The option of recruiting off the street for the High Readiness Reserve may prove to be a fruitful one, leading to individuals undertaking six months or more full-time training. In time, this could be promoted among school-leavers and tertiary students as a well-paid and rewarding opportunity for service to the community. The Ready Reserve might return by the back door.

Related to this is the idea currently being floated by the Minister for Defence, Brendan Nelson, that two years service might be offered to regular recruits in place of the current minimum of four years, presumably without any obligations for subsequent part-time service. This would provide a chance to 'try before you buy' which was a highly successful feature of the Ready Reserve. But even as little as two years rather than one full-time year may not prove attractive enough to many young people.

As a footnote, the Navy has so far not chosen to use the High Readiness Reserve scheme for reasons not made public. It used the Ready Reserve scheme mainly to provide existing reservists with better conditions of service rather than to create a new capability. Perhaps this time around it could take the opportunity to train up new personnel, perhaps with a focus on off-shore patrolling capabilities in the framework of border security. It might indeed create a 'coastguard service' within the Navy based on part-time sailors before a future government creates a separate Coastguard. ♦

Dr Hugh Smith taught at RMC Duntroon and ADFA for 33 years and remains a Visiting Fellow at UNSW@ADFA. In 1995 he and Lieutenant General John Coates conducted the official Review of the Ready Reserve Scheme.

Letters continued from page 5.

Sir: On hearing the recent criticism of the fitness of Ziggy Switkowski to head the government's inquiry into nuclear energy, on the curious grounds that he was formerly a nuclear physicist and presumably knows too much about the subject, I was reminded of the surprisingly similar logic of the late Sir Arthur Tange, whose biography was reviewed in the Autumn 2006 *Defender*.

I was present when Tange addressed the Chief of the General Staff's annual conference, in I think 1972. There he declared in effect that because of their military experience uniformed officers of the Australian Defence Force were so biased as to be incapable of giving balanced advice on military matters and hence should be excluded from the decision-making process.

This arrogant declaration was received in stony silence by an audience of over 200 senior ADF officers, which incidentally included many with markedly higher civilian qualifications than Tange's BA (Hons). When comments were called for I was the first to respond, to the effect that by his reasoning our duty as uniformed officers was simply to pull our steel helmets down over our eyes when told and march towards the enemy until some public servant in Canberra said otherwise. Another respondent was the late Major General Stewart Graham, who pointed out that what Tange had said implied that persons with medical qualifications should be excluded from directing the nation's health services and economists and accountants from holding office in the Treasury.

Needless to say, we had both wasted our breath. Under Tange the Defence Department was reshaped to reflect just that dominance by public servants. His multiple committees were so loaded with bureaucrats that uniformed ADF committee members were effectively sidelined, a legacy which apparently remains to this day the root cause of many of the highly publicised problems now being experienced by the Defence Department.

Let us hope that our energetic and undoubtedly able new Minister for Defence will be able to sever this Gordian knot.

Owen Magee
New South Wales

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