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Stephanie Ashwell

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The Army National Guard: Recruitment, Retention, and the Balance of Life

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An Honors College Project Presented to  
the Faculty of the Undergraduate  
College of Arts and Letters  
James Madison University

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by Stephanie N. Ashwell

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Accepted by the faculty of the Sociology Department, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

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This project is dedicated to all National Guard soldiers who so willingly dedicated themselves not only to this country but to their state as well.

To my great uncle CPL Jack Simms and my uncle SSG Fred King, thank you for paving the way for me to my service to the National Guard.

Lastly, this is dedicated to CDT Ware, this is in hopes we all become great leaders like you were.

# The Army National Guard: Recruitment, Retention, and the Balance of Life

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# **The Army National Guard: Recruitment, Retention, and the Balance of Life**

## **Preface**

The Army National Guard is a component of the U.S. Army and, as such, all soldiers comply with all Army Regulations and Standards as well as attend all Army trainings. National Guard soldiers both deploy overseas as well as work on stateside missions such as state emergencies and natural disasters. The names of all participants in this project have been changed to protect their identity and their service. The purpose of this project was to shed light on the lives of these soldiers while creating a better understanding of the National Guard as a whole.

# **The Army National Guard: Recruitment, Retention, and the Balance of Life**

## **Acknowledgments**

First, I would like to thank Dr. Matthew Ezzell. You are the main reason this project became possible and I have appreciated your guidance and patience through this process.

Second, I want to thank Dr. Kimiko Tanaka and Dr. Beth Eck for your continued support and guidance during this project. You both provided valuable information that made this project better. Lastly, thank you to my participants on this project. This would have been nothing without you and I thank you for your willingness to be open and honest about your experiences.

# **The Army National Guard: Recruitment, Retention, and the Balance of Life**

## **Abstract**

The National Guard is an institution with a history older than the United States. Members are drawn to Guard service for a variety of reasons, and they face a range of difficulties as they manage their experiences in the Guard and in their civilian lives. This project offers a small case study, based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews, with six current or former Guard members. Findings highlight that these members experienced a range of frustrations that clustered around issues of recruitment, retention, and the balance of life. The purpose of this study was to gain a better idea of what are the motivating factors as to why individuals join the National Guard, reenlist in the Guard, and why some choose to leave the National Guard after some time. The result was more than expected with soldiers being very open about the incentives and drawbacks of being members of the National Guard.

# The Army National Guard: Recruitment, Retention, and the Balance of Life

## Introduction

*“Favorite aspect of the Guard...being able to gain experiences while doing something I enjoy...least favorite right now is not having days off ever...drill 3 days this week after I’ve worked 4 days and now I have to work another 5 days. Sometimes I have no time off”.*

-Sally

The National Guard has changed drastically over the last 381 years since its founding and with it the members have become more dynamic with both their military and civilian lives. Soldiers of the Guard are asked to provide service to the Guard once a month and for a few weeks during the summer in the form of Annual Training (AT) to remain ready to help in both domestic and foreign missions. But as time has progressed for the Guard over the last 381 years, the training schedule has increased and it has not only impacted the morale of soldiers for recruitment and retention, but it has caused soldiers to struggle with balancing their civilian and military lives.

The Guard can provide experiences to both younger and older adults who may not have had those chances otherwise as well as provide incentives such as low-cost health care, educational benefits, and an extra income. Seen throughout this research, soldiers are still divided between continuing their Guard careers even with these positive incentives and experiences. The current project, with exploratory aims and based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews, was designed to provide insights into the experiences of Guard members as they tried to balance their lives inside and outside of Guard service. Results show that participants experienced a range of frustrations that clustered around issues of recruitment, retention, and the balance of life.



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### **A Background on the National Guard**

The U.S. Army National Guard is one of the oldest military branches with its original "Guard Birthday" of December 13, 1636 (National Guard n.d.). It was originally founded in Massachusetts by the Massachusetts Bay Colony's General Court where they organized the militia as three regiments which would help with better defense for the colony. Over one hundred years later, the Militia Act of 1792 was enacted which required any free, white, and able-bodied men between the ages of 18 and 45 to enroll in their state's militia. This act remained in place until 1903 (Marion & Hoffman 2018, p.4). This act also allowed the National Guard to keep their founding day from 1636 which was before the founding of the U.S. Army in 1775 (National Guard n.d.).

