



LIFE AS A

Private

*A Study of the Motivations and Experiences
of Junior Enlisted Personnel in the U.S. Army*

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For more information on this publication, visit www.rand.org/t/RR2252

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available for this publication.

ISBN: 978-0-8330-9969-3

Published by the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif.

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Preface

The Army and other services face challenges in recruiting and retaining high-quality individuals. This report documents research and analysis conducted on a project entitled *Life as a Private: The Army Value Proposition*, sponsored by the United States Army Recruiting Command and conducted within the RAND Arroyo Center's Personnel, Training, and Health Program. Its purpose is to characterize the attitudes, experiences, and motivators of soldiers assigned to their first operational unit in the Army and to use these findings to inform Army leadership on how to attract and retain the best talent.

This report presents the results of in-depth interviews with 81 first-term soldiers. These soldiers, most commonly ranked Private First Class, participated in interviews that asked about the experience of joining the Army; their perceptions of their work and unit lives; their social, physical, and financial health; and their overall satisfaction with Army life. RAND operates under a "Federal-Wide Assurance" (FWA00003425) and complies with the Code of Federal Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects Under United States Law (45 CFR 46), also known as "the Common Rule," as well as with the implementation guidance set forth in DoD Instruction 3216.02. As applicable, this compliance includes reviews and approvals by RAND's Institutional Review Board (the Human Subjects Protection Committee) and by the U.S. Army. The views of sources utilized in this study are solely their own and do not represent the official policy or position of DoD or the U.S. Government.

RAND Arroyo Center, part of the RAND Corporation, is a federally funded research and development center (FFRDC) sponsored by the United States Army. This publication was privately produced and is not the product of an official of the United States Army acting in an official capacity. The contents of this publication, including words and opinions, are unofficial and not to be considered as the official views of the United States Army or Department of Defense.

The study's findings should be of interest to those designing recruiting and retention programs for the Army, as well as commissioned and noncommissioned officers charged with leading U.S. Army privates in peace and war and senior leaders who develop policies that influence soldier welfare and recruitment and retention. This report will also be of interest to aspiring young Army recruits and their families who wish to better understand what life would be like as a young soldier in the United States Army.

The Project Unique Identification Code (PUIC) for the project that produced this document is ASA167159.

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Summary

Introduction

The Army and other services have faced challenges in recruiting and retaining high-quality individuals. After a spike between 2001 and 2004, recruit quality again fell: Those who held a score of 50 or above on the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) dropped from 72 percent to 60 percent of accessions, and the percentage of accessions who were high school graduates fell from 89 percent to 75 percent. Against this backdrop, the U.S. Army Recruiting Command (USAREC) asked RAND Arroyo Center to undertake research to improve its understanding of soldiers' motivations to join the Army, and how the reality of Army life matches up with expectations. Who joins, why, and how satisfied are they with their decisions? The purpose of this research is twofold. First, the Army continues to seek improvements in its recruiting process to avoid what have been periodic reductions in recruit quality and number. Second, it is hoped that this study's portrayal of the U.S. Army private will serve as an educational tool for a variety of important audiences, such as Army senior leadership, junior officers, and prospective new recruits.

To conduct this study, RAND Arroyo interviewed 81 soldiers, ranked E-1 to E-4, generally assigned to their first Modified Table of Organization and Equipment (MTOE) unit. We conducted interviews with soldiers in six Career Management Fields (CMFs)—Infantry (CMF 11), Artillery (CMF 13), Armor (CMF 19), Medical (CMF

68), Maintenance and Munitions (CMF 91), and Supply (CMF 92)—at four installations: Fort Bragg, North Carolina; Fort Drum, New York; Fort Riley, Kansas; and Fort Hood, Texas. The topics covered during the interview included (1) personal and military background; (2) civilian background; (3) enlistment decision; (4) expectations and experiences of military occupational specialty (MOS) and Army life; (5) experience in the unit; (6) satisfaction with Army life; (7) social life, and health and fitness; and (8) retention and post-Army plans. We coded and analyzed the data using the qualitative data coding program Dedoose.

Participants included more armor, medic, and infantry CMFs compared with artillery, maintenance, and supply. In our sample, E-3 is the most represented pay category; 13.6 percent of the participants were female; the vast majority of participants were single and without children; most participants were ages 19 to 21; and just over 60 percent had either a general equivalency diploma (GED) or a high-school diploma. Over a third of participants report having at least some college education.

The findings from this study offer a rich description of experiences by a select few junior enlisted Army personnel; however, due to sample size limitations, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to the U.S. Army as a whole or to any rank or CMF category.

Key Findings

The interviews create a portrait of the soldiers in our sample as they join the Army and as they serve in their garrisons.

Joining the Army

The importance of family is a recurring feature in the narratives of soldiers. Families played a critical role in prompting or helping soldiers to enlist in the Army. One-half of our sample rated family members as influential in their decision to join. Participants routinely identified relatives who had served in the Army, and many suggested that family history critically impacted their decision to join. Most families

supported enlistment, although not always without reservations. This primacy of family may offer opportunities for the Army to enhance recruitment and retention of its soldiers.

We found that soldiers join for a variety of different reasons, with institutional and occupational values prominently featured as key motivations for joining the Army. A call to serve and perceptions of honor were intermixed with desire for new adventures and considered calculations of benefits and steady paychecks.

Working in the Army

Many soldiers in our sample recognized that the Army gave them an opportunity to become a military professional. For example, soldiers told interviewers that they chose combat occupations (e.g., infantry) because such occupations exposed them to excitement and adventure unique to the Army. Some number of soldiers in noncombat occupations (e.g., mechanics) said that the Army exposed them to unique work experience that could help their employment prospects should they ever decide to separate. Put simply, most soldiers in our sample acknowledged the unique benefits they hoped to get from their Army service.

However, many of these same soldiers expressed frustration with the bureaucratic characteristics of work in the Army. For example, some soldiers complained about not being able to perform the jobs they trained for during Basic Combat Training (BCT) and Advanced Individual Training (AIT). Others expressed frustration with boredom, the lack of time spent training in the field, and performing tasks that did not relate to their occupations; a few soldiers wanted more deployment opportunities. But when asked about broader life in the Army, most soldier experiences were better than they expected.

The information soldiers consume prior to joining their first unit may influence soldier expectations about Army service. Many recruiters perform admirably, but others may paint an unrealistic picture of day-to-day soldier life, thereby creating unusually high expectations. A steady diet of World War II action movies may likewise leave a prospective soldier uninformed about modern life in the Army. Efforts that

instill more accurate portraits of soldier work and life may improve satisfaction with the Army experience.

The results suggest differences in expectations for what it means to be an Army professional versus the reality of working as a soldier each day. For many in our sample, the idea of being a professional soldier helped motivate soldiers to enlist in the Army. However, soldiers expressed frustration with the realities of working within the large Army bureaucracy. Soldiers reported interest in changing their military occupations sometime in the future. Thus, these soldiers recognized that there were career opportunities for them within the large Army bureaucracy.

Life Inside the Unit

We found that, in general, soldiers in our sample said that their relationships with other soldiers proved a critical feature of Army life. These relationships typically began to form once soldiers entered their first duty stations. However, before arriving, most soldiers knew very little about their new duty stations or about the units where they would forge these important relationships. Upon arrival, many soldiers began to forge strong relationships with other service members.

Most soldiers identified their “unit” at the squad, platoon, or company level. When asked about the best characteristics of their life in these units, most described the camaraderie with other soldiers or their unit leadership. Several soldiers expressed frustration with the bureaucratic characteristics of Army life. Much as we found earlier, soldiers frequently complained about not doing their jobs and personnel issues. In some cases, these bureaucratic problems seemed to impinge on soldier opinions about their peers and leadership in units. Nonetheless, the overwhelming majority of soldiers in our sample were positive when asked about how well their units work together. Despite the bureaucratic problems, most soldiers claimed to be doing well and reported strong relationships with fellow service members.

The critical importance of camaraderie and good small-unit leadership suggests avenues to enhance soldier recruitment and retention and that it may be wise for the Army to increasingly leverage small-unit leaders and peers to help motivate soldiers to reenlist. Because social

bonds between soldiers and bonds formed through shared work experiences both appear to be important to soldier satisfaction, peer relationships may be used to motivate reenlistment as well. The Army could also emphasize peer bonds as part of its value proposition. This would not only help the Army remind enlisted personnel of this key service benefit, but the value of peer bonds may prove a critical enticement to soldier recruitment.

Financial, Health, and Social Well-Being of Soldiers

In general, most soldiers gave positive self-evaluations of their well-being. Further, the majority of soldiers were relatively vigilant about managing their salaries and personal debt. Most said they were in good health, with some describing physical problems because of the demands of their work. Finally, most soldiers in the sample told our interviewers that social life was an important dimension of their military service.

Most soldiers said that their leadership and peers were an important source of support. They also valued other sources of support. Put another way, soldiers have multiple sources of support available to them during their first terms as a soldier. In comparison with soldiers in the past, today's soldiers have access to information technology that gives them opportunities to keep in touch with family and friends back home. Many soldiers seemed to view their family and friends as a distinct and separate source of support from their fellow soldiers and the leadership. However, fellow soldiers and leadership were by far the most important source of motivation, camaraderie, and overall social support for personnel in our sample.

Satisfaction with the Army Experience

In general, junior enlisted personnel in our sample were satisfied with life in the Army. Many of these soldiers said that although military service places demands on their lives, those demands carry responsibilities that could bring opportunities for them in the future. Some were focused on the opportunities that exist in civilian society, namely full-time employment or postsecondary education, while others were focused on career opportunities in the Army. As a result, most soldiers

were planning to stay in the Army for either just a single term or an entire career, rather than for multiple contracts.

These intentions are likely to vary over time. We found that a number of soldiers said their career intentions had changed since they first enlisted. This is not too surprising, given that the Army is selective in who may join, provides extensive training, and offers unique opportunities to soldiers that may not exist in the civilian labor market. Soldiers said they were aware of these advantages, and some were considering how this could help them transition to civilian society should they decide to separate from the Army in the future.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study offers unique insight into the lives of enlisted soldiers as they begin their lives in the U.S. Army. It provides a rich portrait of their experiences as they enter the Army and as they go through their lives in garrisons. This study also has implications for the Army Value Proposition (AVP). The AVP serves as a defining statement characterizing features of Army life that will prove attractive to potential recruits. This statement then helps drive all formal advertising and marketing efforts by the Army. The AVP reads as follows:

The U.S. Active Army is for those who want more than a job; they want to make a difference, every day, for themselves, their families, and the Nation. Through shared values and training that develops their potential, these men and women take pride in their ability to adapt, respond and prevail in complex environments at home and abroad.¹

In general, we found that the AVP aligns with the experiences of soldiers in our sample; however, we did identify several opportunities for improvement. First, we recommend that the Army better emphasize occupational values (travel and adventure as well as job stability,

¹ Army Marketing and Research Group, email discussion with one of the authors about consumer market research, August 11, 2016.

pay, benefits, and MOS guarantees) in the AVP. Second, the Army should consider adding social bonds and camaraderie to the AVP.

Table S.1 captures four key conclusions drawn from the findings of the study and highlights associated recommendations for the Army.

We discuss these conclusions and recommendations in more detail in Chapter Seven.

Table S.1
Conclusions and Associated Recommendations

Conclusions	Associated Recommendations
Soldiers report that peer bonds play an important and positive role in their Army experience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider emphasizing occupational benefits and adding social bonds to current AVP • Highlight social bonds as part of reenlistment campaigns • Consider incentivizing first-term soldiers who successfully recruit from their friends and peer networks
Soldiers often had unrealistic expectations of their MOS and Army life.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure recruiters provide accurate information about MOS • Improve the accuracy of information about Army life that new recruits receive • Following BCT/AIT and one-station unit training, provide accurate information about installations and unit assignments
Families have a critical role in the recruitment and retention of soldiers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain or expand recruitment programs that build parental support
Soldiers complain of boredom and taskings unrelated to MOS.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help leaders engage soldiers in relevant and educational tasks and otherwise use soldiers' time more effectively

Acknowledgments

Many individuals contributed to the completion of this report. We must first express our gratitude to the 81 soldiers who participated in this study. Their experiences make up the full substance of this report, and we are indebted to them for their time and their candid conversations and insights. We are also grateful to the officers and noncommissioned officers of these soldiers who hosted teams of RAND analysts and otherwise made these interviews possible. Joseph A. Baird and Wendy Martin served as the study's project monitors, and their direction and insight helped shape the focus of this study. Finally, we are grateful to Mady W. Segal of University of Maryland and Sean Robson of the RAND Corporation for their careful and considered critique of this report. Any errors are the sole responsibility of the study authors.

