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Testimony

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MILITARY READINESS

Current Indicators Need to Be Expanded for a More Comprehensive Assessment

Statement of Neal P. Curtin, Director of Reporting, National Security and International Affairs Division



Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

To have forces that are highly trained and ready to fight in an environment of force downsizing and shrinking defense budgets is a formidable challenge. This challenge has raised concern about the potential for the U.S. military to be reduced to the "hollow forces" that prevailed during the 1970s. As you know, Representative Spence, the Ranking Minority Member of the House Committee on Armed Services, asked us to examine whether the current definition and indicators of readiness adequately reflect the many complex components that contribute to overall military readiness. Today, I plan to highlight some of our key observations from our work on this issue.

My comments are framed around four key points:

- DOD's system for measuring readiness provides valuable data, but it is not comprehensive and it cannot signal an impending change in readiness.
- The military commands are monitoring numerous additional indicators to supplement data currently reported, and we are examining these indicators to see whether there is a consensus on which indicators are most important and have predictive value.
- A future readiness system should factor in jointness, have predictive capability, facilitate trend analyses, and provide more objective and candid assessments.
- The military commands have expressed concern about the status of current and future readiness, but it is not feasible for us to give a bottom line given the absence of consensus on readiness indicators and how one should view them collectively.

LIMITATIONS IN DOD'S CURRENT
APPROACH TO MEASURING READINESS

The primary system DOD uses to measure readiness is the Status of Resources and Training System (SORTS). This system measures the extent to which units possess the required resources and are trained to undertake their wartime missions. These measurements, called C-ratings,¹ are probably the most often cited readiness indicator. Although SORTS data is essential for assessing unit readiness, it is not comprehensive and it cannot signal an impending change in readiness. Rather, SORTS primarily measures month-to-month readiness of the personnel, equipment, and training of operating forces. SORTS reports can identify shortfalls that

¹ Ratings range from C-1 (best) to C-5 (worst).

degrade units' readiness status, such as differences between required and on-hand personnel and equipment.

According to the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and service officials, SORTS is serving the purpose intended. The system has several limitations, however. The following observations are not intended as criticisms of SORTS but as examples of limitations that are inherent in the system.

- SORTS does not provide information on several factors that, according to JCS, are critical to a comprehensive readiness assessment--factors such as mobility, operating tempo, morale, and leadership. Appendix I depicts additional factors that should be considered, as contrasted with the factors that are measured by SORTS.
- C-ratings do not assess joint readiness, that is, the preparedness of unified commands and joint task forces to effectively integrate individual service combat and support units into a joint operating force.
- C-ratings represent a snapshot in time. They do not address long-term readiness or signal impending changes in the status of resources.
- Some elements of C-ratings are not objective. The C-rating for training is based on a commander's subjective assessment of how well the unit is trained based on personal observation and various internal and external evaluations. A commander may subjectively change a unit's overall C-rating to reflect a broader perspective of the unit's ability to perform its wartime mission.

GAO's Previous Experiences With SORTS Data

In the past, we have had access to SORTS data in various issues we were reviewing. In some instances the SORTS data did not appear to accurately reflect unit readiness. For example, in a report on Army training, issued in February 1991,² we noted that evaluations of units' proficiency were not always reliable. We found that training readiness assessments of active Army units may have been overstated. We reported that the information provided to higher commands and JCS was of limited value because the assessments (1) were based on training conducted primarily at home stations and (2) may not have adequately considered the effect on proficiency of the loss of key personnel. Likewise, in our reviews pertaining to the Persian Gulf War, we noted that readiness reports for support forces and National Guard combat forces were often inflated or

² Army Training: Evaluations of Units' Proficiency Are Not Always Reliable (GAO/NSIAD-91-72, Feb. 15, 1991).

unreliable.³ For example, in a September 1991 report, we noted that when three Army National Guard brigades were mobilized for Desert Shield, their commanders estimated that up to 40 days of post-mobilization training would be needed for the brigades to be fully combat ready. However, on the basis of their independent assessment of the brigades' proficiency, active Army officials responsible for the brigades' post-mobilization training developed training plans calling for over three times the number of days that the readiness reports stated were needed.

GAO'S EFFORTS TO IDENTIFY CRITICAL READINESS INDICATORS

Because of the limitations associated with DOD's traditional approach to measuring readiness we have begun a study, at Mr. Spence's request, to identify indicators that, together with SORTS information, could provide a more comprehensive readiness assessment. In addition, we plan to identify indicators that signal a change in future readiness.

