



1st Combat Camera Squadron (John L. Houghton, Jr.)

Reserve Components Looking Back to Look Ahead

By LEWIS SORLEY

Few policy issues are as complex, controversial, and in flux as those concerning Reserve forces. That was particularly true during the Vietnam War and, because of what happened there, during the following quarter century. At this juncture, when not only Reserve but active forces are being deployed and employed at a hectic pace, a review of Reserve forces policy as it has evolved since Vietnam may offer insights for possible revision of that policy to accommodate current realities.

The Vietnam Era

Reserve forces policy precipitated a crisis in political-military relations as

the United States began deploying massive ground forces to Vietnam in July 1965. General William Westmoreland, Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, since June 1964, had been reporting with increasing urgency that South Vietnamese forces were incapable of fending off the North Vietnamese army and Viet Cong without intervention by American ground forces. Lacking drastic action, he cabled in early March 1965, “we are headed toward a [Viet Cong] takeover of the country” within a year.¹

Later in March, 173^d Airborne Brigade and two battalions of marines were dispatched, but that did not end the debate over ground forces. First there was extended discussion of how those forces might be used, with Westmoreland pressing for—and getting—more and more latitude for conducting

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White House meeting
on Vietnam.

U.S. Information Agency (DWC/NARA)

offensive operations. In parallel, there was agonized consideration of dispatching far larger forces.

As the point of decision neared on sending more forces, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara made one of his periodic “fact-finding” trips. When he left for the war zone in mid-July, staff actions were well under way in the Pentagon and White House preparatory to calling up Reserve forces. While McNamara was in Saigon, Deputy Secretary Cyrus Vance cabled him that President Lyndon

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Johnson was “favorably disposed to the call-up of Reserves and extension of tours of active duty personnel.”² Vance added that the previous day he had met three times with the President and been assured that a “request for legislation authorizing call-up of Reserves would be acceptable.”³

In his report to the President on returning to Washington July 20, 1965, McNamara recommended deployment

of additional forces to Vietnam as requested by General Westmoreland and a concomitant call-up of 235,000 Reservists. The services, the Army in particular, were well along in planning for an order from the President to begin such a mobilization. Three days later, at a White House meeting, President Johnson revealed to McNamara and others that he had decided not to use the Reserves.

The President addressed the Nation on July 28, one of the most fateful junctures in the long war, saying that he planned to send 50,000 more troops to Vietnam, including the newly-created 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), and that more would be sent as needed. Insiders waited expectantly to hear that he was authorizing mobilization to support the deployments but instead were astounded to learn that it would be done without the Reserve.

This constituted a crisis of the first magnitude for those charged with preparing and dispatching the deploying forces. The Army in particular,

more reliant on its Reserves than the other services, was now in a bind. Instead of being able to supplement active units, it was now faced with replicating those forces, newly created and requiring equipment, training, and large numbers of additional young officers and noncommissioned officers.

General Harold Johnson, Army Chief of Staff from June 1964 to June 1968, recalled that the President’s refusal to call up Reserve forces constituted one of the most difficult crises in those turbulent years. The general learned of the decision in a July 24 meeting with McNamara and the service chiefs. All were stunned. “Mr. McNamara,” said Johnson, “I can assure you of one thing, and that is that without a call-up of the Reserves the quality of the Army is going to erode and we’re going to suffer very badly.”⁴

Brigadier General Hal Nelson, Army Chief of Military History, called the LBJ refusal “a watershed in American military history.” As a consequence, “the active force was required to undertake a massive expansion and bloody expeditionary campaign without the access to Reserve forces that every contingency plan had postulated, and the Reserve forces—to the dismay

of long-time committed members—became havens for those seeking to avoid active military service in that war.”

General Creighton Abrams served as Army Vice Chief of Staff from 1964 to 1967, the years of the buildup of large ground forces, and was involved in organizing, equipping, training, and deploying ever more Army troops—without recourse to Reserve forces. He was moved to observe that the massive increases consisted entirely of privates and second lieutenants, an agonizing situation when long-nurtured and experienced Reserve forces lay idle due to Presidential policy.