Abbreviations

AFQT	Armed Forces Qualification Test
AIT	Advanced Individual Training
APFT	Army Physical Fitness Test
ASVAB	Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery
AVP	Army Value Proposition
BCT	Basic Combat Training
CMF	Career Management Field
CONEX	container express
GED	General Educational Development
HRAP	Hometown Recruiter Assistance Program
JROTC	Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps
MEPS	Military Entrance Processing Station
MOS	military occupational specialty
MTOE	Modified Table of Organization and Equipment
NCO	noncommissioned officer
OSUT	one-station unit training

PT	physical training
RJP	realistic job preview
ROTC	Reserve Officers' Training Corps
TAPDB	Total Army Personnel Database
USAREC	U.S. Army Recruiting Command

Introduction

Background

In 2016, the U.S. Army recruited 62,000 soldiers. These enlistees come from all walks of life, but what do we know about these enlistees and their motives to join the Army? The American soldier is certainly not an understudied subject. Based on past research, we know a great deal about soldiers and soldiering. For example, there are landmark studies, such as Morris Janowitz's *The Professional Soldier* (1964), which, drawing on intensive personal interviews with mid- to senior grade officers, discovered that many such officers come from relatively humble origins of small towns and local farms. The implication is that such officers were "made, not born."¹ And there are portraits—such as the collected works of Ernie Pyle, Samuel Stouffer's *The American Soldier*, or, more recently, David Finkel's *The Good Soldiers*—that sought to show the reality of soldiering in war.²

There are also portraits of garrison life or life on permanent military posts. Some of these studies date to the beginning of the all-

¹ Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait*, London: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1964. Another work in this mold is Lloyd J. Matthews, *The Future of the Army Profession*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002.

² See, for example, Ernie Pyle, *Here Is Your War: Story of G.I. Joe*, New York: Henry Holt, 1943; Samuel A. Stouffer and Arthur A. Lumsdaine, *The American Soldier: Combat and Its Aftermath*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1949; David Finkel, *The Good Soldiers*, London: Atlantic Books, 2010.

volunteer Army in the 1970s and 1980s.³ George Wilson, for example, visited a company of 200 men both in basic training and after the men completed advanced infantry training and arrived at their operational unit. The book critiqued the Army for, among other things, improper oversight during training. And when researchers have examined contemporary soldiers, studies tend to research specific aspects of the Army experience, such as military divorces or posttraumatic stress.⁴ Scholars have noted differences in the characteristics of enlisted personnel and their officers, with some proposing the former are changing in divergent ways from civilian society.⁵ While most of these early studies focused on men, there has been a growing line of research on women in militaries of the United States and its allies.⁶

This is appropriate, given that the Army has been engaged in a period of tremendous warfighting strain and social change.⁷ Gaining a detailed understanding of the specific challenges associated with contemporary Army service has been essential to weathering these trials. But as the Army begins a return to a largely garrison-based life and the

³ George C. Wilson, *Mud Soldiers: Life Inside the New American Army*, New York: Collier Books, 1991; David R. Segal and H. Wallace Sinaiko, *Life in the Rank and File: Enlisted Men and Women in the Armed Forces of the United States, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom*, Washington, D.C.: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1986; and Charles Moskos and Frank Wood, eds., *The Military: More Than Just a Job?* Washington, D.C.: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1988.

⁴ Sebastian Negrusa, Brighita Negrusa, and James Hosek, "Gone to War: Have Deployments Increased Divorces?" *Journal of Population Economics*, Vol. 27, No. 2, April 2014, pp. 473–496; Rajeev Ramchand, Rena Rudavsky, Sean Grant, Terri Tanielian, and Lisa Jaycox, "Prevalence of, Risk Factors for, and Consequences of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Other Mental Health Problems in Military Populations Deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan," *Current Psychiatry Reports*, Vol. 17, No. 5, May 2015, pp. 1–11.

⁵ Charles C. Moskos, *The American Enlisted Man*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1970.

⁶ Mady Wechsler Segal, "Women's Military Roles Cross-Nationally: Past, Present, and Future," *Gender & Society*, Vol. 9, No. 6, 1995, pp. 757–775; David R. Segal and Mady Wechsler Segal, "Change in Military Organization," *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 9, 1983, pp. 151–170; Segal and Sinaiko, 1986.

⁷ Social changes inside the military include, most notably, the end of the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy; gender integration of combat positions; changes of policy toward transgender service members; reduced taboos concerning mental health treatment; and reduced tolerance of military sexual assault.

social upheaval of the past decade is beginning to subside, now is an appropriate time to take a holistic approach to understanding soldiers' experiences in the Army.

Beyond the need to understand soldiers' experiences with garrison-based life in the Army in and of itself, such an understanding can also contribute to improving the process of recruiting junior enlisted soldiers. Such improvements are important, given that the Army has historically experienced challenges in meeting recruitment goals and suffered reductions in recruit quality.⁸ Such challenges may return, as research on millennials' attitudes toward the military and military service suggests that although they respect the military and veterans, they do not themselves want to serve.⁹ A recent survey of 18-to-29-year-olds found that while 60 percent supported using ground troops in the fight against the Islamic State, only 16 percent were themselves willing to serve.¹⁰

Objectives

Against this backdrop, the U.S. Army Recruiting Command (USAREC) asked the RAND Arroyo Center to conduct a study to gain a broad understanding of soldiers' motivations to join the Army and of how the reality of Army life matches up with expectations. Who joins, why, and how satisfied are they with their decisions? The goal

⁸ National Research Council, *Attitudes, Aptitudes, and Aspirations of American Youth: Implications for Military Recruitment*, Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2003. After a spike between 2001 and 2004, recruit quality fell, with those who held a score of 50 or above on the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) dropping from 72 percent to 60 percent of accessions, and the percentage of accessions who were high school graduates falling from 89 percent to 75 percent (Beth J. Asch, Paul Heaton, and Bogdan Savych, *Recruiting Minorities: What Explains Recent Trends in the Army and Navy?* Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-861-OSD, 2009).

⁹ Morten G. Ender, David E. Rohall, and Michael D. Matthews, *The Millennial Generation and National Defense: Attitudes of Future Military and Civilian Leaders*, New York: Springer, 2013.

¹⁰ Harvard Institute of Politics, "Fall 2015 Poll," webpage, Kennedy School, December 2015.

was to provide USAREC with feedback on the lives of Army privates to inform future recruitment efforts. When it comes to recruiting, the Army relies on the Army Value Proposition (AVP) to make its case for Army service. A value proposition is defined as a “positioning statement that explains what benefit you provide for who and how you do it uniquely well.”¹¹ This statement helps drive all formal advertising and marketing efforts by the Army.

The U.S. Active Army is for those who want more than a job; they want to make a difference, every day, for themselves, their families, and the Nation. Through shared values and training that develops their potential, these men and women take pride in their ability to adapt, respond and prevail in complex environments at home and abroad.¹²

We sought, in part, to determine whether the AVP should be kept as is or whether there are additions or changes that could be made to it, based on what we learn about soldiers’ motivations to join the Army and their experiences from recruitment to serving at a garrison.

To develop this portrait of Army life, we relied on interviews. Specifically, we interviewed soldiers who had completed Basic Combat Training (BCT) and Advanced Individual Training (AIT) and who were now generally assigned to their first operational unit. We wanted to tell these soldiers’ stories, to include the value they placed on Army service, their frustrations, and their hopes. Thus, in addition to evaluating these results against the existing AVP, we present a broad portrayal of life in the junior ranks of the Army.

We hope that this portrayal will resonate far beyond Army recruiters and help educate a variety of important audiences. For example, we hope that senior noncommissioned officers, U.S. Military Academy and Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) cadets, and officers

¹¹ Definitions from Google.com (“Value Proposition,” Google Dictionary definition, undated); Michael Skok, “Four Steps to Building a Compelling Value Proposition,” *Forbes Magazine*, June 14, 2013.

¹² Army Marketing and Research Group, email discussion with one of the authors about consumer market research, August 11, 2016.

from junior to senior grade can use this report to better understand the background, aspirations, and the joys and frustrations of those who are led. We also hope that this report becomes a resource to prospective new recruits and their families so that they can gain an understanding of Army life that is more nuanced than that portrayed in the media or recruitment brochures.

The period of early Army service is of particular interest because it marks a key transition for the soldier. In his landmark 1961 work, Erving Goffman described the military as a “total institution,” an organization that separates the individual from larger society, enforces social norms, and regulates nearly every aspect of his or her life.¹³ Certainly, the military begins as a total institution in basic training, where soldiers have few individual freedoms. But as soldiers move from the initial training phases into garrison life, the Army becomes something different—something in between the total institution and an ordinary workaday job.¹⁴ The soldier must now learn to integrate the Army and personal life. For many young soldiers, arriving at their first duty station is also the first time they have lived and worked outside their parents’ household, with all the personal responsibility that entails. The Army in garrison is very different from the all-encompassing Army as portrayed in books and movies, which tend to focus on the experiences of basic training and combat. It is against this backdrop that we asked junior enlisted soldiers to describe their expectations, their lives, and their current satisfaction with Army life.

¹³ Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*, London: Aldine Transaction, 2007.

¹⁴ Lewis A. Coser, *Greedy Institutions; Patterns of Undivided Commitment*, New York: Free Press, 1974; Mady Wechsler Segal, “The Military and the Family as Greedy Institutions,” *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 1986, pp. 9–38.

Approach

As noted previously, we relied on an interview approach to enable us to get a portrait of enlistees' recruitment motivations and experiences and their experience while in their garrisons.

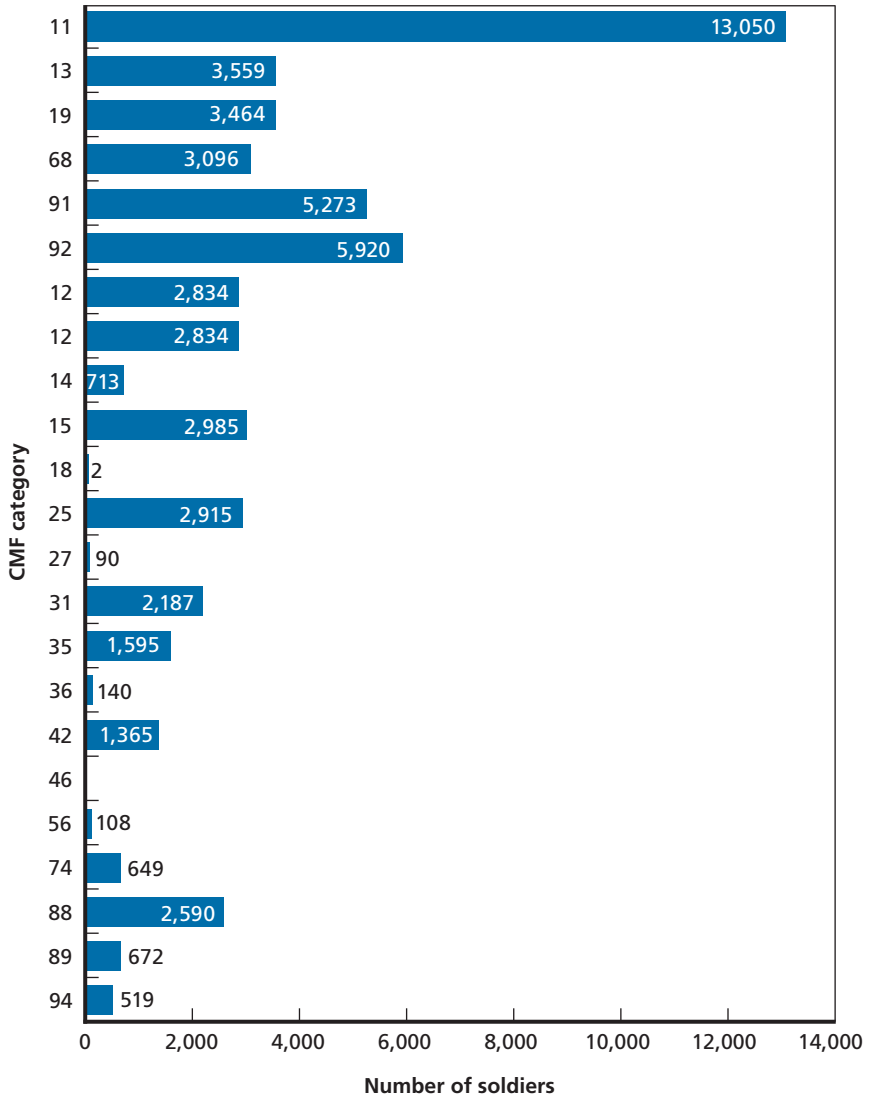
Participants

We interviewed 81 soldiers from six different high-density Career Management Field (CMF) categories at four different installations. The interviewed CMF categories were Infantry (CMF11), Field Artillery (CMF13), Armor (CMF19), Medical Specialist (CMF68), Maintenance and Munitions (CMF91), and Supply (CMF92). In consultation with the study sponsor, we selected these CMF categories for two reasons. First, we wanted to ensure that our study included a mix of combat (CMFs 11, 13, and 19) and combat support and combat service support (CMFs 68, 91, and 92) CMFs. For ease of use, we will, from here on, use "noncombat" to describe combat support and combat service support, though we will recognize that such positions are exposed to combat. Second, to capture the typical Army experience, we wanted to select the most populous CMF categories in the Army. To make this second determination, we reviewed the data presented in Figure 1.1, which lists the number of soldiers per CMF category for the U.S. Army. Based on these data, we selected the combat and noncombat CMFs that represent the most populated categories in the Army (see Figure 1.1).