The militia units of the Guard played important roles during the Revolutionary War, securing successful wins in battles such as Bunker Hill (1775), King's Mountain (1780), Cowpens (1781), and more which aided in key wins leading to the surrender of British General Cornwallis at Yorktown (Marion & Hoffman 2018, p.2-3). The Guard also participated in the War of 1812 and the Mexican-American War, and it was during these two wars that respect for the militia units became greater and was recognized by high ranking officials as a major asset to the fight (Marion & Hoffman 2018, p.5-7). During the Civil War, while the volunteer units were disbanded, every state maintained their national guard units and took the time to become a more complete force.

Before World War One (WWI), the Militia Act of 1903 was passed and established the principle of providing funding and equipment federally which allowed for more centralized control securing the status of the *National Guard* (Marion & Hoffman 2018, p.12). The Act required the National Guard to meet federal standards regarding recruiting and retention of

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enlisted soldiers, commissioning of officers, and participation in in-field training. It also established funding for the National Guard at both the federal and state levels.

WWI and beyond, the National Guard has been mobilized overseas during various foreign conflicts. More notably, during WWI the Virginia National Guard established the 29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. This division was known as “the blue and grey” as it combined guard members from the north (Maryland, DC) and south (Virginia) regions that were split during the Civil War (Marion & Hoffman 2018, p.27). It was during WWI and WWII that the Virginia National Guard would see more mobilization of its soldiers than ever before with 5,500 casualties in France's Argonne Forest and 28,775 Guard soldiers killed throughout WWII (Davenport 2009, p.2 & "29<sup>th</sup> (US) Inf."). The 29<sup>th</sup> Division would be one of the main divisions and the only Guard division to storm the beaches of Omaha at Normandy, France, on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1944, known as Operation Overlord. This was the largest amphibious assault in the history of the U.S. Military (“29<sup>th</sup> (US Inf.”).

The National Guard continued to deploy throughout the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and through the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and ongoing military conflicts. When soldiers are home from war, though, they serve in a different but important role while they are not conducting training. They serve the people of their state and surrounding states in times of natural disasters and other domestic emergencies (Marion & Hoffman 2018, p.171). When soldiers are not deployed, they fall under a different Commander-in-Chief which is the governor of the state of which their national guard unit is a part of and are under State Active Duty, or SAD status (EMI). In times of emergencies and/or natural disasters, units take all commands from the Governor. Soldiers during these times will help emergency crews (firefighters and EMTs) to help rescue individuals, assist in the prevention of damage/repairing of property, and

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assistance on supplying members of the community with food and water; and, the National Guard is usually the first line of military response to most emergencies (EMI). Eventually, with the passage of the National Security Act of 1947, the Air Force was created along with the Air National Guard which aids the Army National Guard in international and domestic missions (National Guard n.d.).

In 2016, the National Guard reported that the force consisted of 348,165 soldiers with 303,000 being enlisted, 36,600 being officers, and 8,565 being warrant officers (NGB 2016). Currently, the Virginia guard has 7,200 soldiers serving within the Army National Guard (Puryear 2019). In the research conducted by the National Guard Bureau, 83.55% of Guard members were male and 16.45% were female with the majority of the force being between the ages of 17 and 28 (NGB 2016). Of these members, the majority of the force have either a high school degree or some college with 19.21% having a bachelor's degree or higher. The National Guard is the largest reserve force in the Department of Defense as of fiscal year (FY) 2016 (NGB 2016).

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## **Methodology and Limitations**

With exploratory aims, this project is based off of semi-structured, in-depth interviews and a questionnaire to provide demographics of the participant pool. In the beginning, the interviews were conducted in person, but towards the later part of the academic semester, interviews were conducted by phone. With participant consent, interviews were audio-recorded. Following the interview, recordings were transcribed and coded for analysis. Based on interviews, this project aims for rich description rather than broad generalizability.

One of the biggest limitations faced during the research was time. With the research portion of this project to be completed within an academic semester, it caused the extent of the research to be re-evaluated. Originally, I hoped to interview 10 to 15 participants with a mixture of those participants being enlisted soldiers and officers. Given time constraints and the difficulty of juggling participants' schedules and my own, the participant pool was reduced to six (6) enlisted soldiers. I discuss the demographics of the participants more fully, below, but the pool represented four (4) men and two (2) women, all white, ranging in age from 23 to 48, and spanned between 3 years of service to retirement. All but one participant were involved in civilian careers and do not work full time for the Guard. Not only was time a factor in this decision, but financial support for the research was as well.

Beyond the limitations, the strength of this methodology was that I was able to gain a solid understanding of each participant beyond the general statistics from the questionnaire. In the future, with more time and financial support on the project, I hope to continue the project and expand it to include more soldiers as well as widen the participant pool demographics. Due to the limited connection to individuals within minority groups in the population of the Guard, these groups were not as represented as I would have liked them to be.