The effects General Johnson predicted were soon felt. In late 1966 he observed that the level of experience in the Army was steadily diminishing. As early as May 1966, he felt obliged to address the matter in a signed letter in the *Weekly Summary*, a close-hold Army publication distributed only to general officers. “By 1 July 1967,” he forecast from the force expansion already planned, “more than 40 percent of our officers and more than 70 percent of our enlisted men will have less than 2 years of service.” Johnson acknowledged that in units he visited young soldiers were filling jobs without the necessary experience, inevitable given the growth of the force and unavailability of Reservists. He emphasized that the problem was Army-wide.

The general enjoyed a reputation for exceptional integrity and dedication. Having barely survived as a prisoner of the Japanese during World War II, he fought his way back to professional prominence while winning a Distinguished Service Cross commanding infantry units during the early Korean War. He now found himself so opposed to the LBJ decision that he contemplated resignation in protest.

Johnson had earlier consulted retired General Omar Bradley about resigning. Bradley counselled against it: “If you resign you’re going to be a disgruntled general, you’ll be a headline for one day, and then you’ll be forgotten. . . . What you do is stay and you fight your battle and you continue to fight it to the best of your ability inside.”



Heading for D-Day landing.

U.S. Army

The Joint Chiefs of Staff as a body also urged mobilization of Reserve forces, not only at the outset of major deployments but repetitively over the next several years. Johnson heeded Bradley’s advice and served on, working within the system to get the decision reversed but without success and with increasing bitterness. “Assessing relationships within the Department of Defense,” he said in a post-retirement oral history, “I think that here we had a catastrophe.” Sending the Army to war without its Reserves likely helped produce that outlook.

The Army Reserve forces were devastated by the President’s decision. Not only were dedicated soldiers demoralized by not being able to put their training into practice, but when the Reserve became a haven for those avoiding service in Vietnam it was an additional insult. Moreover, various units were stripped of equipment as the buildup continued, rendering them incapable of deployment even had mobilization been ordered.

The sorry state into which Reserve forces declined was illustrated early in 1968 when, after North Korea’s seizure of the intelligence ship *USS Pueblo*, President Johnson reluctantly ordered a

small call-up, primarily to reconstitute the depleted Strategic Reserve. The result was a dismaying spate of class action lawsuits by units contesting the legality of their mobilization, despite which a small number of mobilized troops was eventually sent to Vietnam. By mid-December 1969, all the units called up had reverted to Reserve status.

After Vietnam

Following a year as deputy, General Abrams took command of U.S. forces in Vietnam in June 1968 and held the post four years. During most of his tenure the United States was progressively executing a unilateral withdrawal. In June 1972, with that action largely completed—deployed forces were down to 49,000 from a 1969 high of 543,400—Abrams went home to become Chief of Staff.

The Army was then showing signs of the long struggle in Vietnam. Despite the enormous sums spent in support of the war, much had been taken from the hide of the services. The great Seventh Army in Europe, as evaluated by General Bruce Palmer, Jr., USA, “ceased to be a field army and became



Marine Reserve helicopters refueling over Gulf of Aden.

U.S. Navy (Paula M. Fitzgerack)

a large training and replacement depot for Vietnam." As a result it was rendered "singularly unready, incapable of fulfilling its NATO mission."⁵

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Abrams set about rebuilding the Army, stressing two aspects: combat readiness and care of the soldier. When he took office, the authorized end strength was plummeting, and the Army was struggling to find even those numbers in a newly mandated all-volunteer era. Radically revised Reserve forces policy became part of the solution.

What was dubbed the Total Force policy was enunciated during the tenure of Secretary Melvin Laird. The point was to integrate active and Reserve forces of the various services into a more homogeneous whole. The Army saw the Total Force policy as changing how the Nation would employ Army National Guard and Reserve units in war by integrating the Reserve components into plans, thus creating more dependency on them. Wrote Don Oberdorfer:

National mobilization was the critical underlying issue, even more important in the military view than the additional resources it would provide. Once accepted, mobilization could generate a 'win the war' psychology at home under which nearly any military initiative would be possible, instead of a 'tolerate the war'

*psychology under which nearly anything was difficult.*⁶

When Laird's successor, James Schlesinger, took office, he and Abrams established a relationship based on shared values. Abrams described the Army need for more combat power to meet its contingency missions, and Schlesinger agreed that if Abrams could save spaces by reducing headquarters and overhead he could apply those spaces to combat forces. Schlesinger persuaded Congress to stabilize end strength at what would now be seen as a robust 785,000.