We conducted interviews at four U.S. Army installations: Fort Bragg, Fort Drum, Fort Riley, and Fort Hood. We chose these installations because of the relatively large population of first-term soldiers (the bases rank first, third, sixth and eighth in terms of population size; see Figure 1.2) and the wide geographic representation. Fort Drum is located in the Northeast; Fort Riley in the Midwest; Fort Hood in the South; and Fort Bragg in the Southeast.

At each installation, we requested to interview 21 participants in three separate CMF categories (seven soldiers per CMF). We requested to speak with males and females within each CMF based on the per-

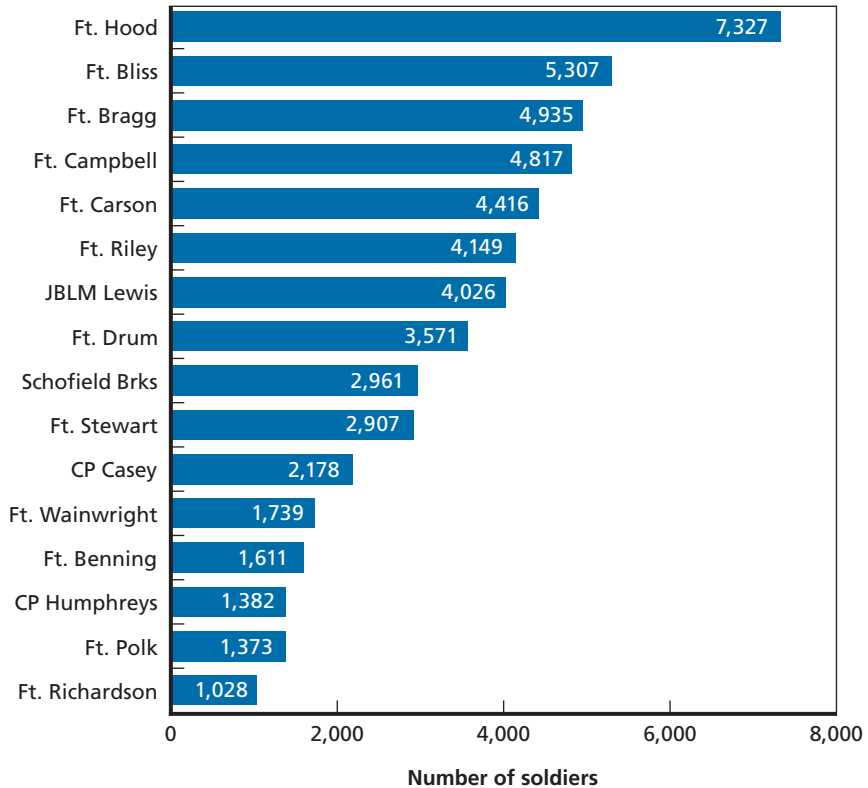
Figure 1.1
Number of Soldiers Ranked Private First Class and Below, by CMF Category



NOTE: Data provided by U.S. Army Recruiting Command, January 2016.

RAND RR2252-1.1

Figure 1.2
Number of Soldiers Ranked Private First Class and Below, by Installation



NOTES: Data provided by U.S. Army Recruiting Command, January 2016. Only installations that serve as unit home stations were included in this figure. JBLM = Joint Base Lewis-McChord; CP = Camp.

RAND RR2252-1.2

centage of females in that CMF.¹⁵ Because Total Army Personnel Data Base (TAPDB) data show variation in attrition based on education

¹⁵ Percentages of female enlisted per career field found in Laura Miller, Jennifer Kavanagh, Maria C. Lytell, Keith Jennings, and Craig Martin, *The Extent of Restrictions on the Service of Active-Component Military Women*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-1175-OSD, 2012. We recognize that these percentages may be out of date, as combat military occupational specialties have now been opened to women. The percentages of females in combat CMFs are still low but will likely grow slowly over time.

level, we also requested to speak with one individual with some college experience in each CMF/installation grouping.¹⁶ To mitigate the risk that commanders might inadvertently introduce bias into the selection of participants for interviews, we requested that leadership use a randomization procedure in selections. We specifically asked commanders to select soldiers according to the last digit in their Social Security numbers. (We are withholding the specific number that we used.) Ultimately, however, the degree to which units used this process in selecting soldiers remains unclear.

Demographics and other information on our participant sample are provided in Table 1.1. As can be seen, the sample leans slightly more toward armor, medic, and infantry CMFs relative to artillery, maintenance, and supply ones. E-3 is the most represented pay category. Though the inclusion requirement was for soldiers E-1 to E-3, we did interview ten E-4s. In virtually all these cases, the soldier had been promoted to E-4 within the previous six months. In our sample, 13.5 percent were female, which closely tracks with the TAPDB percentage of women in their first Modified Table of Organization and Equipment (MTOE) unit.¹⁷ The vast majority of participants were single and without children; however, 14 participants reported having children, and 12 participants were currently married. Most participants were 19 to 21 years of age. Over 60 percent of the participants had a General Educational Development (GED) or a high-school diploma, with over one-third having some college education. While this research did track the gender of the interview respondent, we did not ask about race. However, some soldiers did raise issues of race independently.

¹⁶ Soldier-level data on soldiers in their first MTOE unit from are from the TAPDB for soldiers enlisted fiscal years 2002–2012. The TAPDB includes a wide variety of information on enlisted personnel throughout their careers; pertinent examples include basic demographic information (gender, race, age at enlistment), highest degree attained at enlistment, and AFQT score. Also captured in the TAPDB is information on the fiscal year of enlistment, promotion dates, demotion dates (if any), and reason for separation for those who leave the Army. Finally, the TAPDB includes a unit identification code that indicates unit assignment on a monthly basis. The TAPDB is administered by the U.S. Army Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel/Human Resources Command (HRC).

¹⁷ TAPDB data showed 14.42 percent of soldiers in their first MTOE unit as female.

Table 1.1
Characteristics of Participant Sample

CMF	
Infantry (CMF 11)	17.3% (n=14)
Artillery (CMF 13)	13.6 (11)
Armor (CMF 19)	19.8 (16)
Medic (CMF 68)	19.8 (16)
Maintenance (CMF 91)	16.0 (13)
Supply (CMF 92)	13.6 (11)
Paygrade	
E-1	12.3% (n=10)
E-2	19.8 (16)
E-3	55.6 (45)
E-4	12.3 (10)
Gender	
Male	86.5% (n=70)
Female	13.5 (11)
Children	
Yes	17.3% (n=14)
No	82.7 (67)
Marital Status	
Divorced	3.7% (n=3)
Engaged	2.5 (2)
Married	14.8 (12)
Single	79.0 (64)

Table 1.1—Continued

Age	
25 years old +	7.4% (n=6)
24	4.9 (4)
23	6.2 (5)
22	8.6 (7)
21	19.8 (16)
20	25.9 (21)
19	22.2 (18)
18	4.9 (4)
Education Level	
College	3.7% (3)
Some college	35.8 (29)
High school	46.9 (38)
GED	13.6 (11)

NOTE: Numerals in parentheses indicate number of participants; preceding numeral indicates percentage. Some percentages may not sum to 100. The maximum enlistment age is 35 for the Active Component of the U.S. Army. Only two soldiers were above the age of 30 at the time of the interview, with the remaining sample between 18 and 30.

Representativeness of Sample

While it was not the goal of this project to obtain a fully representative sample, we did evaluate our sample relative to other soldiers at their first operational post. This analysis sought to establish that our sample, while not technically generalizable, can still offer useful insights for this population of first-term soldiers. We intended to capture soldiers in their first MTOE unit, as they began their careers assigned to the operational force. In practice, we did not screen out soldiers who had already been assigned to another unit previously. While the vast majority of soldiers were in their first MTOE unit, a few—fewer than five—had done short assignments in places like Korea. However, the group

of soldiers assigned to their first MTOE unit remains the most relevant comparison to our sample.

Participants in our study sample tended to be older, of higher rank, and more educated when compared with all soldiers assigned to their first MTOE unit. Relative to all soldiers in their first MTOE unit, our sample underrepresents soldiers of rank E-2 (48 percent of first MTOE unit soldiers rank E-2, versus 20 percent of our sample) and overrepresents soldiers of rank E-3 (25 percent of first MTOE unit soldiers rank E3, versus 56 percent of our sample). Relatedly, our sample skews older than the total sample of soldiers in their first MTOE unit, with more than half of our sample between ages 20 and 22 (versus only 30 percent for soldiers in their first MTOE unit).¹⁸ Soldiers in our sample were also more educated than the average soldier in a first MTOE unit. Forty percent of our sample had completed at least some college education, versus only 10 percent of soldiers the first MTOE population. Our sample asked soldiers their current marital status, while the TAPDB data asks only whether soldiers in their first unit have ever been married. However, by combining our categories of “single” and “engaged,” we may approximate TAPDB’s “never married” category. In our sample, 81.5 percent of soldiers were never married, while in the TAPDB data, 78.0 of soldiers had not been married. A further 14.8 percent were currently married, and 3.7 percent were divorced. One factor that may account for these differences is the criteria used by unit leadership in selecting individuals to participate in our study. While we requested that leadership randomly select participants from their units, it is possible that some leadership chose older and more mature junior enlisted soldiers.

Interviews and Data Coding

The RAND team first crafted the interview protocol. In crafting this instrument, we sought to cover a range of topics that encompass the lives of first-term soldiers. Prior to administration, RAND interviewers pretested the instrument with three former Army and Marine enlisted personnel currently working at RAND. We used pretesting to ensure

¹⁸ MTOE proportions were derived from the TAPDB.

that the questions were clear, to identify any other interview topics that would be of interest, and to ensure the interview length approximated one hour. Based on this pretesting, we made slight modifications to the instrument. The protocol is provided in Appendix A. We ultimately included the following topics in the instrument:

- personal and military background
- civilian background
- enlistment decision
- expectations and experiences of military occupational specialty (MOS) and Army life
- experience in the unit
- satisfaction with Army life
- social life
- current health and wellness
- retention and post-Army plans.

The research team conducted individual-level soldier interviews at each base location over a span of two to three days. Five RAND staff conducted interviews, with two to four staff attending each base visit. Prior to each interview, participants provided informed consent, and we conducted each interview in a private setting with typical interviews lasting approximately one hour. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. We deleted all personally identifiable information from the transcription, and all audio recordings were permanently deleted. Appendix A includes the interview protocol, although these interviews were semistructured, and researchers did ask soldiers to expand on relevant topics.

We then implemented a regimen to train our team of analysts to consistently code the qualitative text. We also conducted a series of analyses to determine the degree of inter-rater agreement between those analysts. These analyses confirmed that we had fairly high levels of inter-rater agreement. The coding process and efforts to instill inter-rater agreement can be found in Appendix B.

Study Limitations

The findings from these interviews provide a rich description of experiences by a select few junior enlisted Army personnel, but with any research of this type there are limitations. First, the sample is not representative of the entire U.S. Army, a particular Army installation, or a subgroup of soldiers. Consequently, the results cannot be generalized to the U.S. Army as a whole or to any rank or CMF category. Second, as noted in Appendix B, while we sought to establish interrater reliability and conducted numerous coding sessions, we still recognize that there is some degree of measurement error in our coding of the qualitative interview data that might differ if another team of researchers followed a different research protocol.

Third, the response rate for all interview questions was not uniformly 100 percent.¹⁹ As previously noted, we added several questions to the protocol after our first installation visit. We identify these questions in the notes section of the relevant data figures (see Figures 2.5, 3.5, and 6.4). In addition, in some cases participants were asked questions but chose not to answer, while in other cases, the interviewer may have chosen, based on the specific context of the interview session, to not ask the question. In other cases, interviewers, possibly because of the length and complexity of the survey instrument, may have failed to consistently ask every single follow-up question or prompt.

Fourth, we asked soldiers in the interview sample to reflect on choices and decisions they made before and shortly after joining the Army. Soldier responses to these questions could certainly be influenced by various cognitive biases associated with memory.²⁰ Soldiers answered with what appeared to be their most faithful recollections; however, the transformative experience of Army service may have resulted in certain post-hoc framing and justification that does not accurately represent soldiers' attitudes at the time those decisions were

¹⁹ Specific response rate for each interview question is highlighted in the notes section of the subsequent figures and tables.

²⁰ Rüdiger Pohl, *Cognitive Illusions: A Handbook on Fallacies and Biases in Thinking, Judgment and Memory*, Hove, UK: Psychology Press, 2004; Linda A. Henkel and Mara Mather, "Memory Attributions for Choices: How Beliefs Shape Our Memories," *Journal of Memory and Language*, Vol. 57, No. 2, August 2007, pp. 163–176.

made. For example, in responding to the question of why they joined the Army, it is very possible that the experience of being in the Army for one to three years may have influenced how soldiers responded to that question.