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As it currently stands, there isn't open source demographics on the National Guard as its own separate component, but in 2016, the U.S. Army included the Guard in their demographics. The Guard made up 33.8% of the total force of the Army (The Office of Army Demographics 2016, p.1). The total force ethnic demographics for enlisted were 53% white, 24% black, 16% Hispanic, 4% Asian, 3% other showing a large underrepresentation of minority groups in the Army as a whole (The Office of Army Demographics 2016, p.1). Further, this racial disparity will vary from state to state. The expansion of this research would allow them to be better represented as well as gain a better understanding between enlisted soldiers and officers.

I, myself, am a member of the National Guard. I have been in the Guard for 6 and a half years with 5 and a half years to go on my current contract. I started my Guard career as a 42R 9D (Musician-French Horn) and now I am a 35F (All Source Analyst). Within the last few years, I was promoted to the rank of Sergeant, a non-commissioned officer. I am a third generation in the National Guard with my great uncle and uncle serving in my Brigade before me and others in my family have been serving in the U.S. Military since the Revolutionary War. I am the first woman in my family to serve in the military.

At the time of the interviews, I was a 25-year-old white woman pursuing an undergraduate degree in sociology. My experience in the Guard gave me insider status. This can be both a benefit and a limitation. I was able to get access and establish trust and rapport with my participants quickly because of our shared experiences, but those very same experiences may have blinded me to assumptions, implicit or explicit, that are common across members of the Guard. I strove to correct for these potential blind spots by writing about my experiences and expectations and including my own experiences as data to be analyzed. I also talked about my burgeoning analysis with my thesis supervisor, a sociologist with no experience in the National

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Guard. From my own experiences, I approached the interviews knowing that I was interested in issues related to participants' attempts to balance life in and outside of the Guard. This was only a jumping off point, however, for the conversations that unfolded.

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### **Demographics**

The questionnaire provided to each participant (n=6) at the time of their interview was to provide the best demographics of the participant pool. None of the demographics below included myself in the overall percentages. The questionnaire was nine questions long asking about age, gender, deployment/SAD experience, etc. The questionnaire yielded the following results:

#### **Age:**

Half of the participants (50%) were between the ages of 20 to 29 with the other half being divided between 30 and 39 years old (33.3%) and one individual being between 40 and 49 years old (16.7%).

#### **Gender:**

For gender, 60% were male and 20% were female. This is close to being proportional to the current demographics of the National Guard as a whole.

#### **Race/Ethnicity:**

For race and ethnicity, 83.3% of participants identified as white (non-Hispanic) and 16.7% identified as Latino. There was a large racial disparity in those represented and future research would allow for this gap to close.

#### **Employment:**

For employment, almost all of the participants have civilian employment (83.3%) with one individual who is an active Guard member (16.7%). Of those who are employed on the civilian side, two of them are currently seeking an advanced degree (33.3%)

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### **Years of Service:**

The majority of the participants had 2 to 6 years of experience (50%). Two individuals that have served between 13 and 19 years (33.3%), and one who has retired (16.7%). It is important to note that one of the individuals that served between 2 to 6 years is complete with their service and no longer in the military.

### **Deployment:**

Only two individuals have deployed but both had multiple deployments to the Middle East with the National Guard.

### **SAD (State Active Duty) Missions:**

Almost all of the participants have been assigned to a SAD mission (66.7%), but only one participant had done multiple SAD missions. These missions included not only natural disaster relief support but enforcement capacities as well.

### **Prior Service:**

Within this participant pool, only one individual was prior service from the Air Force. They did not complete training and were moved over to the Army through the “Blue to Green Program” (an inter-service transfer) to prevent gaps in service.

### **Plan on Re-Enlisting:**



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There was a 50/50 split on those who did or did not want to re-enlist. Two participants are currently out of the Guard, but one individual noted that they plan on re-enlisting to active duty rather than the National Guard when they return to service.

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### Findings

In the pages that follow, I'll highlight the emergent themes that arose in the interviews. Using semi-structured interviews allowed me to touch on identified points of interest but to also stay open for unanticipated areas of discussion. Even across six interviews, patterns and themes emerged. These focused on three broad areas: recruitment; retention; and, balance of life.

#### ***Recruitment***

*"I met a really good friend and he had joined the National Guard. He kind of noticed I was 'milling' around and not doing much with my life and not knowing what I wanted to do with my life. He knew the military was a big goal of mine and my family was a big goal for me as well so he said, 'Why don't you give it a shot?' ...I'd be the first person in my entire family to be in the United States Military."*

- John

It is thought that recruitment for military branches resides solely in the recruiter's offices scattered throughout the United States. But truth be told, many servicemen and women have expressed that recruitment started with family and friends that were prior or current servicemen and women. It was their experiences that put the bug in their ear about what the military could provide them. Within my research, I found this to be 100% true among my participants who, across the board, all say that initial "recruitment" was done by family and friends.

