

A Strategic Advantage Suffering in Silence

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Imagine a scenario in which the U.S. Army is deployed for a large-scale combat operation, but its equipment is in disarray, and its maintenance teams are understaffed and undertrained. This is the harsh reality facing the Army Reserve today (Albrecht, 2021). With 78% of the Army's sustainment personnel and equipment residing in the Reserve (Albrecht, 2021), it is shocking to think that this critical component is struggling to keep up with the demands of modern warfare. The Army Reserve is at a breaking point, and it is time to take action to address the chronic underfunding, understaffing, and resource shortages that threaten its ability to support the Total Force.

The Army Reserve has been depleting and downsizing its resources, affecting the majority of its sustainment operations elements (Dunn, 2017). The Reserve is now in dire need of upsizing, resourcing, restructuring, and rebuilding its forces to a sustainable and manageable level for large-scale combat operations (LSCO) (Dunn, 2017). According to an article written by Luc Dunn, an interview conducted at an Association of the United States Army (AUSA) conference on Wednesday, October 11, 2017, "General Robert Brown, commander of U.S. Army Pacific, stated that he has never seen a better Total Force than in today's Army. 'In the Indo-Asia-Pacific, we simply cannot do our mission without those critical Army Reserve assets,' he said" (Dunn, 2017, para. 3). Luc Dunn's article goes on to say, "In the future, the Army must capitalize on the Reserve component to provide needed operational capabilities and capacity, Brown said. 'The ability to strike, protect, and maintain will require Reserve efforts above and beyond anything we have seen before,' he said" (Dunn, 2017, para. 4).

So, what is at stake if the Army Reserve cannot get its sustainment operations in order? The answer is simple: the success of the Total Force (Dunn, 2017). Without a reliable and well-maintained equipment fleet, the Army Reserve will struggle to support its fellow service members in the field, putting the entire mission at risk (Kapp & Torreón, 2020). Moreover, it is not just about equipment – it is about the people who maintain it. The Army Reserve not only needs skilled wrench turners and diagnosticians, but also maintenance managers, like Warrant Officers, to oversee the upkeep of its equipment and ensure it is ready for action at a moment's notice (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2023). However, with a severe shortage of these critical personnel, the Reserve is facing a perfect storm of maintenance challenges that threaten to undermine its ability to support the warfighter (Kapp & Torreón, 2020).

The Army Reserve is needed worldwide to provide sustainment elements for conflicts and training events (Cragin, 2020). However, it cannot conduct these missions with substandard equipment readiness and a severe lack of full-time maintenance personnel and managers (Warrant Officers) (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2023). Warrant Officers provide the technical and tactical level of expertise and management needed (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2023). They are the glue that ensures equipment readiness is maintained to a higher level (Kapp & Torreón, 2020). Currently, the Army Reserve does not have a full-time maintenance Warrant Officer in brigades and is losing those personnel in battalions, as of FY25 (DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY, 2023). Without those full-time maintenance Warrant Officers at those critical levels of command, the Army Reserve is struggling to maintain equipment readiness (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2023).

In the same article written by Luc Dunn, "Lt. Gen. Aundre Piggee, deputy chief of staff, Logistics, stated, 'The U.S. is still the only military superpower in the world... That is because of our ability to project combat power anywhere in the world – and that is logistics. That's the power that the Army Reserve brings to this nation'" (Dunn, 2017, para. 5). Unit readiness is essential to logistics, Piggee

said. 'Equipment must arrive on time when required,' he added, 'and that's the capability we're looking for from these Ready Force X formations. We have to be ready for those missions' (Dunn, 2017, para. 6). In the same article, Lt. Gen. Aundre Piggee added, "We're going to have to sustain ourselves. We need to start training now for that" (Dunn, 2017, para. 7). Now, is that time to start the training, to get our great Army's equipment readiness to a higher state of readiness and even more importantly, increase the Soldier's proficiency and confidence within the units (Kapp & Torreon, 2020). Unit readiness relies heavily on the combined efforts of the property book officer and maintenance managers at each level to ensure equipment is maintained and transferred appropriately (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2023).

The article, Analysis of Land Army Maintenance Techniques in the War in Ukraine (MILITARY REVIEW, May-June 2023), notes, "The assumption is that combat use will quickly lead to the required level of training for use, but maintenance is a far greater challenge that cannot be solved during combat operations" (MILITARY REVIEW, 2023, p. 12). Another article, Ukraine: Why has Russia's 64km convoy near Kyiv stopped moving? (BBC, 2022), reports that the convoy was stopped in part by determined Ukrainian resistance and by mechanical failures, as well as by Russia's inability to recover and repair its broken vehicles (BBC, 2022). If the United States Army gets into a conflict, will it face the same challenges as the Russian Army? What steps can be taken to mitigate these identified issues during the initial invasion into Ukraine? The U.S. Army needs to start thinking about and preparing its forces to sustain and maintain their equipment before facing these same challenges (Kapp & Torreon, 2020).