Finally, given the subject sample of this report, U.S. Army privates and their near grade fellows, we caution that the observations and experiences reported by our sample are those occurring nearing the early to middle points of their first term of enlistment, after they have entered their first unit. These are consequently first impressions of life in the Army, and individual experience and maturity will no doubt affect subsequent impressions.

Organization of This Report

The remainder of this report is organized into the different elements of a soldier's life in the Army: soldiers' lives before the Army and their motivations for joining (Chapter Two); soldiers' perceptions about their MOSs (Chapter Three); the lives of Army privates within their military unit (Chapter Four); soldiers' social lives, finances, and health (Chapter Five); and soldiers' overall satisfaction with the Army experience and their plans for reenlisting (Chapter Six). Chapter Seven summarizes conclusions and offers recommendations for how the Army can improve its recruitment of new soldiers. Appendix A includes the protocol followed during interviews. Appendix B describes the coding of the data.

Recruitment: Joining the Army

Well, you never see little kids playing Navy, you never see little kids playing Air Force [and that's] because it's too expensive. So when you're little you always played Army man.

Infantryman

Recruitment is the moment when the diverse paths of thousands of men and women converge in a common decision—to join the United States Army. It represents the would-be soldier's first interactions with the Army's bureaucracy and with the challenges and opportunities of navigating it. In this section, we discuss the civilian backgrounds of our interview pool and their motivations to join the military, including the key influences on their decision.

Civilian Background of Men and Women Who Join the Army

Here, we provide a snapshot of the civilian backgrounds of our research sample.

Age at Enlistment

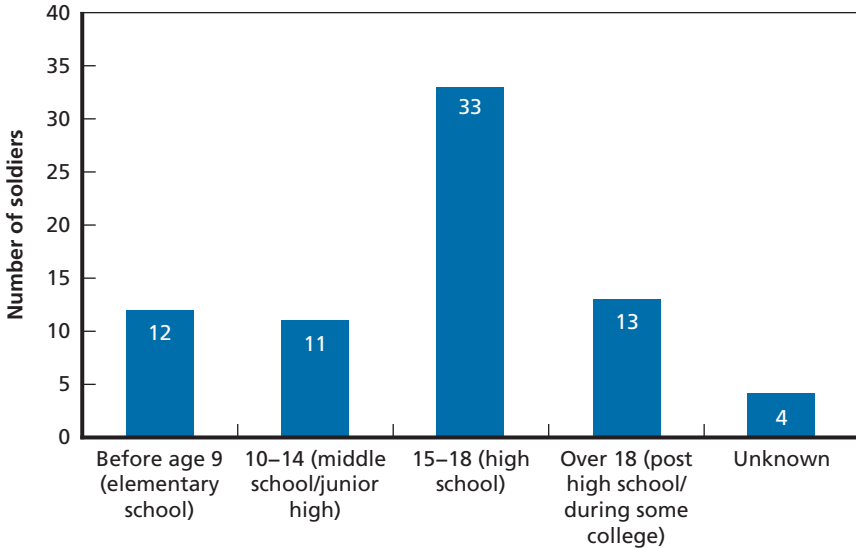
When we interviewed our sample, nearly a third of them (n=23; 32 percent) reported that they initially considered joining the military before entering high school, reflecting the fact that the military can loom large in the imaginations of youth. As one respondent said, "I've always

thought about it since I was a kid; it always seemed adventurous, but then it was also the pride and also the benefits; it seemed like an all-around good idea” (CMF11). As Figures 2.1 and 2.2 show, many of the soldiers first considered joining the Army during high school (n=33; 45 percent), but many did not commit to the idea until after high school (n=49; 67 percent).¹

Geographic Background

The soldiers came from a variety of backgrounds, as shown by the range of hometowns soldiers hailed from. As shown in Figure 2.3, the largest number (n=29, 39 percent) came from small towns, while the second

Figure 2.1
Age When First Considered Enlisting in the Army

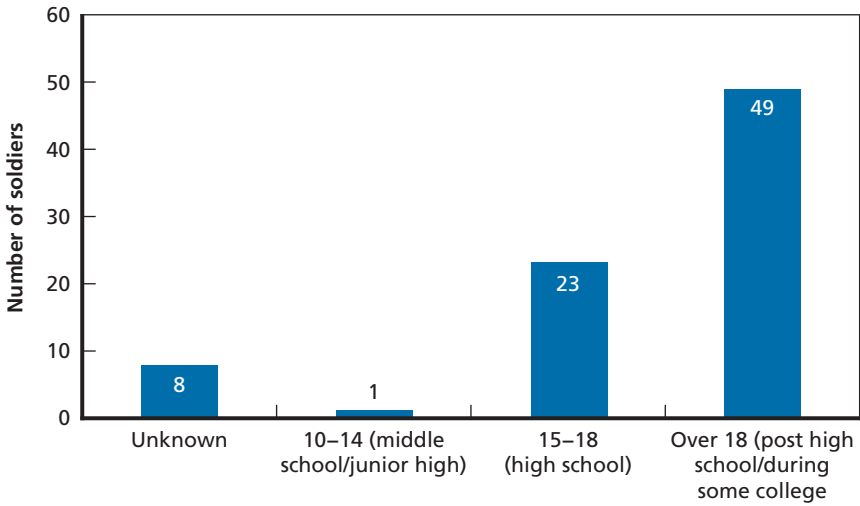


NOTE: “When did you first think about joining the Army?” n=73.

RAND RR2252-2.1

¹ While we commonly heard that soldiers had minimal work experience before enlisting, there were also those who joined as older soldiers with a significant track record of work. And while most soldiers saw the Army as one of their most lucrative options, several took pay cuts to join the military.

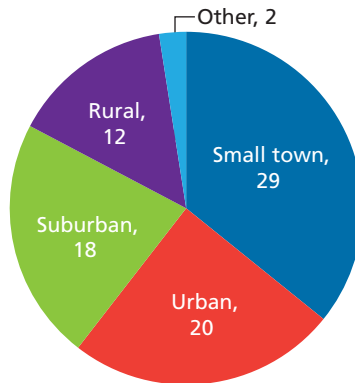
Figure 2.2
When and at What Age Decided to Enlist in the Army



NOTE: "When/at what age did you decide to join the Army?" n=73.

RAND RR2252-2.2

Figure 2.3
Where Soldiers Come From



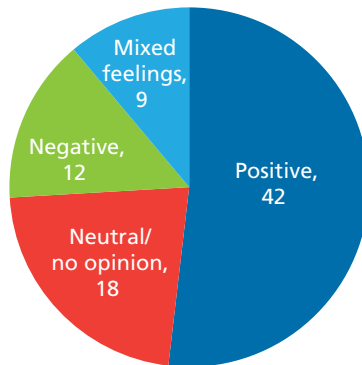
NOTE: "What is your hometown; where did you come from?" n=74; numbers inlaid in the figure represent number of soldiers.

RAND RR2252-2.3

largest number (n=20, 27 percent) came from urban areas. This makes our sample distinctly less urban than the U.S. population as a whole, where nearly 84 percent are located in metropolitan areas.²

When asked how they felt about their hometowns, soldiers generally reported positive feelings (n=42, 57 percent, as shown in Figure 2.4). For example, one soldier observed, “[It’s a] small place. Everyone knows each other. There’s not much trouble. You have those bad apples every now and then, but it’s a friendly place. . . . I liked it” (CMF13). Then again, some soldiers (n=12; 16 percent) had negative things to say about their hometowns. Among this subgroup, soldiers were eager to leave home:

Figure 2.4
Feelings About Hometowns



NOTE: “What type of community is that (e.g., small town, city, suburbs; good place, bad place)?” n=74.

RAND RR2252-2.4

² Note that the Census Bureau defines metropolitan as the total area dependent on an urban core that has 50,000 or more people. Soldier hometowns were based on narrative descriptions by soldiers and may be imprecise. This figure is intended for general comparison only. Ideally, we would also identify the specific region in the nation that these soldiers hail from, but the name of the hometown and state were deleted, along with all other potentially identifiable information. See Darryl T. Cohen, Geoffrey W. Hatchard, and Steven G. Wilson, “Population Trends in Incorporated Places: 2000 to 2013,” U.S. Census Bureau, March 2015.

Definitely wanted to get out of there, so this definitely helped get me away from all that. . . . It was rough, it was just a bad place to be. . . . [There were] lots of shootings, violence everywhere. As soon as I left, there was bank robberies and lots of murders started escalating throughout the years to come and it's just been getting worse. . . . Yeah, it was time to get out a long time ago. (CMF13)

Others (n=9; 12 percent) saw both good and bad in their hometowns. As one soldier noted, "I enjoyed growing up there, but it's not someplace that I would want to spend the rest of my life. . . . I like the city more, at least being closer to the city. [My town] is about two hours from the city so it's too far" (CMF68). Finally, a quarter of soldiers (n=18; 24 percent) were either neutral about their hometowns or had no opinions about them.

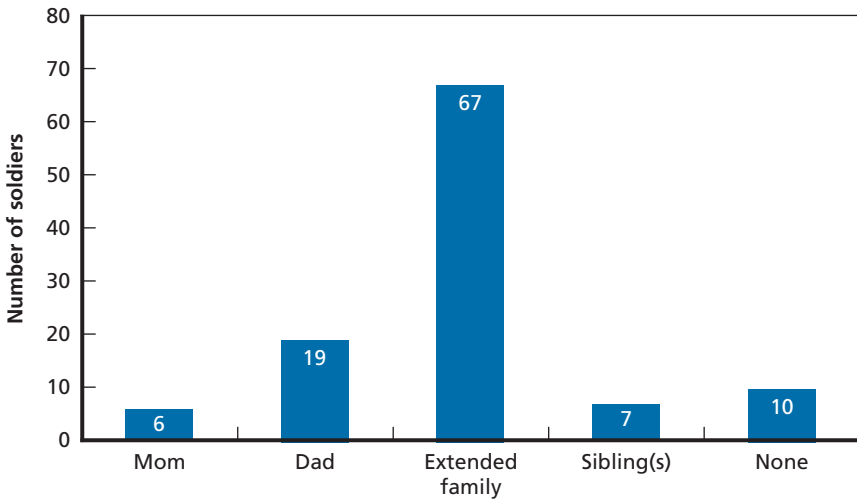
The Importance of Family Considerations in the Decision to Enlist

When it comes to making a decision about whether to enlist in the Army, we asked about the influential people and factors in that process. Nearly 88 percent (n=71) of all soldiers identified a relative—their mother, father, sibling, or extended family—who had served in the military; only ten respondents (12 percent) had no relatives who had served (Figure 2.5). This is roughly consistent with another recent RAND study, which found that 83 percent of Army recruits had a close family member who had served.³ When we specifically asked about how their family history of military service influenced their decisions to enlist in the Army, 15 (19 percent) of those we interviewed indicated that a family history of military service factored in their decision to join (not shown).

Soldiers told us how their family members reacted when they found out the soldiers were joining the Army. While family reactions

³ Bernard Rostker, Jacob Alex Klerman, and Megan Zander-Cotugno, *Recruiting Older Youths: Insights from a New Survey of Army Recruits*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-247-OSD, 2014. Rostker, Klerman, and Zander-Cotugno (2014) counted parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Our sample allowed soldiers to identify any relative. Rostker, Klerman, and Zander-Cotugno (2014) also surveyed both active and reserve recruits but found only slight differences between those pools.

Figure 2.5
Relatives Who Served in the Military



NOTE: Figure depicts coded responses to the interview questions, “Did either of your parents serve in the military?” and “Do you have other family members who served or are serving?” 81 and 67 participants, respectively, responded to these questions (this latter question was added after the first installation visit). For each question, more than one response was allowed.

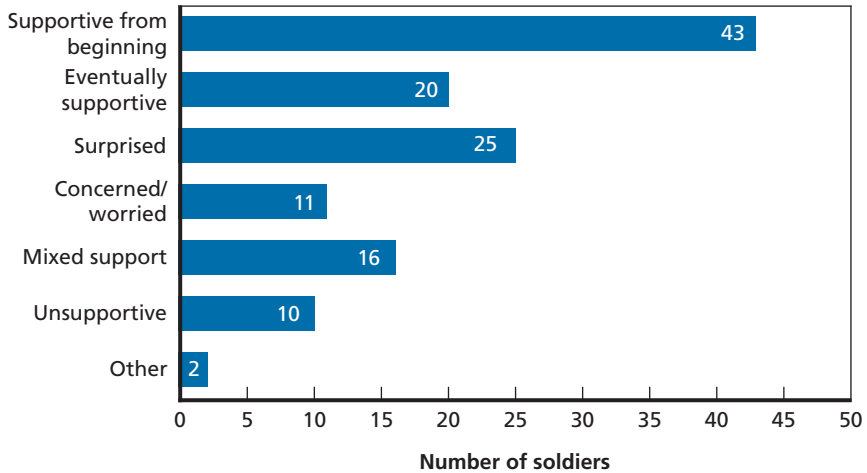
RAND RR2252-2.5

to enlistment varied, 63 soldiers (80 percent) reported their family members were either supportive from the beginning ($n=43$; 54 percent) or eventually supportive ($n=20$; 25 percent; see Figure 2.6). Another 16 soldiers (20 percent) indicated mixed support, meaning some family members were supportive and others were not. Only ten soldiers (13 percent) felt their families were unsupportive of their decision to join the Army. This supports previous research and observations, suggesting a link between parental support for military service and child enlistment.⁴

Soldiers identified influential figures in their decision to join the military (see Figure 2.7). More than half of all soldiers ($n=46$; 63 per-

⁴ Jennifer Lee Gibson, Brian K. Griepentrog, and Sean M. Marsh, “Parental Influence on Youth Propensity to Join the Military,” *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 70, No. 3, June 2007, pp. 525–541.