I experienced this when I was recruited by one of my college friends who suggested it to me for the ability to pay for college and get paid to be an Army musician. I jumped at the chance and shortly met with the recruiter. This was the same type of story that my participants told me:

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A friend or family member came to them with the idea of the National Guard and they were in the recruiter's office within a few weeks to a month.

The Guard has taken note of this as well as they have developed programs to entice soldiers to bring people to the Guard . In 2018, the Virginia National Guard created a new incentive program called “Every Soldier is a Recruiter” (Gatti 2018). Within this program, those who provide three leads to the Guard within the year would be submitted for an Army Achievement Medal and given consideration for the school of their choice, such as Airborne School, Sapper school, or a career development school (Gatti 2018). All these incentives help with gaining points towards promotion within the Guard.

Overall, the program wasn't very publicized throughout the Guard and as recruitment numbers go down throughout the National Guard each year this program may be what is needed to increase numbers. In 2018, the National Guard Association of the United States said, “the problem is not retention; retention numbers are high across all three components. It's recruiting” (NGAUS 2018). The personal experiences of the soldiers and a familiar face seem to be what drew the participants in this research to join the Guard. A survey of a larger population of the Guard would give better insight into what is the driving force behind recruitment, but what the participants spoke to shows that recruitment may often be a social process that is shaped by broader structural realities.

Each participant offered personal reasons for joining. Some joined for money for college, a new source of income, or a chance to serve their country while also creating a civilian career. One participant, Amelia, joined the Guard at 17 years old with goals of paying for college and gaining experience for better career prospects. Amelia never had the intention to re-enlist after her first contract because she knew these needs would be fulfilled. When asked about the

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benefits she was offered when she talked to the recruiter, she said no benefits were given. She asked, “Are recruiters less likely to give benefits if people walk in knowing they’ll enlist?” I didn’t interview any recruiters, so I can’t say if this is an explicit strategy on their part. However, this is something I experienced, as well, when I enlisted in the Guard during the same year as Amelia. During that time, the military was being removed from Afghanistan; so, the incentives for recruitment may not have been as necessary as in the recent past – as the prospects of deployment were smaller, the necessary incentives were smaller, as well. But many of the people with whom I went to basic training had received tens of thousands of dollars in recruitment bonuses whereas Amelia and I had only received the Montgomery G.I. Bill (Chapter 1606) which is offered to most soldiers who enlist for six years as well as our state tuition assistance.

For individuals who grew up working class or without the financial privileges that enable easier access to higher education, the negative side to the smaller incentives offered to me and Amelia is that they are, indeed, small. They may not seem “worth it” to enlist for longer years of service or to continue in service once the first contract with the Guard is complete. For Amelia and many other participants, the state tuition assistance did not pay but only a portion of school tuition. Highlighting the ways that the broader context of income inequality can shape patterns of recruitment and retention, many of the participants in the current study reported that it would have been financially wiser to have joined active-duty Army at the outset so that the entirety of their school would have been paid for. For almost all of the participants, not joining active duty in the Army was their biggest career regret because the benefits were much larger to have done 4 years of active-duty Army service than any length of time spent in the National Guard.

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In this context, programs such as "Every Soldier is a Recruiter" could have a downside. Soldiers that have any ill-feeling at all could express these concerns to those whom they are trying to recruit for the Guard which might de-incentivize individuals from joining the Guard as opposed to active duty Army or the Reserve. If the Army continues to outsource the role of recruitment from paid recruiters to active duty members, but isn't able or willing to offer incentives and benefits that provide an adequate compensation for the structural realities of class inequality, then recruitment may continue to be a challenging component of the Guard experience (the importance of understanding the needs of soldiers and better incentives for current soldiers will be further discussed in *Retention* and *The Balance of Life*).

Another area that fell into the concerns of recruitment was a clear understanding of basic training and Advanced Individual Training (AIT), including the physical, emotional, and social expectations that come with them. Many of the participants expressed a feeling that, overall, basic training wasn't difficult; but certain aspects were more difficult than others. For example, Sally said that she was sent to basic training very quickly after joining the Guard and she didn't feel as prepared mentally or physically for what basic training was like. She noted that she could handle it and that the experience was okay, and she said that people can never be fully prepared for basic training until they've seen it. But she also said that the Guard could do better to prepare recruits to understand the stress (physical and mental) they are likely to experience.

