

Minutes of All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Reserve Forces and Cadets held in Room S, Portcullis House on 2nd March 2016 at 1600 hours

Speaker: Major General John Crackett CB TD, Assistant Chief of Defence Staff, Reserve Forces and Cadets Division, Ministry of Defence

Subject: Future Reserves 2020 Update.

Attendance:

Madeleine Moon MP – Chair Julian Brazier MP – Minister for Reserves Lord Freeman Lord Patel Graham Evans MP Toby Perkins MP Flick Drummond MP Oliver Coleville MP Matthew Ward - Researcher, Parliamentary Office of Madeleine Moon MP Clerks: Colonel (Retd) Hugh Purcell GL RFCA (Honorary Clerk) Kate Peyton GL RFCA	Major General John Crackett CB TD Brigadier Mark van der Lande Fleur Thomas DRM Mark Demery GL RFCA Comms Sophia Baker GL RFCA
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The Chair welcomed all including the Minister Reserves (**Min Res**), Julian Brazier. Major General John Crackett (**JC**) assisted by Brigadier Mark van der Lande (**MvdL**) would give an update on the Future Reserves 2020 (FR20) programme, which had not run as smoothly as hoped. An example had been the problems in the recruit pipeline, but she thought that much of this had been resolved and matters were moving forward. General Crackett had assumed his appointment in March 2013, otherwise he held a commission in the Corps of Royal Engineers as a member of the Engineer and Logistic Staff Corps where he was responsible for providing advice to the Army on electricity generation and distribution. In civilian life he was a Chartered Engineer who until 2011 had been Managing Director of Central Networks, which distributes electricity throughout the Midlands. She expressed amazement that he could find the time to do the work he did for the Reserves.

JC said his role was to look after MOD tri-Service policy and strategy for the Reserves and the Cadets, he was also a reservist. Reflecting on the last three years, FR20 had involved a significant, once in a generation, change that perhaps ranked with the Wilson reforms of 1967 or the more recent SDSR 2010 'new chapter' and was the first attempt in living memory to try to reverse the consistent decline in Reserves. He would evidence that the MOD had done what it said it would do and would make some suggestions on what (was) needed going forward.

What MOD had done. 39 of the 40 commitments published in the White Paper in July 2013 had been achieved and reservists had new kit, refurbished training facilities and there had been a major expansion of overseas training exercises. Terms and conditions had been improved and they got paid leave for every day they trained as well as access to the Armed Forces Pension Scheme. There were financial Incentives to reward completion of each stage of training as well as to attract ex-regulars who came with a bundle of skills and experience. Employers had always been able to claim the cost of having a reservist mobilised, but the process was now easier and a business of fewer than 250 employees could additionally claim £500 for every month a reservist was deployed. Commissioning as an officer achieved a level 5 certificate or diploma, passing out as a reservist achieved a level 1 certificate, equivalent to a GCSE skill in terms of employability. They had benchmarked all reservist military training, tried to match each military skill to a civilian skill and accredit them to a civilian qualification. They had produced an improved employer recognition scheme; 16 employers had received Gold Awards from the Prime Minister in January, which had provided huge publicity for the firms involved. There was better notice of mobilisation and employers were told when training was likely to happen during the year. Significantly, MOD now had account managers to keep in contact with the top 150/200 national organisations.

The effect this has had. Recruiting would always be a challenge, but the decline has been reversed. After a nervous year when it had been flat, they had modified the process, looked carefully at their standards and tried to improve marketing. 2015 had been a year of consistent progress and there were now 34k reservists of which 26.5k were fully trained. There

were more joiners than leavers with 39% more joining and 15% fewer leaving than in 2014 and retention of fully trained reservists was now 90.5%. Surveys had indicated that 83% of employers would consider hiring a reservist, 85% considered reservists an essential and necessary part of the defence network, and more than 80% thought a reservist would be an asset to their business and should be supported in principle. 880 Corporate Covenants had been signed and a poll had shown that 79% were favourable of reservists, the highest it had ever been. The Federation of Small Businesses' had stated that 'Reservists and Service Leavers are in demand by Small Businesses' compared with a 2013 survey that had 40% of small businesses unwilling to hire a reservist. Now it was 42% who would hire and only 16% who would not hire.

The security part of the 2015 Strategic Defence & Security Review (SDSR) had concluded that the UK faced more diverse risks at a greater scale than five years ago, an endorsement of the FR 20 programme and the need to access reservist skills.