To identify indicators that are being monitored in addition to SORTS, we visited over 40 active and reserve service commands, selected defense civilian agencies, the Joint Staff, and three unified commands. The commands are monitoring literally hundreds of indicators in addition to SORTS, but generally do not report them above the command level. To further refine these indicators, we have asked the commands to rate the indicators in three areas: (1) the importance of the indicator for assessing readiness, (2) the quality of information the indicator provides, and (3) the degree of value the indicator has as an early warning of a potential change in readiness. We are currently tabulating and analyzing the commands' responses. Once we have completed this task we plan to ask each of the services' operations offices and recognized defense experts outside of DOD to review the commands' ratings of the indicators to provide us with additional perspectives on their importance and predictive value.

Although I do not want to prejudge the outcome of our ongoing work, I can already see the potential for identifying indicators that have predictive value. For example, one of the commanders-in-chief (CINC) we visited identified three key indicators he believes provide early warning of imminent readiness degradation:

-- an increase in operating rates, for example an increase in flying hour requirements, to meet routine commitments;

³ National Guard: Peacetime Training Did Not Adequately Prepare Combat Brigades for Gulf War (GAO/NSIAD-91-263, Sept. 24, 1991). Operation Desert Storm: Army Had Difficulty Providing Adequate Active and Reserve Support Forces (GAO/NSIAD-92-67, Mar. 10, 1992).

- the transfer of funds among accounts to support increased operating rates; and
- the cancellation or deferment of planned training or logistics support activities.

We will systematically assess these types of indicators to see whether they might be used together with SORTS data to provide a more comprehensive readiness assessment.

FEATURES NEEDED IN A FUTURE READINESS MEASUREMENT SYSTEM

Now I would like to discuss the features I believe are important to include in a system for measuring readiness in the future. A system of the future should (1) factor in jointness, (2) have some predictive capability and facilitate trend analyses, and (3) provide more objective and candid assessments. I will touch on each of these features.

Assessing Joint Readiness

The Persian Gulf War heightened awareness of the importance of joint training and operations, and the services and JCS are increasing their attention to this area. One of the more significant actions taken concerning joint training was the October 1993 establishment of the U.S. Atlantic Command. This unified command is responsible for the joint training and "packaging" of most military forces stationed in the United States for overseas deployments to support the other warfighting CINCs. This is taking place at a time when U.S. military forces forward deployed are decreasing and are less permanently attached to and controlled by the theater CINCs. All of these factors heighten the importance of joint readiness. However, according to several military leaders, not enough systems are in place today to give the CINCs meaningful assessments of joint readiness.

Part of the solution to measuring joint readiness may be to roll up some existing indicators of the units that would participate in a joint action--indicators such as personnel, equipment, and lift capabilities. An additional significant factor is the extent of joint training those units' battle staffs have received. More precise measures of joint readiness depend on the availability of joint doctrine and training standards. However, there is a void in these two areas today. While the JCS has undertaken a significant effort in joint training, much remains to be done to develop (1) a complete catalogue of all tasks that joint forces can be expected to perform and (2) the training conditions and standards for conducting joint exercises and properly evaluating them. It may be several years before JCS completes these efforts.

Facilitating Projections and Trend Analyses

Developing a measurement system that can project changes in readiness has received heightened attention. In addition to our ongoing work that I just described, both the Air Force and the Army are trying to supplement SORTS data by developing a capability to forecast a unit's readiness. The Air Force now requires commanders to forecast units' status at 3-, 6-, and 12-month intervals. Also, the Air Force is designing a system, called ULTRA, that uses SORTS data, some additional indicators, and computer modeling to forecast readiness that can be achieved at various funding levels. Likewise, the Army has implemented the Status Projection System, which augments SORTS data with future resource acquisition and distribution information.

Related to the feature of predictive capability is the ability to conduct trend analyses based on the most important indicators. During our visits to various military commands we noted an unevenness in the availability of historical data depending on the indicator being monitored. Therefore, to facilitate trend analyses, units and commands will have to retain comparable data over time for the most important indicators. We also noted an unevenness in the quality of the data available for measurement. While some indicators were rated high in importance, they were rated low in quality. So it may be that the accuracy and timeliness of data in key areas need to be improved.