Strategically speaking, the Army Reserve's role has changed over the past 25 years, and military forces are increasingly reliant on the sustainment capabilities provided by Army Reserve components (Cragin, 2020), according to Capt. Justin Albrecht, "Current Army force structure puts 78% of its sustainment personnel and equipment in the U.S. Army Reserve. Of note, 55% of medical units, 65% of finance units, and 73% of human resources capability reside in the Reserve" (Albrecht, 2021, para. 2). Can you imagine that level of sustainment operations being provided by a force that has been degraded and downsized, and is now expected to give that kind of support for LSCO? What would the strategic outcome be if the Army Reserve continues at this level of support, versus increasing the number of personnel to manage and maintain the equipment and systems that require their expertise (Kapp & Torreon, 2020)?

In a Congressional Research report, Charles Cragin, a former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs, summed up the changing role of the reserve components: "The role of our Reserve forces is changing in the United States. We have seen their traditional role, which was to serve as manpower replacements in the event of some cataclysmic crisis, utterly transformed. They are no longer serving as the force of last resort, but as vital contributors on a day-to-day basis around the world" (Cragin, 2020, p. 5). According to TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1 (2018), "The persistence of Army forward presence forces is a foundational element of dynamic employment of the Joint Force, as it enables joint strategic maneuver with critical combat, sustainment, protection, and mission command capabilities" (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2018, p. 10).

The Army Reserve's Modified Table of Organization and Equipment (MTOE) is derived from a study of the Active Army's capabilities and then imposed on the Army Reserve to ensure it aligns with their capabilities (USAR 140-1, 2020). According to USAR 140-1, Force Management, "The MTOE is a modified version of a table of organization and equipment (TOE) that prescribes the unit organization, personnel, and equipment necessary to perform a mission in a specific geographical or operational environment" (USAR 140-1, 2020, p. 2). This one-size-fits-all approach has several issues when applied to an organization that conducts training once a month for 2 to 4 days, while the equipment sits for the rest of the month without being maintained or used (Kapp & Torreon, 2020). This inevitably leads to a decline in the proficiency of the Soldiers who operate and maintain this equipment (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2023).

Far too often, Army Reserve units are either ramping up for annual training or a mobilization/deployment and have a false sense of their equipment readiness based on data in GCSS-Army (Kapp & Torreón, 2020). This is the worst time to discover that the equipment on which the Army relies does not function, and the Soldiers who are relied on to diagnose and repair equipment are not proficient enough to provide that support when needed (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2023). The Army Reserve needs maintenance managers in those progressive roles, positions, and all echelon levels, as well as wrench turners, mechanics, and technicians (Soldiers) to build equipment readiness to a maintainable level and provide that sustainment operational piece during conflicts, missions, or training events (Kapp & Torreón, 2020). According to Army Regulation (AR) 750-1 (Army Materiel Maintenance Policy, Maintenance of Supplies and Equipment, 2023), “mechanics should spend 50 percent of their IDT and annual training time engaged in maintenance performance or training, including conducting 25 percent of field-level services on unit equipment in their respective functional areas” (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2023, p. 15).

Given the level of importance placed on sustainment operations, why are there few full-time Soldiers performing maintenance and maintenance management, and why are these functions not ingrained in the fabric of units (Kapp & Torreón, 2020)? How can the Army Reserve provide almost 80% of sustainment with only 5% of the budget allocated toward sustainment operations to strategically increase equipment and Soldier readiness throughout the Army Reserve (DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY, 2023)? In the report from the DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY, Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 Budget Estimates, Operation and Maintenance, Army Reserve Appropriation Highlights (2023), “The Army Reserve supports the National Defense Strategy by providing trained, equipped, and ready units and Soldiers capable of defending our nation and its interests as an essential member of the Total Army and Joint Force” (DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY, 2023, p. 1). According to AR 750-1, “Sustainment consists of maintenance functions formerly known as general support and depot operations of the Army maintenance system, which is an Army-wide program for commodity-unique maintenance” (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2023, p. 10).

So, what is the way forward for the Army Reserve? It is time for the U.S. Army to recognize the critical role that the Army Reserve plays in sustainment operations and provide the necessary resources to support its growth and development (Kapp & Torreón, 2020). This means investing in the people, equipment, and infrastructure that the Reserve needs to succeed, from maintenance managers and technicians to equipment and facilities (Cragin, 2020). By doing so, the Army can ensure that the Reserve is ready to support the Total Force whenever and wherever it is needed, and that the nation’s military remains a dominant force on the battlefield (Dunn, 2017). The stakes are high, but with the proper support and resources, the Army Reserve can overcome its challenges and emerge stronger than ever (Kapp & Torreón, 2020).

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