As it currently stands, the Guard has a Recruit Sustainment Program (known as RSP). It is set in place to "make sure the soldier is physically fit, mentally prepared, and administratively correct for basic training and [Advanced Individual Training]" (Soucy 2019). Recruits go through this program once a month and two weeks during the summer, similar to a standard drill weekend, up until they leave for basic training. There are five phases to the program: (1) red, (2)

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white, (3) blue, (4) green, and (5) gold. Recruits spend most of their time in white phase but leading up to their last RSP drill before basic training, they are in blue phase to finish all administrative paperwork and tasks to ensure their correctness.

Several participants said that they only went through one RSP drill before leaving for basic training, and this was true in my experience, as well. One participant, with his prior service in the Air Force, had no RSP training before leaving for Army basic training. Given the information from the National Guard Bureau article, that means that participants received very little to no training on the basics of the Army before basic training as many of them only completed administrative tasks before leaving.

I asked the participants if they felt *socially* out of place when they made it to basic training, in addition to having to face the physical and mental hurdles the training can bring. Many of them said they had to quickly adapt to make it through with minimal stress. They described observing others who had more experience or knowledge of the social do's and don'ts of basic training and noted that they tried to follow the others' lead. Having to rely on a hidden curriculum and on the example of others to decipher the social norms of the Guard was an additional burden for the participants. This could prove to be a barrier to a recruit feeling like they are fully connected to the Guard experience, and this could also have repercussions for retention.

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### *Retention*

*“I think its [soldier care] is a close second, but I think the mission is number 1 for them [leadership...They will finish the mission first than worry about soldier care]”*

-Daniel

When it came to the topic of retention, in every single participant, there was hesitation in whether they would re-enlist. For the participants that retired or left the Guard recently, they said they experienced hesitation in re-enlisting in the Guard many times across their experience. I wanted to press the participants more on the reasons for the hesitation, and what I found from them was even beyond the hesitation I understood for myself when it came to re-enlistment. As my participants point out, the Guard provides a lot of benefits, most notably financial incentive for schooling, opportunities for social networking, and, frequently, the feeling that you are providing services and support to those in need during times of crisis. Many of the participants pointed to these realities when talking about what drew them to the Guard in the first place. The benefits are real, with potential material, social and emotional payoffs. So, why would soldiers hesitate to re-enlist?

When it came to the question of “Do you plan on re-enlisting?”, there was a 50/50 split across my participants. Some who said no were retired or already out. They had already made the decision and had moved on. For the ones that said yes, however, their decision was more conditional. They noted that there were leaning towards saying yes for the moment, but all of them noted that they would see later down the road if re-enlistment was actually for them. One participant, Daniel, had 15 years of service in the Guard, making him 5 years away from retirement. Given that, he was leaning heavily toward re-enlisting; but, he said he cannot be certain because of a few factors.

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Daniel's life was hectic. He was employed full time in civilian life, he was pursuing an advanced degree, and he was serving in the Guard with many responsibilities while also having a family with a spouse and young children. Daniel's balance will be discussed more in *The Balance of Life*, but it's important to note these aspects now as Daniel said they were one factor affecting his decision to re-enlist. He said he has been gone a lot over the last several years because of Guard service and responsibilities, and he said that he was feeling worn down. When I asked him if he felt he was being supported through the Guard in terms of *soldier care* (leaders ensuring the soldiers' needs are met in both their military and civilian lives), he said he felt that his immediate leadership did but as leadership got higher he was less confident in their support.

Daniel, along with many other participants, used the term "poor leadership" as a significant reason for the push against re-enlistment within the National Guard. While this is not unique because any job can have this issue within their business, it has a greater consequence in the Guard in terms of readiness and confidence from soldiers. In the context of the Guard, particularly, the stakes of service can literally be life and death. A lack of trust in leadership, thus, can feel like more than an annoyance.

Jerry's story and experience further illustrates these concerns. Jerry retired at almost 30 years of service to the National Guard. While 30 years is a significant amount of time, Jerry did have a 2-year break in service in the Guard when he was at 16 years of service. He had, at the time, no intention of returning to the Guard to finish out for retirement. He said that he was burnt out in general between his civilian and Guard careers, but more so there was a shift in the dynamic and atmosphere of the Guard at the time. The Guard took a large undertaking of re-evaluating the structure and readiness of their units in the early 2000s after 9/11 so they could be



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more prepared for deployment. Jerry went through this shift and, unfortunately, he realized he had differences with the leadership about the vision of the Guard and his work within it.