Providing More Objective and Candid Assessments

Our past reports and ongoing work indicate that some formal readiness reports dealing with training appeared to be overstated and did not adequately reflect the impact of concerns voiced separately by military officials about significant problems. A variety of factors may contribute to this situation and suggest the need for more objective and candid formal assessments in the future.

I have already alluded to our Gulf War-related work, where we found that readiness reports had given inflated indications of the readiness of support forces and National Guard combat forces. Today, as we talk with military leaders in headquarters and field units, we often hear concerns about the degradation in readiness, as well as even greater concerns for the future should current trends continue. Yet in some instances we are told that despite perceived declines in current readiness, the formal readiness reports do not reflect this decline. Why do such discrepancies exist?

To be sure, readiness assessments contain both objective and subjective elements. Gunnery scores, for example, can be more objectively measured than can the broad impact of turbulence and personnel shortfalls. And it might be that commanders' concerns

about readiness are a signal of an impending change that may eventually show up in formal reports. However, while these situations can account for part of the problem, I believe that another and more fundamental problem exists.

A variety of military leaders have told us that some commanders may view the readiness reports they prepare as scorecards on their capabilities and performance. Thus, they are reluctant to report degraded readiness. We have also been told that the reluctance to cite degraded readiness is indicative of a "can do" spirit of optimism. Whatever the cause, the fact is that significant differences can and do exist between official readiness reports, independent data, and informally expressed professional military judgments. Formal assessments have not always been reliable.

If real progress is going to be made in projecting long-term readiness, the services need systems that provide more objective and more candid assessments.

OTHER DATA'S PICTURE OF READINESS TODAY

Finally, I would like to provide a few observations on the key issues affecting the current state of readiness gleaned from some of our completed and ongoing work. I will focus on two important elements--personnel and training.

Personnel Issues

Concerning personnel, I want to talk about the level of current military operations, turbulence, and personnel fill rates.

Today, as downsizing continues, U.S. military forces are being called upon for operational contingencies--delivering humanitarian aid in Iraq, Bosnia, and Somalia and enforcing "no-fly" zones in Bosnia and Iraq, to name just a few. The Army Chief of Staff recently testified before the House Armed Services Committee that on an average day in 1993 the Army had over 20,000 soldiers deployed on operational missions in over 60 countries. So the turbulence that is inherent in a major downsizing of U.S. forces has been exacerbated by unusually high operating tempos. With greater numbers of missions and fewer personnel, the frequency and length of deployments away from home have increased for each service and can be expected to continue to increase. As a result, several senior leaders from the services have raised concerns about the impact of this situation on long-term morale, retention, and the ability to maintain readiness for traditional warfighting missions.

In our ongoing examination of active duty personnel levels, we have identified varying degrees of personnel imbalances within the Army that have affected the readiness of combat and support organizations. We have encountered situations where Army combat

units reported having enough people, but not with the right skills or experience. For example, the commander of one large Army combat organization recently expressed concern that the Army's allocation of officer personnel had "crippled" the readiness of his units.

Various Army officials have told us that imbalances are exacerbated and in some instances understated due to

- transfers of personnel from units not deploying to units deploying to support contingency operations,
- unit reductions or relocations and delays in making change of station moves,
- changes in authorized peacetime personnel levels,
- military personnel being borrowed for other uses, and
- requirements to assign personnel to the Army's Reserve and National Guard under the initiative to enhance reserve component training and readiness.

We know from our past reviews that personnel shortfalls are not just a recent occurrence; we have seen indications of such problems in varying degrees in years past. During the Persian Gulf War, for example, the Army reportedly transferred over 50,000 personnel from units that did not deploy to other units to meet deployment requirements.⁴ With a much smaller Army force and fewer units to draw from, such transfers will be more difficult in the future. In our work on personnel levels, we are trying to establish the magnitude of problems today compared with years past.

Training Issues

Now I would like to discuss the impact of contingency operations on training for combat missions, the shifting of funds to support these operations, and an example of how gunnery scores have increased despite resource constraints.

Although some training benefits are derived from deployments for contingency operations such as peacekeeping and peace enforcement, various military officials have reported that such deployments often curtail training and affect training proficiency in warfighting skills. For example, Central Command officials report having canceled 12 training exercises since fiscal year 1993 due to deployment of personnel to Somalia and expressed concern about the impact of such cancellations on warfighting capabilities.

⁴ Operation Desert Storm: War Highlights Need to Address Problem of Nondeployable Personnel (GAO/NSIAD-92-208, Aug. 31, 1992).