Figure 2.6
Family Reactions to Enlistment



NOTE: “What did your family and friends think of your decision to join the military?”
 n=79; more than one response allowed.

RAND RR2252-2.6

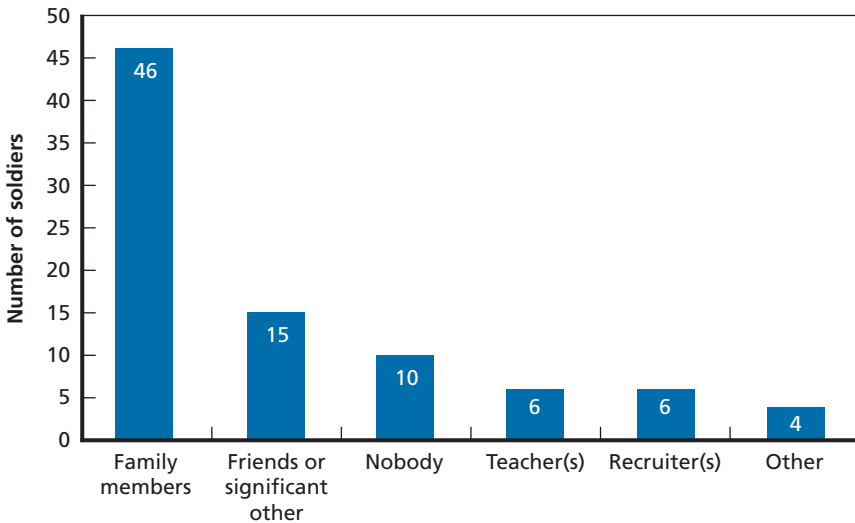
cent) told us that a family member or significant other influenced their decision to join. Many soldiers reported that parents played a key motivational role, as one soldier noted:

My pops. My dad is very, I guess you could say old-school Mexican, there’s no just sitting around chilling, you’re either going to get a job, you’re going to go to school or the other option was to join the military. I worked for three, four years after that, dead-end job after dead-end job, I figured might as well. . . . (CMF19)

Influential family members were not limited to parents, as one soldier stated that her two-year-old son most influenced her, and another soldier stated, “I’d say my [younger] siblings because I wanted them to be really proud and look up to me.”

Influential forces were not limited to family members. Some soldiers (n=10; 14 percent) said that nobody acted as a significant influence on their decision to join, whereas others cited friends, significant others, or teachers. In several cases, this included instructors in Junior

Figure 2.7
Influences on Soldiers' Decision to Join



NOTE: “Who, if anyone, was especially influential in your decision [to join the Army]?” n=73; more than one response allowed.

RAND RR2252-2.7

Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) programs, a high school–based training and leadership development program:

Yes, my [JROTC] sergeant back in school, back at my high school. She really turned me on to the idea, [to] join because you want to get out, because she knows personally how my life is. She was just like, “You know what, just join the service. I’ve been in for 22 years. I can tell you how everything’s going to be instead of your recruiters, because your recruiters are going to lie to you.” And she was right. (CMF92)⁵

⁵ It is unclear exactly what this participant refers to when it is noted that recruiters lie. In a subsequent part of the interview, the participant noted that the video used by the recruiter depicted a 92 CMF job that was relatively easy. “They showed me a video,” observed the soldier; “you basically give out stuff. I was like, that’s easy enough, OK—I can choose that one. Yep, that’s it.” The soldier noted, however, that different aspects of the job were more complicated than planned: “You do just give stuff out, but then there’s like paperwork to do, there’s a lot of running down the [sergeant], go pick up parts. I can’t really drive yet so I’ve

Motivations to Join the Army

In this section, we explore the varied reasons that motivated our sample to join the Army. As one young male soldier said, “Everybody joined for their own personal reason. But one thing we all have in common is we joined for a reason” (CMF68).

Soldiers’ logic for joining the Army varies as greatly as the soldiers themselves. Some soldiers took an extended period of time to consider joining the Army, like one woman who “talked to recruiters because I loved the ROTC back in high school; I did that all four years” (CMF92). Another described an agonizing process to join:

I tried joining when I was 17 and it didn’t work. . . . It was a false medical diagnosis. Some doctor messed up and said I had an issue that I didn’t have and then they permanently disqualified me. It took me seven years to get in the Army. . . . I had to go to several other doctors. I did it on my own without the Army just to show I didn’t have it. And then I called USAREC, MEDCOM [U.S. Army Medical Command], a whole bunch of different commands to try to figure out why they said I was permanently disqualified. I wrote my congressman . . . the Secretary of Defense, one of the generals, joint chief of staff. I was just going crazy. (CMF11)

Others made a less calculated decision:

Well, the Army wasn’t really my first choice, I [almost joined the] Air Force and Navy. It’s kind of funny how I joined. My best friend was joining and he had to go into the recruiting station. He’s like, “Just stop by with me,” because we had some things we were going to do afterwards. I ended up walking in there and I knew the recruiter for over a year on Facebook. [During that time I was] talking to them through school, and he was always trying to get me to join. I was like, “let me think about it.” I walked in there [with my best friend that day], I sat down waiting for my

got to wait on somebody to help me go pick it up. Go pick up parts, ordering them, lots of paperwork and if somebody loses something, there’s tons of paperwork for that, a lot of time has to go through. It’s just a lot of stuff to keep track of.”

buddy, next thing I know I end up walking out with a MEPS [Military Entrance Processing Station] date. . . . What the hell happened? (CMF91)

Most Soldiers Express Both Institutional and Occupational Motivations

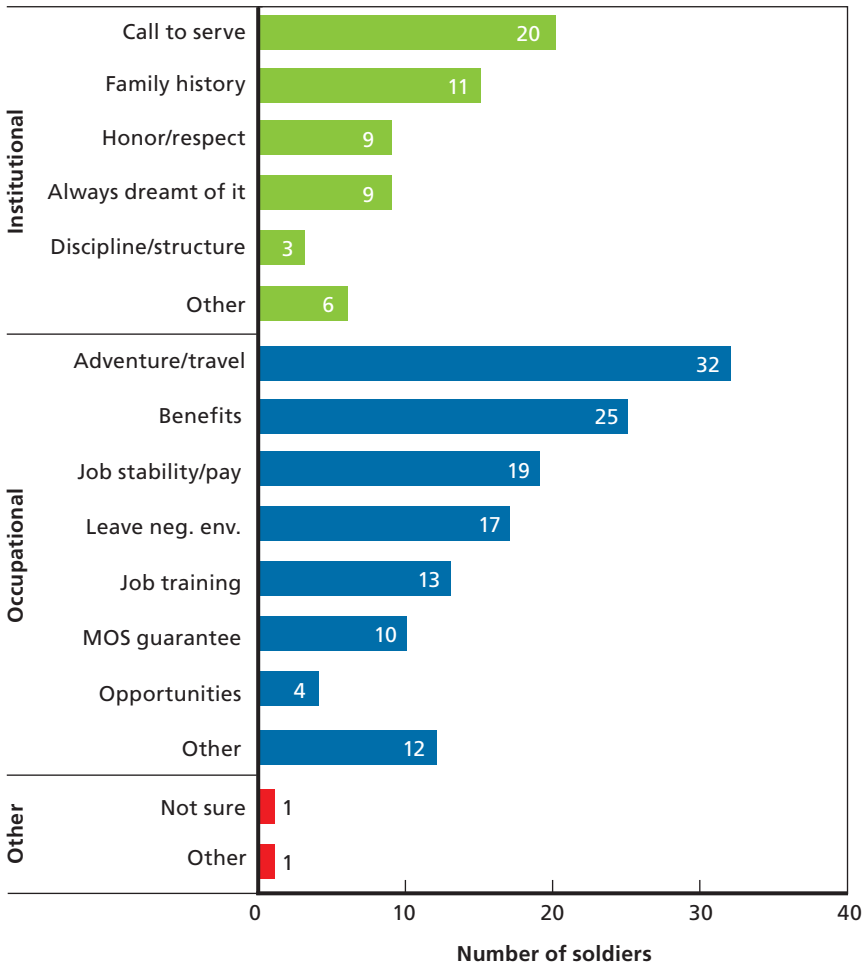
The military is a unique organizational construct in American life. While it is a profession like many others, it is more than simply a job—the military is also an institution. Noted sociologist Charles Moskos wrote that, “members of an institution are often viewed as following a calling; they generally regard themselves as being different or apart from the broader society and are so regarded by others.” Moskos conceived of two roles, institution and occupation (I/O). Institutional values are defined by values and norms that transcend the self-interest of service members in pursuit of some higher good (e.g., service to one’s country). The occupational values are defined by self-interested motivations found within the marketplace (e.g., salary and benefits). According to Moskos, the advent of the All-Volunteer Force in 1973 created tension between institutional and occupational values for the American military, causing a rapid shift toward the military as a workplace and the loss of much of its institutional basis. David Segal referred to “pragmatic professionals,” meaning that personnel hold both institutional and occupational values as they serve. We found evidence of this balance in many of the soldiers we interviewed.⁶

Figure 2.8 depicts the codes for stated motivations to join the Army, with institutional reasons represented by green bars and occupational reasons represented by blue bars. Participants could cite more than one motivation, and all responses are represented in the figure. Seven soldiers (9 percent) cited only institutional reasons to join the Army, and 37 (46 percent) cited only occupational reasons, whereas 37 soldiers (46 percent) cited some combination of the two (not shown).⁷ The total number of occupational motives was 132 (the blue bars) while

⁶ Moskos, 1970.

⁷ One soldier could not provide a reason why he had enlisted.

Figure 2.8
Institutional and Occupational Motivations for Joining the Army



NOTE: “Why did you decide to join the Army?” n=79; more than one response allowed. To develop the codes for this figure, RAND staff read and reviewed a number of interviews with a specific focus on how different soldiers talked about different motivational sets. This led to an initial framework for motivations that then informed coding efforts. After coding was complete, the project leaders reviewed individual code assignments to ensure consistency.

the total number of institutional ones was 62 (the green bars). The single most commonly cited motive to join the military was occupational: to seek out travel, adventure, and new experiences (n=32; 41 percent). Typical of responses driving this motive was a desire for broader horizons, for example: “I’ve been in Kansas the majority of my life, so I figured if I joined [the Army], I’d have a greater chance to go out and visit new states and new countries” (CMF19).

The primary institutional motivator cited by soldiers was a call to serve. One soldier said that he joined

Simply because I really wanted to participate more in the nation as a whole, especially when it comes to foreign policy because, you know, I simply grew up around a lot of people who would . . . criticize decisions to go into wars overseas or sometimes support them, but then would never actually go and take part in that. (CMF11)

CMFs 91 (maintenance) and 92 (supply) did not cite a call to serve as a motivation to join. However, half of all medics interviewed did cite a call to service—often specifically to save wounded soldiers—as a reason to join.⁸ In fact, medics, of all the CMFs, cited a call to serve most frequently.

Occupational Motivations Included Benefits, a Steady Paycheck, and Leaving a Negative Environment

Soldiers stated that a desire to improve their current and future prospects helped motivate them join the military. In particular, many soldiers sought to gain access to the military’s benefits (n=25; 32 percent). These particularly included health care, tuition assistance during service, and the GI Bill.⁹ Some participants saw these benefits as a lifeline; one single parent said she joined “just because I had my son and I

⁸ As a percentage of total responses by each CMF, 36 percent of CMF 11s, 27 percent of CMF 13s, and 25 percent of CMF 19s cited a call to service as a motivator.

⁹ The GI Bill is officially known as the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 but is more commonly referred to as the GI Bill. In this instance, GI is not an acronym, but it derives from a popular World War II-era nickname for soldiers.

needed the benefits, I guess you could say” (CMF92). Others used the Army to look to the future and create a better life after military service:

The Army can provide me with great education benefits, great career benefits later on. So . . . why not start that and do that, instead of just working at some dead-end job that’s only paying minimum wage, maybe \$10 an hour when I can go and get fantastic benefits, all that. (CMF13)

A quarter of soldiers (n=19; 24 percent) joined for the stable pay, knowing they “needed to make money” (CMF92). Some soldiers saw joining as an opportunity for short-term employment, while others saw the prospects of a steady career: “After I weighed the pros and cons I was like, well, why not, and if I stay in for 20-plus years [I can] retire at 40. So it seemed like a good deal to me, especially in the economy we’re in” (CMF68).