What was still to be done. After the introduction of so much change there was now a need to embed it. They had established momentum and could not take their foot off the recruitment pedal if they were to meet the challenge of 35k reservists by April 2019. Progress had been made in changing society's attitude to reserves as being valuable and valued, but this process would be long-term and require consistent work. FR20 needed to keep its funding as removal of resources would damage the proposition. A final concern was diversity. Compared to a UK population of 14% Black, Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME), the Reserves was about 5%, which was worse than in the regular forces. The country not only needed more representative armed forces, but if they continued to only attract white people, they would make it harder for themselves as they would be recruiting from a diminishing demographic.

He concluded that improvements had been made, they had done much of what they said they would do, there was still much to do to sustain the changes, keep the resources needed to meet the strength targets and make the Reserve more inclusive.

The Chair thanked **JC** for his positive report and drew Min Res' attention to the importance of maintaining the funding.

Questions

Toby Perkins MP

Question 1. Did the 34k figure cover the three Services, and was the 35k target by 2019 for fully trained? **JC** replied that it was tri-Service, that 26.5k were fully trained today and they needed 35k fully trained by 2019.

Question 2. The end to the flow of people leaving was positive, but how confident was he of achieving the 35k fully target trained by 2019? **JC** replied that it could be done but would be challenging and an enormous push was still required, particularly by the Army. The RAF was only 40 short of its FR20 target, Navy numbers were rising satisfactorily but their target was only 3k of the total. The Army had to find 30k, would have to continue with well-targeted marketing, refining their processes and looking at the uses to which to put reservists. To stop focussing on this would result in failure.

Question 3. Had the reduction in the public eye as Afghanistan came to an end affected recruiting, did times of economic difficulty make a difference to recruiting figures and did the return to prosperity hinder recruiting? **JC** wanted to encourage MPs to keep talking about and promoting reserves to help keep up the momentum. Afghanistan had worked both ways, some were attracted to being mobilised, others had partners or gatekeepers who had not wanted them to go somewhere dangerous. Mobilisation in 2003 had resulted in a 5% net loss to the TA, but applications to join had gone through the roof. The question was which would have a greater impact, being less operational putting some off joining, or the opposite as gatekeepers would be less worried. There was also a relationship with the economic cycle and as GDP grew Regular Army recruitment suffered, but when the economy slumped recruitment rose. This was partly because the Army offered a steady job as against uncertainty. He did not yet have evidence for the Reserve as they had only started collecting data, but in his experience when times were tough one did not concern an employer about becoming a reservist and being away from work for long periods, but as the economic cycle picked up one was more likely to do so. **MVdL** highlighted the linkage between 4 Signal Regiment and BT and the benefits of the additional skills reservist training could bring to the workplace.

Flick Drummond MP

Question 4. Was Capita responsible for medicals and recruitment, as the slightest flaw in a medical was proving a barrier to getting through the system? **JC** replied that Capita conducted medicals for the three Services and recruitment for the Army, but not the latter for the Navy and RAF. The medical standards needed to be maintained for good reason, to avoid for example someone who is asthmatic being run up a hill in a combat situation, keeling over and maybe dying. They

consistently reviewed these standards, which were under constant scrutiny and not surprisingly they were under pressure to make them as appropriate as they could be for reserves. Half those who went for a medical got deferred and of those deferred about half were rejected. Overall, between 10-25% were rejected for medical reasons, which he considered reasonable, but they needed to speed up the process and improve GP responsiveness to prevent people giving up. There were also recruitment waivers for some who possessed key skills; an example was a deaf man who was a cyber wizard.

Lord Patel

Question 5. Lord Patel had said that diversity in the Armed Forces would improve if there was emphasis on gaining skills rather than serving one's country. Skills were very important for ethnic minorities and he thought the MOD should adopt this approach. **JC** agreed saying that the reserve proposition, although about volunteering, did not sit well with how volunteering was done within ethnic communities, who tended to prefer volunteering on behalf of family. **MinRes** said that when one removed the Commonwealth wedge from the Regular Army, British ethnic minorities were better represented in the Reserve than the Regular Army. The Regular Army recruiting drive was based around developing skills and the slogan 'A Better You'. The reservist who stayed longest had a job at the point they applied and the unemployed did not stay long once they got a civilian job. As the challenge lay around someone with a demanding day job, they had to be imaginative about reaching into communities. Cadets would never be used as a recruiting tool, but as many were girls and many were attracted from ethnic communities and often shared premises with reserves, there was an opportunity to show the opportunities within the Reserve. **Lord Freeman** said that there were at least half a dozen highly respected and distinguished representatives of ethnic minorities in the House of Lords who, if asked, would help with hosting and as role models. He offered to arrange a talk with them which **JC** thought a very good idea. He also remembered a few occasions when employers had complained about the lack of feedback from the Army as to how their reservist was getting on when deployed and he recommended a letter be sent. **JC** said this had been envisaged in the White Paper and was something they encouraged units to do. It had mostly been done after an operation, but as mobilisations had reduced they were now encouraging units to write after a reservist had been on a significant course, but this was not yet being policed. **The Clerk**, an employer of a reservist, had by chance seen just such a letter to his reservist from his military boss. This had made a great difference as to how he viewed him and such a letter just needed to be put on a wider distribution.