Of particular note, Jerry didn't feel he was being taken care of and because he had the option to not re-enlist, he took that opportunity. At the time, he noted, getting out seemed like his only option. For his Military Occupation Specialty (MOS), there wasn't a unit he could move to within his state and he didn't want to change his MOS because he loved his job. It wasn't a decision made lightly, though; being in the Guard was a salient and central component of Jerry's sense of self for 16 years of service at that point, and it also provided material supports in the form of health care, funding for school, and an extra income to his civilian position. Not to mention, he enjoyed most of the people he worked with and he would be receiving health insurance for life if he continued to 20 years of service in total. But, he was willing to leave all this behind because his lack of trust in the leadership tipped the balance too much.

After two years off, one of his old friends from the Guard became a leader in Jerry's former unit. Because of that, Jerry felt it would be better than before and decided to re-enlist. It's worth pointing out that one single individual as a leader turned Jerry's whole perspective of the Guard around because Jerry knew that *soldier care* was this leader's utmost priority. It shows how crucial soldier care and soldiers having their needs met can be to encourage retention as well as create a large and ready force.

Another term for "poor leadership" that participants sometimes used is "toxic leadership." They noted that, in their view, this is not only a problem with the Guard but, at times, in the military as a whole. It's been recognized as one of the main reasons overall that soldiers along with other military personnel give for getting out of the military and in worst-case scenarios falling into suicidal thoughts (Zwerdling 2014). Fortunately, none of the participants in this study

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expressed negative thoughts to that degree, but some did express extreme frustrations with toxic leadership ruining their thoughts of the Guard. Some noted that toxic and inept leadership had even put them in physical danger during training events during annual training. To be sure, anyone signing up to enlist in an organization for which deployment to an active war zone is a possibility understands that there are risks involved. But no one ever wants to be put at *unnecessary* risk in the context of training as many of these participants, and I, had experienced.

It is worth pointing out that other components of the Army, in years past and at the time of this writing, have met their retention goals early in the year whereas the Guard has continued to struggle with maintaining strength numbers (goal of the total number of available spots for soldiers) (South 2019). In the Center for Strategic and International Studies, they noted that in fiscal year (FY) 2019, the Guard and Reserve both failed to meet their end of strength numbers (Cancian 2020). Cancian noted, “Both reserve components will suffer from understrength units...the reserve components need to sustain their status as operational reserve” (2019, p.7). With 25,000 Army and Reservists and Guard members mobilized on average at any given time, it is crucial to maintain retention to maintain both missions, overseas and domestic side, but readiness for those missions as well (Cancian 2019).

It is evident retention is crucial and with so many participants indicating that the frustrations with leadership and a lack of a work-life balance outweigh the rewards in their mind for continuing their careers in the National Guard. A thorough evaluation of the work-life balance of soldiers and understanding the soldier's needs has provided insight into what exactly is driving soldiers away from the National Guard.

## **The Army National Guard: Recruitment, Retention, and the Balance of Life**

### ***The Balance of Life***

*“[His wife] had made the comment to me, ‘I could see a change in you when you out that uniform on’ ...she’d have to say, ‘Calm down, you’re not at drill anymore’”*

-Jerry

The Guard has greatly changed over the last 381 years since its founding in 1639, and with that, the time commitment of soldiers is vastly different than the Minute Men of that time. But even as recent as 2015, there was a different expectation of time commitment than currently Guard members experienced in 2020. It is important to note, though, that the time commitment for Guard members can vary from person to person (especially depending on MOS), and from unit to unit. This is based on the personal responsibility of the soldier (rank within the Guard) and the mission for the unit (a more complicated mission requires more time for preparation and execution of the mission).

Within the participant pool, there was a variety of Guard time commitments. One participant, Jerry, had two-day drills one weekend a month and two-week annual trainings (AT). Sometimes the two weeks would be split up to help soldiers with a balance in their civilian and military careers. This is the bare minimum requirement of every Guard soldier, but Jerry volunteered for extra missions as much as he could both for the extra money and because it offered a positive reflection on his evaluations which were used for promotional opportunities.

Daniel has had a much different experience than he expected when he entered the Guard. He has now experienced not only two deployments overseas very close to each other, but he has also experienced 3- and 4-day drills once a month (sometimes falling into the same month) as well as 3- and 4-week annual trainings due to his unit’s increased mission requirements. While it

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is required to ensure readiness towards the overall mission, it doesn't mean that it hasn't caused troubles for Daniel and others.