The services have had to shift funds from other programs to support contingency operations. Most of the funding support for operations in Somalia was drawn from the services' operations and maintenance appropriations.⁵ To cover the costs of the operation, the services were initially able to reallocate funds from programs with less immediate funding needs and borrow against future quarterly budget allocations. However, according to officials of each of the services, some scheduled training exercises were canceled, and others were postponed. While there are normally peaks and valleys in training, valleys can stretch out when training opportunities are lost. Given that military training is cyclical and is affected by personnel turnover and other support missions, making up for lost opportunities becomes very difficult, even if the Congress later provides supplemental funding.

According to DOD and service officials, participation in peacekeeping activities has had both positive and negative effects on readiness. On the positive side, personnel have received real world training in areas such as deployment, small unit tactics, command and control, and some combat situations. At the same time, however, officials are concerned that combat units deployed too long in these activities may miss opportunities to practice some individual and collective warfighting skills. At the request of the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, we are currently reviewing the impact of operations such as peacekeeping on units' readiness to conduct traditional combat missions.

On a more positive note, Army officials have recently noted significant improvements in tank gunnery scores of soldiers, even though training standards have become more stringent and the amount of training ammunition being fired has been significantly reduced. One reason cited for these improvements is the increased use of simulators to facilitate training. The scores suggest that simulation technology could help maintain and enhance warfighting capabilities in a resource constrained environment. Our own reviews have identified important benefits to training through the use of advanced simulation technology.⁶ But simulations cannot be relied on exclusively--a balanced mix of simulation and traditional training is necessary. It will be up to DOD to rigorously examine the cost/benefit of various training options as a baseline for identifying and defending its training requirements and maintaining a ready force.

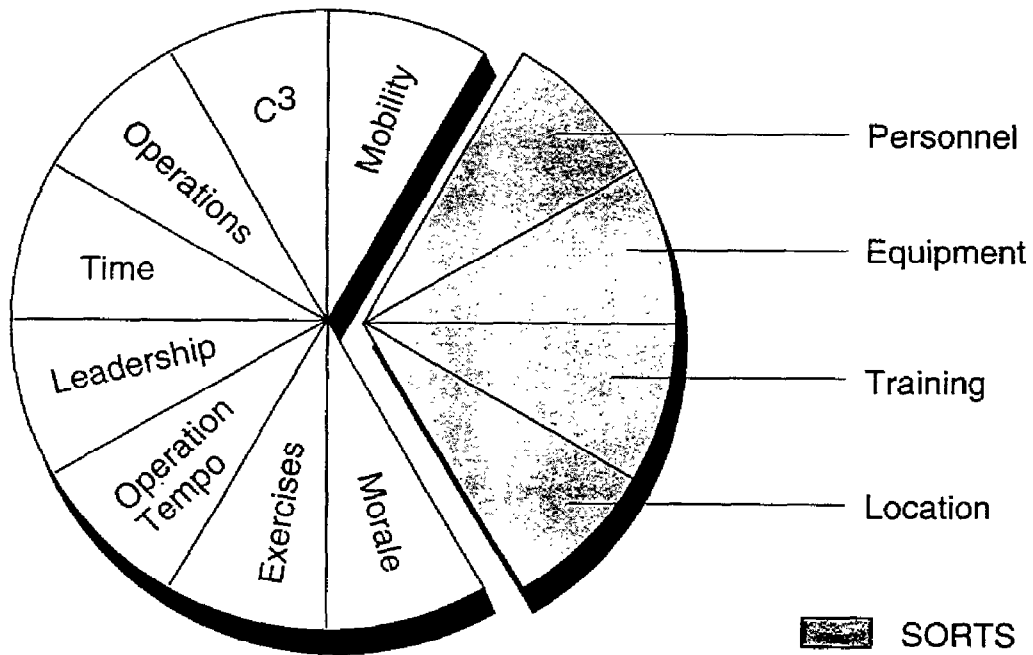
⁵ Peace Operations: Cost of DOD Operations in Somalia (GAO/NSIAD-94-88, Mar. 4, 1994).

⁶ For example, see Operation Desert Storm: War Offers Important Insights Into Army and Marine Corps Training Needs (GAO/NSIAD-92-240, Aug. 25, 1992).

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Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be happy to respond to any questions that you or Members of the Subcommittee may have.

GAO Factors Important to a Comprehensive Readiness Assessment



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