Abrams set about slashing headquarters, beginning with his own Pentagon staff, and taking other measures to reduce noncombat forces. He also told Congress of his desire to increase the force structure from 13 to 16 divisions, the minimum he thought necessary given worldwide commitments

and contingency roles. General William DePuy, Assistant Vice Chief of Staff and a key player in resource allocation and management, had told Abrams that the Army had resources for 10 rather than 13 good divisions and certainly not for the 16 contemplated. Abrams acknowledged that but stressed the overriding importance of arresting the decline in end strength and building more combat power.

These actions were linked to fundamental Reserve issues. Abrams felt that Reserve forces, in addition to their contributions to combat capability, provided an essential link to public support. "They're not taking us to war again without the Reserves!" said Abrams, a vow heard often by General Walter Kerwin, Jr., Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel.

Thus the Army set about restructuring so that in future major crises at

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least selective Reserve mobilization would be mandatory. The vehicle was a revised force structure that integrated Reserve and active elements so closely as to make the Reserve virtually inextricable from the whole. To ensure that outcome, the Army structure was modified to put a number of functions entirely or primarily in the Reserve components, chiefly combat support and combat service support, that would be needed in any significant combat involvement.

As for the active force building toward 16 divisions, the manpower savings derived from reorganization and headquarters reductions proved insufficient to provide the fully manned units Abrams desired. Thus was born the concept of roundout forces consisting of Reserve brigades or battalions, designated as affiliates of active divisions and tagged for mobilization and deployment with them in the event of war.

What Is Different Now

It can be argued that the extensive and extended recourse to Reserve forces of recent years, in the absence of

a major war involving the population at large, is quite different from what Abrams contemplated when he put the current policies and supporting force structure in place.

What we are seeing now, unlike earlier periods of major conflict separated by long intervals of relative peace, is more or less continuous overseas military activity involving combat or potential combat and requiring significant Reserve forces. In addition to operations abroad, increased concern for homeland security in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks has produced yet another large and continuing requirement.

Thus many Reservists have been called to active duty not once but repeatedly, sometimes for indeterminate periods or with repeated extensions. The result has been increasing strain on the individuals and their families and employers. Clearly a review of national Reserve policy is indicated, and it should begin with the fundamental mission and go on to consider size, structure, equipment, compensation, mobilization potential, and liability.

Graduation speakers at West Point often admonish those receiving commissions to be prepared for combat service. Every class ever graduated from the Military Academy has seen such service—the 1936 class of Creighton Abrams, William Westmoreland, and Bruce Palmer, Jr., for example, saw service in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam—and world conditions suggest that successor classes can expect the same.

In more recent times the cycle has been shortening. Nearly a quarter century elapsed between World Wars I and II, then the Korean War erupted only five years after World War II, while the deployment of large-scale ground forces to Vietnam took place a dozen years later. After that conflict ended in 1973, significant deployments followed in rapid succession: Grenada, Lebanon, Panama, the Gulf War, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. For most of the last half century, such engagements took place in the

context of the Cold War and the permanent and extensive overseas garrisons it induced. The tempo of operational missions increased further when the Cold War ended.

As of mid-September 2003, the Army had fighters and peacekeepers deployed in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Cuba, the Horn of Africa, Iraq, Kosovo, Kuwait, Macedonia, Pakistan, the Philippines, the Sinai Desert, and Uzbekistan, totalling 180,000 soldiers. Of its 33 brigade combat teams, 16 were in Afghanistan and Iraq. Including assignments in the United States, 128,000 Reservists and Guardsmen were on active duty Army-wide, with 20,000 in Iraq and Kuwait, the latter apparently for one-year tours.

What seems undeniable is that for whatever reasons—fiscal, political, or strategic—the Nation is unwilling to maintain an active force that is adequate to current missions and operational tempo. As a consequence, Reserve forces not only supplement or reinforce the active force but often act as a surrogate for it. This stands the concept of Reserve forces on its head.