Many participants noted that because of the increase in the training schedule over the last couple of years, they have lost large sums of money from their civilian career. Further, they noted that has stunted their promotional progression in their civilian careers since they are not there as much as they could and, arguably, should be. Daniel said, "I'm getting to a point in my career where missing work is becoming detrimental to me succeeding in my civilian job and losing a lot of money." Daniel further noted that there comes a point in people's military careers, as well, that they have to decide between military promotion or civilian promotion. Especially because he said that these last few years have been the highest Operational Tempo (OPTEMPO) he has seen in his entire career. He said:

In the Guard, though, it comes to a point where you have to do one of two things: You have to let your civilian job suffer or you have to move over to AGR [Active Guard Reserve – AGR soldiers serve full-time and receive the same benefits as Active Duty Soldiers]. Most of the Sergeant Majors in battalions are AGR because it comes to a point where you can't do a Sergeant Major's job *and* have a civilian job. It's really, really hard.

The competing demands can be simply be too much to manage, and, of course, this can directly factor into retention, as well. Participants said that most of the jobs they have had while serving in the Guard gives a certain amount of military days each year where they are paid for missing that time and see no penalty to their vacation days. Unfortunately, since the advertised idea of the Guard is two-day drills once a month and two weeks during the summer, many civilian jobs will

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only accommodate those time constraints. After that point, Guard members are often forced to take their vacation days.

The interesting aspect of this coming from the participants is they did not know about, or did not seem to have much knowledge about, the Uniformed Service Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA). The act was passed to ensure: (1) that military personnel would still have their civilian job upon returning from military leave; (2) that military personnel would be protected from missing out on civilian career progression because of military leave (including drill and AT); and (3) that military personnel would be protected from losing vacation days or other similar types of leave because of being away for military reasons (Department of Justice 2011, p.8-9).

Overall, my participants said that they did not have an issue with their employers about taking off time to be able to go to drill and AT. But, when further pressed about the time commitment of the Guard, they all said they felt like it was hindering their progression in their civilian careers. This raises the question of whether soldiers, as well as employers, truly had an understanding of how the law is set up and the rights afforded to them to be able to balance their civilian employment and military career.

Time pressures and competing responsibilities for my participants went beyond the time commitment for actual drill weekends and annual training. For example, all of my participants reported that Guard duties were affecting their everyday lives with an immense amount of non-duty work that was required of them. More broadly, there is an understanding both in the active-duty component as well as the reserve components that soldiers must maintain physical fitness standards, but the more hidden side of outside work is the preparation for drills and annual trainings that require a significant amount of time of leaders that is unpaid.

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During the interview with Daniel, he expressed that this is often what is required from him and noted that it affected his ability to balance his two lives. The following week after drill weekend, he was met with more emails and calls about the upcoming drill weekend a month from then. He mentioned as well as having to be on three-hour conference calls with no compensation. I have experienced this, myself, with conference calls leading up to the next drill weekend as well as planning meetings throughout the month. It was in Daniel's interview that he brought up that this is completely illegal and brought my attention to a recent article out of West Point (a United States Military Academy), calling out that it is illegal what they are asking of military personnel time-wise outside of duty time (i.e. drill weekends and AT) (see Peña 2020).

Soldiers in the Guard and Reserve are required to maintain active duty standards with only about 39 training days each year (Peña 2020). Some, such as Daniel, me, and many other participants who completed about 81 training days this past year, have even more. It was in 2015 that General Mark Milley, the 39<sup>th</sup> Chief of Staff, stated that there would be an increase in training days for the National Guard from the standard 39 training days a year, and my participants had seen the ramp-up (Greenhill 2015). For most of the participants who were still in the Guard, they stated that the OPTEMPO is very hard to handle with their civilian career, as well as with the increased non-duty tasks throughout the month. They're losing their money from drill weekend and annual training, but now they're losing both their free time and extra money due to unpaid non-duty tasks.

As Daniel pointed out, this isn't just a time-bind for Guard members. Peña (2020) notes:

The federal government, including military leadership and staff, is barred from accepting voluntary (i.e., uncompensated) services by 31 US Code § 1342 (part of

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the Antideficiency Act, or ADA). Absent specific statutory authority, the acceptance of voluntary services is a per se ADA violation (para. 5).

There are exceptions to this law such as for officers (not enlisted soldiers) being asked to complete tasks without pay as well as essential jobs remaining open without pay such as during a government shutdown or major natural disaster, but none of these exceptions as defined by the law speaks to the National Guard and non-essential tasks such as conference calls and frequent administrative paperwork. Further, when the government shutdown in 2019, the National Guard shut down, as well, with soldiers being sent home from training courses and drills re-scheduled or canceled until the government re-opened. They were not considered essential workers, while active duty personnel were so to avoid legal issues with ADA (Peña 2020).