Oliver Coleville MP

Question 6. Where geographically was the best place to recruit and where was the worst? **JC** replied that the larger the concentration of people the more likely they were to recruit and this was why they were concentrating on 'new' cities such as Swindon. This need for mass was tempered by political considerations and in the case of the RAF and Navy their need for skills sometimes was better linked to training facilities.

Question 7. Would a regiment of PALS, which could use people who work for BT, for example, work? **JC** replied that 81 Signal Squadron was largely recruited from BT and they always selected a senior BT figure to be the Honorary Colonel. However, the employer was not and should not be a recruiting sergeant.

Question 8. The universities had many students who were complaining about their student fees. Why not offer them an opportunity in the reserves to earn money to pay off their debt? **JC** agreed that as 38% of the population now went to university this market was not well served by the OTC, was under tapped and they needed to do better. Countries such as Canada, Australia and the US did much better and in some cases 40% of their reserve being populated by students.

Question 9. The MOD should seek greater civic engagement and encourage the local mayor to hold a reception around Armed Forces Day. **JC** agreed and said they had promoted the idea around Armed Forces Day, that there was now a Reserves Day and that they were trying to develop an Armed Forces Week. They needed to encourage the civic community to express their pride and generate events. In some places this was done well and Min Res would again send out a letter before Armed Forces Day, which would also go by email. **MvdL** added that they had encouraged the 'trail blazer authorities' to act as a beacon, as there were other local authorities with significant numbers of Service personnel in their area, which included reservists and their families. **AFTERNOTE.** Funds are available to help with the cost of an Armed Forces Day event. Event organisers can apply for 50% of the event cost up to a maximum £10K. The deadline for applications was recently extended to 15 Apr 16.

Graham Evans MP

Question 10. Despite the military disappearing from Cheshire, great respect remained. At Remembrance Day parades he saw Sea Cadets and Air Cadets but why so few Army Cadets? MPs were willing and able to help promote the reserves and the cadets, but this needed to work both ways if they were to raise their profile. **MinRes** reported that he was now the POC in the MOD for signing off MP visits, but many units still did not realise that they did not need permission to invite their constituency MP. He would also simplify the protocol around the invitation for visits by other MPs.

Question 11. After applying for medical insurance his medical had been done by a local doctor brought in by the insurance company. Could the MOD use Reserve MOs to undertake medicals under a pilot scheme, as the wait for GPs to respond took ages? **MinRes** replied that the problem was not the medical but the delay in getting the documents from the GP. The GP contract was with the NHS, not the Government and they were conducting another exercise looking at speeding up the process. **MvdL** added that for the deferrals they were now looking at whether they could use reservist specialists to help but while they were reservists they were also under contract with the NHS so it was not straightforward.

Question 12. The Chair raised the matter of age profile and whether or not there should be an age limit as there were many jobs that people were capable of doing at an older age? **JC** said the age profile of the reservist was slightly older than the regular; reasons were more senior ranks in specialist trades and as they were still struggling to recruit junior officers, reserve officers tended to be older. Age 52 was seen as a good benchmark below which there were no questions asked but above which each case was looked at individually. **The Clerk** was tasked to provide the figures.

MinRes finished by saying that Major General Crackett and Brigadier van der Lande had been a class act and what they had achieved had been remarkable. Major General Crackett would take up his next appointment on 23 March as the first reservist ever to be on the Executive Committee of the Army Board (ECAB), an absolute first in this country.

The Chair thanked them both for being so frank; for what they had done to turn round something that had been heading for a potential disaster and for how they had grabbed the ideas that had come from the floor.

Col (Retd.) Hugh Purcell OBE DL, Honorary Clerk to the APPG RF&C.