Some soldiers (n=17; 22 percent) joined the military to get away from some aspect of their prior lives. In some cases, this was simply escaping a hometown without prospects, but in others, soldiers described leaving bad family situations or unsafe environments. For example, as two separate soldiers observed,

I guess I just joined to get out of the situation I was in, didn’t really see myself going anywhere. . . . Yeah, [I feel like the Army has provided that for me]. The kids that I grew up with, out of the group that I hung out with, two of them are in jail and then the three either passed away or disappeared. (CMF19)

I come from [a city in] California, [that’s] pretty rough. . . . [The Army] definitely helped get me away from all that. It was rough, it was just a bad place to be . . . lots of shootings, violence everywhere. As soon as I left, there was bank robberies and lots of murders started escalating throughout the years to come and it’s just been getting worse. . . . It was time to get out a long time ago. (CMF13)

Yet another soldier said of his family environment and decision to leave, “It wasn’t abusive, but I mean, there was a lot of fights going on with [my father] and my mom and I was just tired of it. . . . [I] just wanted to get away. So I just thought maybe the Army would be my chance to take up my stuff, leave and maybe find happiness kind of, like a happier avenue” (CMF13). And others reported that they left because of limited financial opportunities:

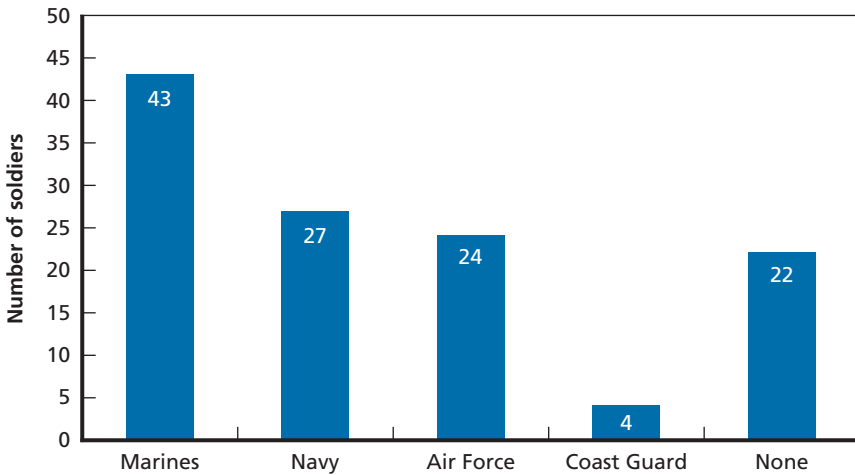
. . . now that I’ve joined the Army I’ve come to realize that everyone has potential. Everyone is capable of so much more than they give themselves credit for. And then, everyone back home, they don’t push themselves. They don’t try. They’re happy just being content in this rut, this ditch that they’re in. They just want to sit there. (CMF68)

We found some evidence to suggest that motivation varies by intended length of career (not shown). Although occupational motives were most frequently cited across all groups, those soldiers who told us that they currently saw the Army as a career tended to cite institutional motives with more frequency than those who did not. We found that those who intend to pursue the Army as a career cited institutional motives an average of 0.93 times per soldier, while those pursuing multiple terms cited them 0.86 times per soldier. Those pursuing a single term cited institutional motives 0.71 times per soldier, and those who were still unsure cited them 0.44 times per soldier. Of course, without conducting tests of statistical significance, it is impossible to know whether these differences are truly meaningful. However, they do offer potential hypotheses that subsequent survey work could more effectively investigate.

Many Soldiers Considered Other Services

Among the soldiers we interviewed, 69 percent of respondents said that they considered joining other services, rather than just the Army (see Figure 2.9 for more details). Overall, 61 percent of participants (n=43) stated that they considered the Marines. Many chose the Army because it allows enlistees to choose their MOS before enlisting. Participants stated that this provided them a bit of autonomy and allowed them

Figure 2.9
Soldiers Reporting Other Service Interest



NOTE: “Why the Army, rather than another service?” n=70; more than one response allowed.

RAND RR2252-2.9

some idea of the role they would be expected to play once their terms of service began. One medic said, “based on my [ASVAB, Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery] score I got to pick whatever I wanted, whereas if I went to the Marines I could be an electrician right now” (CMF68). Beyond the guarantee of MOS, tattoo policies and other qualifying factors often pushed soldiers toward the Army.¹⁰

Other soldiers provided various reasons for choosing the Army over the Marines. Some soldiers simply saw the Army as being a better fit for reasons of culture and practicality. A few felt the Marines were “way too hardcore” (CMF91). One respondent recoiled from joining the Marines after his Marine recruiter became overzealous and tackled him during a game of ultimate Frisbee (CMF68). At least two respon-

¹⁰ The Army allows tattoos on the arms and legs (but not the face, neck, or hands). The Marine Corps policy is more strict, allowing tattoos only on the area of the body that would be covered by a T-shirt, shorts, and extended socks; see David Staten, “New Marine Corps Tattoo Regulations,” *Marines.mil*, June 2, 2016.

dents noted frustration that the Marine Corps recruiting process took too long.

In choosing the Army over the Navy, several soldiers expressed discomfort with the idea of being “stuck on a boat” for long periods of time, or with the fact that they could not swim (CMF19). Several soldiers said they hoped to join the Air Force, but either did not score high enough on the ASVAB to qualify for a desirable position or otherwise did not meet the qualifications for service. One soldier summed up his view of the services thusly:

I mean, obviously my whole family, everybody who was in the military was in the Army. . . . But pretty much Air Force, I have bad eyesight, so I'm not going to be able to fly a plane. I didn't really see the point. Navy, just didn't really interest me, I don't want to just be on a boat for months at a time. Then Marines, they die a lot. I will die, but that's not really my goal. (CMF11)

Another soldier, as noted in the chapter's heading, harkened back to the martial games of childhood in making his case for choosing the Army.

Well, you never see little kids playing Navy, you never see little kids playing Air Force because it's too expensive. So when you're little you always played Army man. (CMF11)

In several cases, serendipity played a deciding role, as one soldier described: “Well, it was going to be Air Force [more] than Army, but I think Air Force was at lunch or something. . . . Like I knocked and they didn't answer, so I went next door” (CMF68).

Summary

As this and subsequent chapters show, the importance of family is a recurring feature in the narratives of soldiers. Families played a critical role in prompting or helping soldiers to enlist in the Army. Half our sample rated family members or significant others as influential

in their decision to join. Participants routinely identified relatives who had served in the Army and suggested that such a family history of military service critically influenced their decision to join. Most families ultimately supported enlistment, although not always without reservations. This primacy of family may offer ideas and opportunities for the Army to enhance recruitment and retention of its soldiers.

We also found that soldiers join for a variety of different institutional and occupational reasons. A call to serve and perceptions of honor intermixed with desire for new adventures and considered calculations of benefits and steady paychecks. In Chapter Seven, we compare these motivations with the AVP—a statement that appears to emphasize institutional over occupational benefits of service.

Working in the Army

I mean, this is a lot greater than my expectation, because I didn't think it was going to be this great. I love my job.

Artilleryman

I've probably said this about five times already, but the expectation was working with other soldiers, providing for their medical needs. . . . But all that . . . I've done . . . was clean CONEXs [container expresses] and trucks. I understand that's stuff that has to be done, but it's literally all I've done, and I sit around from 0900 to 1700.

Medic

Once a recruit completes Basic and Advanced Individual Training, his or her daily work can become a central feature of Army life. For many new soldiers, the day-to-day jobs they perform as part of their MOS represent their first experiences in full-time employment. As with most Americans, such jobs can consume most of a soldier's waking hours, so it stands to reason that work satisfaction contributes significantly to Army satisfaction more generally. This chapter, which explores how junior enlisted soldiers view their newfound careers, is organized around four main sections: (1) how and why soldiers choose their MOS; (2) the degree to which participants' expectations for Army

work life match their experiences; (3) the information sources that influence these expectations; and (4) soldier preferences for changing their occupational specialty.

How and Why Soldiers Choose Their MOSs

As we discussed in the previous chapter, one factor that makes the Army an especially attractive service is that prospective soldiers can choose their career fields. Of course, soldiers do not have *carte blanche* to make this choice. Army recruiters weigh a recruit's scores on the ASVAB, a timed aptitude test administered during recruitment, together with Army data that identify MOS slots to give recruits a list of career field options. The recruit then weighs available options and selects an MOS.

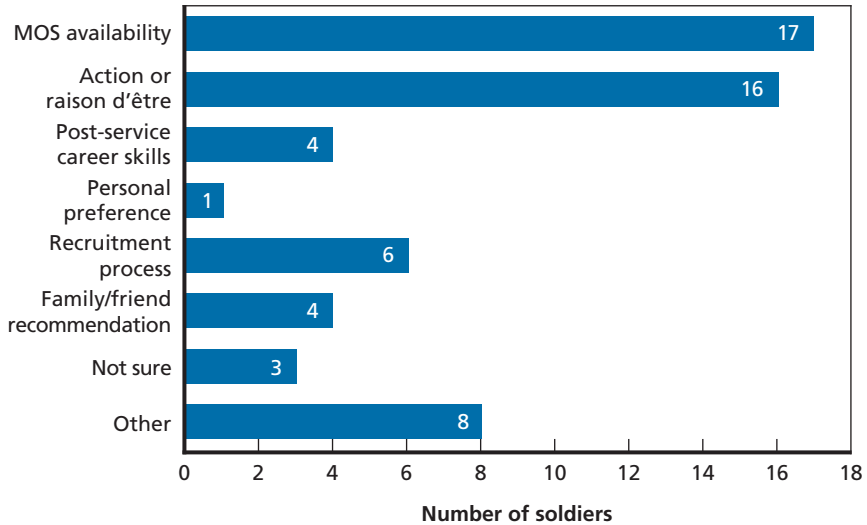
To capture soldier motivations for selecting their MOSs, we asked participants, "Why did you choose your MOS?" Participant responses varied according to whether soldiers were in combat or noncombat CMFs. These differences can be seen in Figures 3.1 and 3.2 for combat and noncombat soldiers, respectively.

For soldiers with combat CMFs, two factors appear to stand out. First, 17 combat soldiers (41 percent) reported that the availability of MOS slots affected their decision. Some did not get their first choice, either because of relatively low ASVAB scores or because the desired position was unavailable.¹ One soldier, for example, wanted a job as a Military Policeman only to learn that the position was not open; so, he went with his second-best option, a Cavalry Scout (CMF19). Several soldiers reported that they prioritized a quick entry into the Army over careful job selection:

The reason I chose it, because I was trying to get away from home and I told [the recruiter] whatever job could get me out of here the quickest way. Because some jobs I would have to wait six months, sometimes a year, until they actually process me out. And I said,

¹ Slots may not be available because that MOS either is currently completely manned or is not a priority for manning.

Figure 3.1
Reasons for Choosing MOSs: Combat CMFs



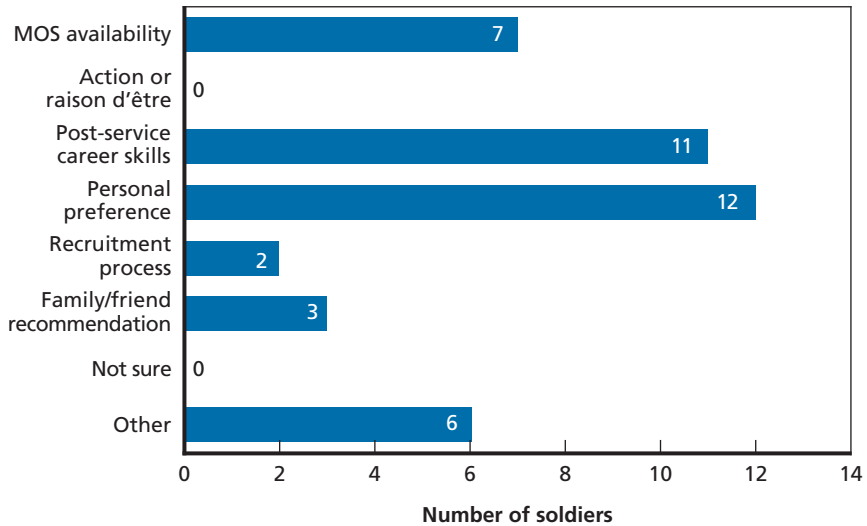
NOTE: "Why did you choose your MOS?" n=41 combat CMFs; more than one response allowed.

RAND RR2252-3.1

"Whatever job will get me out of here the fastest." And they said, "Well, there's this thing called 13 Bravo." And I said, "I don't care. Just put my name down. I want to get out of here." (CMF13)

Second, those with a combat MOS often cited one of two intermingled factors in choosing to join a combat unit. Some sought an active and adventurous job, and others wanted to join a combat unit because "that was what the Army was made for." We coded this sense that the Army's central purpose is combat and that a soldier should play a central role in that task as "Action or raison d'être." Seventeen combat soldiers (40 percent of all combat soldiers) cited this as a reason they chose their MOS. In talking about a job of action, participants wanted to avoid sitting "behind a desk" and instead "shoot rounds," "blow things up," "go out in the field," and "jump out of airplanes and [go on] missions." Other combat soldiers talked about joining the infantry, armor, or artillery units as though they were seeking the ulti-

Figure 3.2
Reasons for Choosing MOSs: Noncombat CMFs



NOTE: "Why did you choose your MOS?" n=39 noncombat CMFs; more than one response allowed.