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### **Discussion**

The National Guard members with whom I spoke highlighted struggles to navigate their service across three broad areas of Guard experience: recruitment, retention, and the balance of life. These areas of the Guard experience are not mutually exclusive, but overlapping and related. My participants noted that the relative attractiveness of the incentives for joining the Guard shifted with the political and structural contexts in which they approached enlistment. Across the military, the realities of class inequality shape enlistment:

An important predictor to military service in the general population is family income. Those with lower family income are more likely to join the military than those with higher family income. Thus, the military may indeed be a career option for those for whom there are few better opportunities. For such enlistees, military service can open opportunities that would not otherwise be available. Indeed, research has found that military service often serves as a positive turning point in the career trajectories of enlistees from disadvantaged circumstances (Lutz 2008, 184).

This speaks, in part, to why the material benefits of enlisting in the Guard are attractive to many recruits. However, in a context in which active deployment feels like a serious possibility, the “usual” incentives may not be as enticing to potential enlistees. Beyond this, the participants in the current study reported sometimes feeling unprepared for basic training along social and emotional grounds. To promote recruitment, the Guard may need enhanced incentives to join, a focus on soldiers as recruiters, and more programs developed for preparing recruits for training.



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Doing so could increase recruitment and there is even a possibility that it could positively affect retention, as well.

The primary frustration that participants raised regarding retention related to toxic and untrustworthy leadership and excessive demands on participants' time outside of paid Guard duties. It is important to note, of course, that it does make sense to have some things fall outside of drill, a reality that all of my participants understood. The National Guard is trying to maintain Army active duty standards with only a quarter of the time that active-duty requires and provides. The problem lies more in the lack of compensation and benefits from the time that Guard soldiers are putting in compared to members serving in other Army components. When it comes to benefits, National Guard soldiers aren't eligible for many Veterans Affairs benefits until they've reached 20 years of service or served on active duty in the Guard for a certain number of days (usually 90+ days of active service). This includes health care, VA home loan (NG Soldiers eligible after six years of service), educational benefits, and burial benefits (Department of Veterans Affairs 2012). Further, under the Servicemember Civil Relief Act (SCRA), soldiers in the Guard are only protected under this law when they serve on active duty time and not at any other time.

All of this, of course, reflects the difficulties my participants expressed in balancing their life in and out of the guard. Active duty military enter into a total institution (Goffman 1961), a place of work and residence, broadly cut off from the wider community, that structures all aspects of life with a large number of similarly situated individuals. This all-consuming experience promotes a high degree of salience and positive association for the role-identity of military personnel. Research (see, for example, Binks & Cambridge 2018; Smith & True 2014; Wilson-Smith & Corr 2019) has highlighted the difficulty that military personnel can experience

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in the transition back into civilian life when their military service is over. For members of the Guard, they are dipping into and out of this “total” experience of institutional affiliation every month. This, in and of itself, can lead to difficult role transitions that can be hard to manage (Vest 2013, 2014). But when, as my participants highlight, the bounds of institutional engagement and role enactment are more porous, when Guard duties bleed over into their civilian life, the difficulties of managing these identities and the experience of role strain can be even more difficult.

These tensions can raise specific challenges for Guard members. For example, what will it mean for soldiers who have considered this such an important part of their identity, if the strains become too difficult and they decide not to re-enlist? Among my participants, what would happen to Daniel if he chose to leave after 15 years of service? After Jerry left following 16 years of service, he said he missed it terribly. As soon as leadership changes were made, and the new leadership prioritized soldier care, he re-enlisted. Would Daniel or Sally (who was still undecided about re-enlistment at the time of our interview) go through the same thing and eventually return to the Guard? Or, if they decided to resolve the tensions in the other direction and go AGR, how would they manage the loss of their civilian roles and responsibilities? The limited scope of this project highlights these questions, but more research is needed to address possible resolutions.

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### Conclusion

The National Guard is a dynamic institution with a history older than the United States. Members are drawn to enlist for a variety of reasons, but financial need, furthering education, positive role association, and a desire to provide service are common. The participants in the current study are no exception. They were drawn to the Guard for reasons both material and symbolic, and they experienced a range of frustrations that clustered around issues related to recruitment, retention, and life balance. Based on this small sample and the concerns they raised, it might seem that the Guard is struggling. It is telling, however, that all of my participants expressed confidence that they did not regret their decision to join the Guard.

Indeed, the benefits and the frustrations that my participants spoke to are real. The very small size of this study prohibits generalizing beyond the study, but my results do raise questions and highlight avenues for future research. Future research of this subject could provide the Guard with a more balanced and focused force. Ultimately, increasing recruitment and retention numbers would allow for the Guard to focus on more *soldier care* as well as provide more funding and resources from the federal and state governments. Recruitment, retention, and life balance all work co-currently together to create a better and more ready total force for the National Guard.

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