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Training Command The Hardest Hit In Manning Plan

By Sean D. Naylor

Army officials say they will meet their goal of manning the divisions and armored cavalry regiments at 100 percent by October, but the price will be high.

That price is "pain" in other parts of the Army, and it's likely to get worse before it gets better, according to Col. Phil McNair, chief of enlisted distribution in the enlisted personnel management directorate at the Total Army Personnel Command, Alexandria, Va.

The pain will be particularly acute in some tactical units that do not belong to divisions and armored cavalry regiments, and in parts of the Training and Doctrine Command. Some of those units already are reporting enlisted personnel strength as low as 62 percent.

When Gen. Eric Shinseki became chief of staff last summer, some divisions were manned below 90 percent, leading to "readiness concerns," according to McNair. Shinseki made manning the combat force a priority, and in October announced a time line to bring the Army back to full strength.

Under the old system, special operations forces were the only tactical units to be filled to 100 percent by specialty and grade. Key personnel in the non-deploying Army, such as recruiters, drill sergeants and prison guards also were kept at the highest level.

With his announcement, Shinseki put the same 100 percent policy in place for the 10 divisions and two ACRs, as well as the 172nd Separate Infantry Brigade at Fort Wainwright, Alaska, by October.

Other nondivisional units that would deploy to a conflict within 35 days would be filled by October 2001, Shinseki announced. His ambitious plan fills the rest of the Army's tactical units by October 2002, and the entire Army a year later.

The plan to fill the divisions and ACRs is going well. The average enlisted strength for those units hovered at 99 percent by July, and it is on track to be at 100 percent by October, McNair said. Improved recruiting is responsible for about half of the additional soldiers now headed to divisions, but the other half is coming from elsewhere in the Army, he said.

Last August, Shinseki told a handful of Army leaders that the "art" of successfully executing his plans would be to do it "without breaking any part of the Army," said McNair.

But the impact of Shinseki's initiative inevitably has been to redirect soldiers in undermanned specialties, such as Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS) crewmen, into divisional rather than corps units. That has left nondivisional units that rely on these specialties even shorter on troops.

For instance, to keep divisional MLRS battalions at just 90 percent strength, the service has had to cut enlisted strength in III Corps Artillery's five MLRS battalions at Fort Sill, Okla., to between 62 and 65 percent strength, McNair said.

But III Corps Artillery is the exception, not the rule, according to McNair. The Army projects the aggregate enlisted strength of those tactical units not yet in the highest fill priority to be 90 percent by October, just two percent lower than 1999 levels.

Personnel officials told Shinseki the Army could fully man the divisions while keeping most of the rest of the tactical units at around 91 percent strength. "The chief said 'I'm good with that,' " McNair said.

The nontactical, or institutional, Army will sacrifice over the next two years to man the war-fighting units. When Shinseki announced his initiative in October, the institutional Army was at 101 percent enlisted strength. In July, it was still at 100 percent, but by October, the Army plans to cut its strength to 92 percent.

The initiative will hit Training and Doctrine Command especially hard. At 98 percent strength last October, the command will be down to 94 percent this October, and 89 percent by October 2001, according to PERSCOM projections.

But even within TRADOC, the pain will not be shared equally. The Army will continue to fill high-priority enlisted positions such as recruiters and drill sergeants at or above 100 percent. But the rest of TRADOC will be at 88 percent strength by Oct. 1 and down to 81 percent a year later.