RAND RR2252-3.2

mate Army experience. One soldier exemplified this view by recalling the Army games of his childhood:

. . . when you play Army man as a little kid, you don't play . . . truck driver, you don't drive a truck for everybody. "Hey guys, dropping off supplies; keep fighting." It's just I feel like if I'm going to do my part, I'm definitely going to do the part I see is fit for being in the Army. (CMF11)

Alternatively, close to a third of soldiers (31 percent) in noncombat occupations selected their MOSs out of a personal interest in the career field. In addition, over a quarter (28 percent) of noncombat soldiers felt that the MOS would enhance their post-Army employment

prospects.² Some soldiers focused on their genuine and long-standing interest in the career field. “I always worked on cars [since I was a kid],” reported one maintenance soldier. “I loved tinkering with stuff, taking it apart and putting it back together, see if it worked. So I figured this MOS seemed like it’d be the best for me.”³

Others focused their descriptions on preparing for a life after the Army. A medic chose his job partly because “I know that [in] the health care field there’s always something open.” A mechanic likewise observed that he decided to go for “something practical. . . . That seemed like something I would be able to use practically in the civilian world, so I grabbed it.”

Other factors were also influential. In some cases, a family member or friend influenced a participant (n=7; 9 percent across combat and noncombat). An infantryman chose his job to stay connected with a family lineage that included a father and grandfather who served in the infantry. Recruiters also proved influential for eight soldiers (10 percent) across the combination of combat and noncombat soldiers, in part by showing enticing videos or offering career guidance.⁴

Soldier Expectations Versus Reality

After soldiers complete Basic and Advanced Individual Training, they join their first unit and officially enter the Army workforce. It is in these first months that soldiers learn whether Army life and work match up

² These responses were particularly common for medics and mechanics. Both of these career fields can excite the interests of young people and offer post-Army career opportunities.

³ Likewise, a medic articulated this by observing “I have a huge passion for medicine. That’s just always been who I am because I like taking care of people” (CMF68).

Other soldiers considered their future and post-Army careers in choosing an MOS. Many medics, for example, highlighted a desire to have a future career in medicine. To this end, choosing a medic’s job allowed them the opportunity to directly experience the medical field.

⁴ Under the coded heading of “Other,” soldiers made general statements such as the MOS “sounds pretty cool” or “it seemed like a good fit.” Other soldiers considered terms of service requirements, a future transition to special operations forces, or perceived ease of the position, to name just a few.

to the expectations about military service that drove them to enlist in the first place. The degree to which Army experiences meet, exceed, or fall short of expectations is critical. According to the Discrepancy Theory of job satisfaction, high expectations set a high bar for soldier satisfaction. If the experience in the job fails to meet soldier expectations for the job, then soldiers may experience disappointment. In contrast, if the experience meets or exceeds expectations, then soldiers' outlooks about their job experience may be more positive.⁵

We assessed expectations versus reality by asking the soldiers how the Army experience differed from their expectations for two key categories: MOS, and overall Army life.⁶

⁵ At least two different theories of job satisfaction speak to the importance of expectations. The Discrepancy Theory of job satisfaction, first formulated by Locke and described by Castillo and Cano, holds that job satisfaction is the "result of the difference between an actual outcome a person received and some other expected outcome level. A comparison in which an actual outcome level was lower than an expected outcome level would result in dissatisfaction" (E. A. Locke, "What Is Job Satisfaction? Organizational Behavior and Human Performance," in E. E. Lawler, ed., *Motivation in Work Organizations*, Monterrey, Calif.: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1973; Jaime X. Castillo and Jamie Cano, "Factors Explaining Job Satisfaction Among Faculty," *Journal of Agricultural Education*, Vol. 45, 2004). In addition, there is the Met Expectations Theory that posits that unmet expectations are associated with decreased job satisfaction (L. W. Porter and R. M. Steers, "Organizational, Work, and Personal Factors in Employee Turnover and Absenteeism," *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 80, 1973, pp. 151–176). Subsequent studies have borne out this theory. Wanous et al., for example, demonstrated in a meta-analysis that met expectations were significantly correlated with job satisfaction, intention to leave, and job performance (John P. Wanous, Timothy D. Poland, Stephen L. Premack, and K. Shanon Davis, "The Effects of Met Expectations on Newcomer Attitudes and Behaviors: A Review and Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 77, 1992, pp. 288–297). This field of research has also spawned the use of realistic job previews (RJPs), which have been shown to improve positive work attitudes and reduce employee turnover (Jean M. Phillips, "Effects of Realistic Job Previews on Multiple Organizational Outcomes: A Meta-Analysis," *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 41, 1998, pp. 673–690; for meta-analytic studies, Stephen L. Premack and John P. Wanous, "A Meta-Analysis of Realistic Job Preview Experiments," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 70, 1985, pp. 706–719).

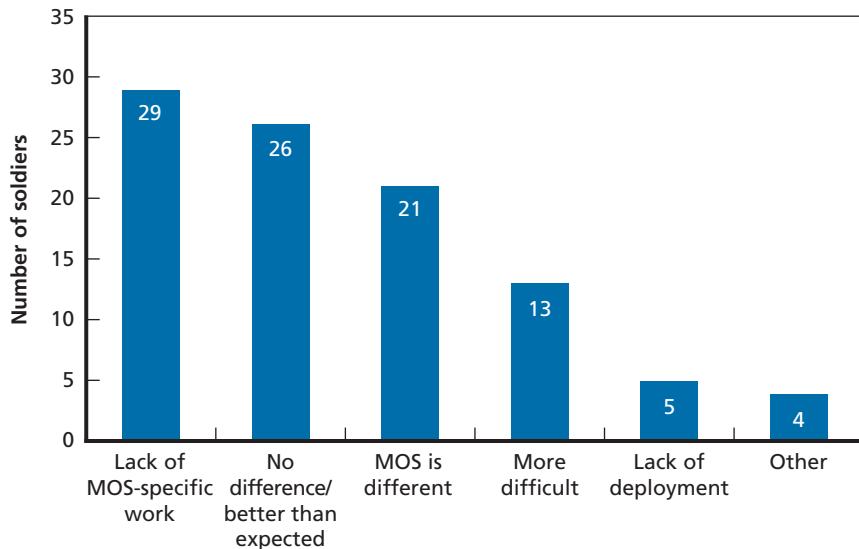
⁶ We also asked participants to describe their expectations for work and Army life; however, most participants responded to this question by detailing unmet expectations.

MOS Expectations Versus Reality

To assess differences in MOS expectations versus reality, we asked participants, “How is your MOS different from your expectations?” We present the coded responses to this question in Figure 3.3.

We highlight several observations from soldier responses to this question. First, 26 participants (33 percent) reported that their MOS experience either met or exceeded their expectations. Some soldiers had curt answers to our query. “No” responded one infantryman, “I mean nothing’s really surprised me yet. . . .” Others, however, responded by noting unexpected positive aspects of their MOS, such as better-than-expected leadership, enhanced responsibility, or better training. One infantryman learned that his job entailed a lot more action than he anticipated, and a member of a reconnaissance unit found that he enjoyed the “behind enemy lines” aspect of reconnaissance.

Figure 3.3
Differences Between Expectations and Reality for MOS



NOTE: “How is your MOS different from your expectations?” n=78; more than one response allowed.

Other soldiers critiqued their MOS experience. A few soldiers (n=5; 6 percent) complained about a lack of deployments: “I expected more deployments, especially coming to [this installation], but I actually haven’t seen one, and I probably won’t see one on my contract” (CMF13). An infantryman who just returned from a deployment still complained about what he perceived of as a lack of deployments: “Definitely not a lot of deployments” (CMF11).

Thirteen participants (17 percent) complained that their job was more difficult than they anticipated. For some soldiers, this complaint focused on the physical demands of Army life. A CMF13 commented, “It’s very, very physically demanding.” In other cases, soldiers complained that the job was more challenging than planned. One-half of the coded sample in this response category comprised personnel from the Supply CMF (CMF92s; n=6) who highlighted the unexpected stressors of supply and logistics: a complex array of paperwork, demands that supplies never “hit zero,” and the requirement to perform tasks not covered in AIT. As two soldiers lament:

So many forms and paperwork and stuff that we have to learn. And I still don’t know all of the paperwork and stuff that’s involved with supply. . . . And right now I’m at the battalion and it’s a whole lot of stuff I didn’t learn in the AIT. It’s a lot different from what they told me. It’s actually hard. It’s a lot of work. And I thought it would just be relaxing. It’s not even just sitting at the desk. I’m sitting at the desk, I’m here, I’m there, I’m everywhere. (CMF92)

I really thought it would be more simplified than what it is. I can’t say it’s complicated, but it gets there sometimes. There’s . . . certain documents that we have to keep up with and regular day-to-day . . . keeping track of our supplies, making sure we’re not hitting a zero on anything so that way those can get done. . . . I can’t say it’s easy, it’s pretty tough, even the way I see it. (CMF92)

Twenty-one participants (27 percent) offered various concerns about their MOS experience that we labeled as “MOS is different.”

For the most part, these differences appeared relatively minor but were obviously important enough to the soldiers to raise them. One mechanic, for example, anticipated that he would work with a larger crew, and another thought that he would get to “dig into” the engines more than just replacing them. A CMF19 did not anticipate having to call for fire, and another found that his unit is smaller than he originally envisioned.

We coded the most common discrepancy between MOS expectation and reality as “Lack of MOS-specific work” (n=29; 37 percent). This category represents the disillusionment that many soldiers expressed when they discovered that they spent much or all of their workday not in professional tasks of training and exercise but on the myriad military details, desk work, and waiting for direction that is natural in a large bureaucracy.

This tension between the expectation of a profession and reality of bureaucracy had several facets. First, soldiers complained of excessive downtime and “a lot of hanging around, a lot of doing nothing” (CMF11) for what one soldier estimated as being up to a third of the work day.

I thought it was going to be . . . really high speed, just a high tempo all the time. Most of the time it’s a lot of sitting around, waiting for something to get done, or sitting around, waiting for another person to get done with dispatching their vehicle, or cleaning the motor pool. (CMF13)

Related to this issue, some soldiers did not anticipate how little of their time would be spent in the field:

Yeah, [it’s] just a lot more office work than I thought, being in an office environment. I wanted to be more out exploring more things out in the field, which we do but it’s not as much as I thought we’d be doing. So we’re working inside more than we’re out in the field, a lot more, and that’s what I wanted to do is be out doing that in the field. (CMF13)

So I think I had a relatively accurate understanding of what I guess deployment and the wars would be like but I thought we'd be training a lot more in garrison and in peacetime. I guess I didn't really understand what joining a bureaucracy of 500,000 people would be like initially. (CMF11)

It is possible that responses of the preceding types echo some of the more common motivations for joining the Army, such as the pursuit of adventure and new experiences, as well as some of the reasons for choosing the soldier's MOS. If, for example, a soldier selected a combat MOS for reasons coded as "Action or raison d'être," then a complaint about too much office time may reflect more than a minor frustration.⁷

Soldiers also complained of too many irrelevant tasks that one soldier affectionately referred to as "sweeping wet grass" or "The pointless things that you think are pointless." As one respondent complained:

I didn't think I would be blowing stuff up all the time but just, I didn't know about the motor pools. I didn't know about all the cleaning that we'd have to do. I didn't know about all of that so it was, I don't know, it was different than I thought it was going to be. (CMF13)

In some ways, this mismatch may reflect the fact that many soldiers derive their expectations of Army life from movies and books. These sources generally portray up-tempo junctures during boot camp or deployed portions of Army life, rather than the reality of a life in the garrison day in and day out. While soldiers understand that the movies are not reality, it is unlikely that they know how much to alter their impressions to make them realistic.

The most noteworthy aspect of the "Lack of MOS-specific work" variable is the degree to which it is CMF-based, because the vast majority of soldiers reporting this complaint were either combat CMFs or medics. For example, ten of 16 medics complained of limited patient

⁷ Given the sample size and nature of qualitative coding, it is impossible to accurately examine correlations within the data.

care opportunities. “We don’t really do medical stuff a lot,” observed one medic. “We sit around a lot, do lots of paperwork, typical Army things, motor pool, layouts, all that” (CMF68). Another soldier stated emphatically,

I’ve probably said this about five times already, but the expectation was working with other soldiers, providing their medical needs, either in emergency setting, a clinical setting, whatever it was. But all that I do, and all that I’ve done since I’ve gotten [to this installation] is clean CONEXs, EMCS [emergency management control system] trucks, and I understand that’s stuff that has to be done, but it’s literally all I’ve done, and sit around from 9 to 17. (CMF68)

And still another observed,

I’m supposed to be working in a hospital dealing with patients, like admissions, disposition, transfers, patient movement. I’m not doing any of that since I got to this unit. (CMF68)

Of the 29 soldiers whose comments could be classified under the “Lack of MOS-specific work” general heading, only two soldiers fell within either the CMF91 or CMF92 category. This distinction likely makes sense, as both CMF91s and CMF92s work on a more steady basis than combat CMFs or medics who engage in intense but episodic training missions.