If policymakers perceive no difference between active and Reserve components in deployability in relative peacetime, a heavy burden falls on Reserve forces. Not only are they asked to maintain readiness comparable to the active force with the limited annual training allocated, but to deploy repeatedly for missions a year or more in duration while maintaining a civil profession. That may be asking too much, especially with possible continued and repetitive deployments for the war on terror. In such circumstances, it appears sustained operations will be the rule rather than the exception. Future Reserve policy must take this reality into account to be viable.

Reliance on Reserve forces is a function of the size of the active force, the capabilities allocated in the various components, and the threat. Compensating for inadequate active forces is the dominant factor in current circumstances. General Gordon Sullivan, former Army Chief of Staff and president of the Association of the U.S. Army, stated the matter straightforwardly in the organization's news publication: "The Army and, indeed, all the services



CDOD (Robert D. Ward)

and a bond with the American people." That same powerful phenomenon has been demonstrated during the ongoing war in Iraq, where if anything Reserve forces are playing an even more crucial part in combat operations and their aftermath.

Review and adjustment of policies for employing Reserve forces are urgently required. The composition and magnitude of such forces may also need major revision, as with the active force. But the planners who carry out such review and revision should be attentive to history and to what Creighton Abrams said with such emotion after the long ordeal of Vietnam. They should ensure that in major crises threatening vital national interests, "They're not taking us to war again without the Reserves!" **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), p. 122.

² U.S. Department of Defense, *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of U.S. Decisionmaking on Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), p. 416.

³ William Conrad Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships*, Part 3, January–July 1965 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988), p. 416.

⁴ Lewis Sorley, *Honorable Warrior* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 1998), p. 212.

⁵ Bruce Palmer, Jr., *The 25-Year War: America's Role in Vietnam* (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1984), pp. 170, 175.

⁶ Don Oberdorfer, *Tet* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971), p. 259.

⁷ Lewis Sorley, "Creighton Abrams and Active-Reserve Integration in Wartime," *Parameters*, vol. 21, no. 2 (Summer 1991), p. 49.

⁸ Robert W. Sennewald, "Fine Tuning Reserve Forces in the Wake of Desert Storm," *Army*, vol. 41, no. 6 (June 1991), p. 14.

⁹ Edward C. Meyer, remarks, senior conference, West Point, June 7, 1991.

need an increase in end strength to meet the high operational tempo that shows little sign of abating in the continuing war on terrorism."

The services need an increase for another cogent reason—so they can stop regularly drawing on Reserve forces to do what the active forces should do. This includes the large numbers of mobilized Reserves providing routine security for active Army posts, two years and more after the emergency call-ups following 9/11. Instead, according to General Peter Pace, USMC, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the services were contemplating activating an additional 17,500 Reservists at the end of September 2001, an increase of 23 percent over the 76,000 from all the services currently on active duty.

By the close of the Persian Gulf War in 1991, it was clear that much had changed since the Abrams integration policy was first conceived, "most dramatically the sources and nature of the global threat. It seems inevitable that as adjustments are made to those new realities, the policy, missions, and composition of the Army's Reserve forces will again undergo review and revision."⁷ The Armed Forces now find themselves at another such point of taking stock and mid-course correction.

What Remains the Same

The motivations that led to the Total Force and to structuring the Army so Reserve mobilization would form part of any major deployment of ground forces remain as compelling as ever. Reservists, for instance, played an enormous role in Desert Shield and Desert Storm, where they not only were essential in getting the job done but validated what General Abrams sensed about the link to public support. General Robert Sennewald, USA, agreed after the Gulf War that Reserve force call-ups "involved hometown America and helped generate a feeling of support for our Armed Forces not seen since World War II."⁸

General Edward "Shy" Meyer, former Army Chief of Staff, was even more definite: "General Abe decided [full-bore integration of the Reserve components] was the right way to do it. . . . This time we had people from 1,330 towns, and that ensured widespread support. We had better think twice before we change that."⁹

General Sullivan recalled that as Army Chief of Staff he drew strength from the portraits of his predecessors on the walls of Quarters 1 at Fort Myer: "One [of General Abrams] in particular keeps me going because he set the Army on the successful path that has led to great victories, success,