A few soldiers mentioned that their recruiters did not prepare them for a lack of MOS-specific work, saying, for example, “I guess my recruiter didn’t really go into that a little bit. He said, ‘Sometimes you’ll have some downtime’” (CMF11).

Alternatively, that soldier who coined for us the term “sweeping wet grass”? He said he entered the Army with a more realistic view. He anticipated his MOS to be “Just as it is now, really.” He continued, “I mean, there’s always that side stuff that comes along with everything. Sweeping parking lots and sweeping wet grass, the pointless things that you think are pointless. I mean, it is what it is. There’s nothing going on right now, so I mean, I’m just basically training. I figured that’s

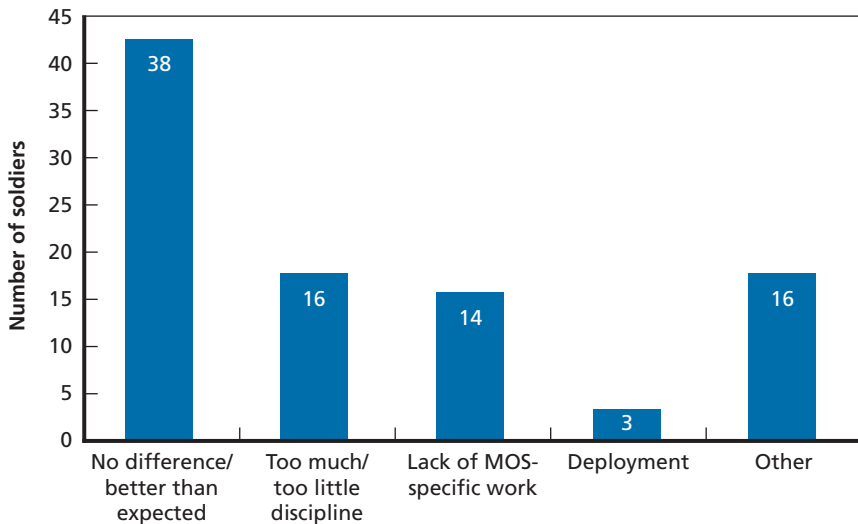
what it would be” (CMF11). This suggests that recruiters can accurately set expectations with recruits without dampening their interest in the Army.

Expectations Versus Reality About Army Life

We asked participants to highlight the degree to which the Army experience in general met expectations (see Figure 3.4).

Thirty-eight (56 percent) of the participants reported that their experience met with or exceeded their expectations. Eleven of these 38 participants specifically noted that the job exceeded expectations. Similar to their responses for MOS expectations, participants raised concerns of not going on deployments (n=3; 4 percent) or not being able to perform MOS-specific work (n=14; 21 percent).

Figure 3.4
Differences Between Expectations and Reality for Army Life



NOTE: “How is [Army life more generally] different from your expectations?” n=68; more than one response allowed.

In addition, 16 participants (24 percent) complained that there is either too much or too little discipline in the Army.⁸ One soldier observed, “I thought it was going to be more laid back, honestly. . . . I knew [Basic and AIT] would be bad, but when I got here it’s just basically the same thing . . . just mainly new NCOs [noncommissioned officers] and people who are full of power in their head” (CMF92). Another, one presumably ill-informed about daily rituals of Army life, stated, “I guess I expected it to be simpler, but I didn’t know you had to go through all these things like PT [physical training] every day and stuff like that. I thought that was only Basic and AIT. I thought that maybe you could do it on your own” (CMF13). Others, however, felt the opposite and lamented the lack of “corrective training,” a punishment meted out in the form of push-ups and other high-intensity exercises. Another medic noted that, “I thought it would be a lot harder than this, honestly. Like that’s actually what I was looking forward to, like actually getting disciplined and taught by a drill sergeant.”

Importantly, more than half of the participants (n=38; 56 percent) reported that the reality of Army life either meets or exceeds expectations. While some soldiers reported “no differences” between Army life expectations and reality (14 out of 38), many others (24 out of 38) pointed to a variety of factors that proved pleasantly surprising about Army life:

The Army is easier than expected:

I thought there was going to be a lot more yelling once I got here, a lot more push-ups. You just got to do what you’re supposed to and you’ll be all right. (CMF91)

The Army is less disciplined and regimented than expected:

I thought the sergeants and stuff were going to be real strict, yelling all the time and stuff like that, but they actually communicate with you on a lower level. They actually talk to you and they’re not always hard and so uptight. (CMF91)

⁸ In approximately half of these cases, participants stated that there is too much discipline.

The Army offers better work-life balance:

I didn't expect it to be more like a 9-to-5; I did not expect that. I mean, yeah, I wake up at like 4:00 or 5:00 to be at the company at 6 for PT. But after that it's just almost a 9-to-5, except for those days where training runs over. That really surprised me, to be honest. (CMF11)

The Army offers other quality-of-life benefits:

I did not think the DFAC [dining facility] would be as good as it is. . . . It's actually really good, not going to lie, they do a really good job. (CMF19)

Sources of Information That Led to Soldier Expectations

Where did soldiers' preenlistment expectations about the Army come from? Across all our interviews, we asked recent enlistees, "Where did you get your expectations about your MOS?" and "Where did you get your expectations about what life would be like in the Army?"

Two key insights sprang from our analysis. First, enlistees use multiple sources to inform their decisions about MOS and their vision about what Army life will be like. Second, respondents use a different mix of sources to inform their decision about MOS than they do to inform their overall vision about life in the Army.

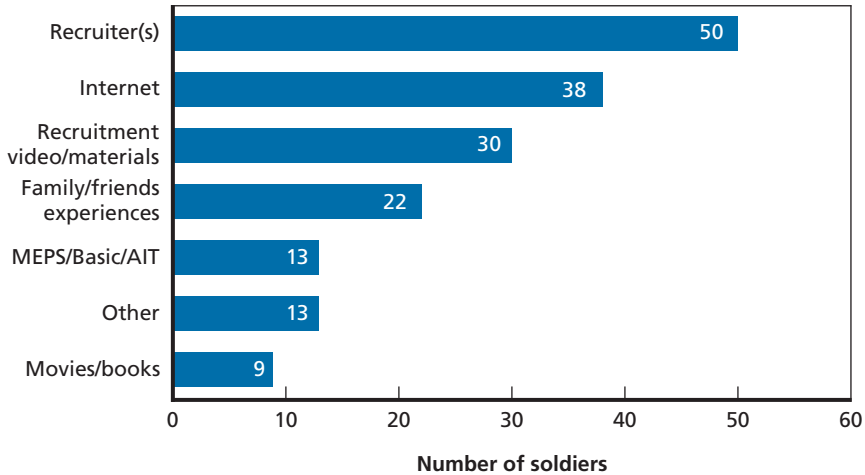
Enlistees Used Multiple Sources for MOS Expectations

Recent enlistees reported that Army recruiters (n=50), the internet (n=38), and recruitment materials (n=30) were the top three sources of information that shaped expectations for their MOS (see Figure 3.5).

Recruiters

Interactions with recruiters can have significant influence on prospective enlistees. For nearly all enlistees, after they take the ASVAB, the recruiter is the first to explain occupations that are available to recruits.

Figure 3.5
Sources of MOS Expectations



NOTE: "Where did you get your expectations about your MOS?" n=72; more than one response allowed.

RAND RR2252-3.5

Participants disagreed on the extent to which the recruiter provided appropriate guidance.

Because of recruiters, it is likely that prospective soldiers hear about MOS options that they never had considered before. One respondent from Fort Bragg recounted first hearing about a career in field artillery from his recruiter. "I never knew it was a job until I actually got to the recruiters and they started talking to me about my options, and that's the first time I heard about this MOS" (CMF13).

Soldiers offered various assessments on the overall helpfulness of their recruiters in choosing an MOS. Of the 51 participants who highlighted the recruiter as a source of MOS information, 15 described the recruiter as helpful, 9 described the recruiter as not helpful, and 13 described the recruiter as deceptive in some form or fashion. Fourteen provided descriptions that were relatively neutral.

Fifteen of the 51 participants suggested that their recruiter was helpful. In some of these cases, helpful recruiters went out of their way to identify new and useful sources of information for the recruits:

My recruiter, he was not . . . artillery, but one of his buddies was. So I got to talk to his friend a lot, and he kind of explained it. He was actually pretty honest about it. Like, he said some things weren't so great about it, but he described a lot of good things. So he's actually pretty honest with me. (CMF13)

In other cases, participants highlighted how recruiters steered them to what they deem a successful MOS choice. One soldier highlighted how a recruiter steered him to the recruiter's same MOS: "My recruiter [has the same CMF as I do]. He pretty much straight told me what it would be . . . so it's been outstanding right now" (CMF19).

In contrast, nine of 51 soldiers described recruiters who appeared unhelpful. Soldiers often critiqued the "unhelpful" recruiters for failing to give them sufficient information on their new careers. For example, a soldier from an artillery unit complained, "[The recruiters] just gave me a little sentence about what it was and then just sent me off on my way" (CMF13), while another soldier observed, "[My recruiter] didn't really tell us anything about [my MOS], he just said you do cool stuff and that's pretty much his summary of the job" (CMF19).

Finally, 13 of 51 participants considered the accounts from the recruiters to be spurious. One respondent simply stated, "I think my recruiter was kind of full of it, to be honest" (CMF11). In another case, a recruiter attempted to talk a soldier into joining an armor unit by telling him that it is just like the World War II tanker movie *Fury* starring Brad Pitt:

My recruiter said you qualify for this job and I said, "Well, what's it like?" and the first thing he [asked] me if I'd ever seen the movie *Fury*. . . . It's a [WWII] tanker movie. . . . I said, "Yeah," and he said, "Well, it's just like that." (CMF19)

Another soldier stated that a recruiter told him that with a supply CMF, he would get to go home by lunchtime every day. That soldier, who did indeed join supply, observed, "[That is] definitely not what's going on." Of course, it is possible that this particular soldier misheard or misinterpreted his recruiter. There is a common narrative in this

report, however, with supply soldiers entering the Army misperceiving how difficult and challenging their CMF actually is.

Internet

The use of the internet as a source of MOS expectations and information was widespread among recent enlistees (n=38). Top sites included official sources like GoArmy.com and nonofficial pages from Google and YouTube searches.

Many respondents researched more than one website or forum while learning about their MOS. For example, one enlistee intentionally sought out descriptions from both unofficial and official content on the web.

A lot of internet. GoArmy.com and stuff like that. Just actual people on the internet. I tried to get more away from the Army, and people that were actually artillery, in artillery and get honest views about it. So I did a lot of research into it, . . . just typing it in on Google, or some like Yahoo Answers, I think it is, and blogs and stuff like that. (CMF13)

Prospective enlistees may seek out unofficial resources on the web to provide greater texture to the descriptions they receive from recruiters and official websites like GoArmy.com. One respondent considered the information on Army websites to be insufficient and lacking details:

I looked up stuff on the internet, “what are Army Rangers,” or stuff like that. But I didn’t do a ton of research on the internet. I think the information on the Army websites in particular is really generic. Like if you have a question in your head and you go on those websites and look at it I remember thinking, “Well, this didn’t answer anything for me.” It’s kind of a wet blanket. You get like a paragraph out of those things. So, official Army means of learning about the military prior to joining it, I didn’t use a lot. (CMF11)

Recruitment Videos

Of the 30 participants who report that recruitment materials and videos helped shape expectations toward their MOS, nine stated the videos were helpful, three stated they were not helpful, and 11 stated that they were deceptive. Seven other descriptions were neutral in tone.

Some soldiers felt that the videos were a constructive resource in helping them choose their MOS. An Armor soldier observed,

I saw the video, yeah, I mean the video really sold it all. He didn't have to tell me anything about the MOS, he showed me a video and I was like, those guys look like badasses. (CMF19)

In other cases, however, participants stated that the videos overglorified the MOS. As an Army mechanic observed,

I just feel like the videos they show you in the recruiting station kind of amp everything up a little bit more or they hype it up more than what it really is. I feel like it's just something they use to pull you into it. For example, the video would show you're in full battle, you've got your plates on, [Army Combat Helmet] ACH, everything and you're just running, you're fixing stuff. The video didn't even show a motor pool honestly, I didn't know the trucks were stationed in a big lot and there were bays and equipment like that. It just looked like you were going to be on convoys and stuff like that. (CMF91)

The use of potentially out-of-date or inaccurate videos to depict a thrilling military lifestyle appeared especially common for the armor CMF, as the following quotes illustrate:

[The recruiter] showed me the basic bullshit video of somebody riding a motorcycle through the desert and jumping all slow motion. [He said] that's going to be you, you're going to be riding that motorcycle when you get there. I was like, yeah, sure I am. (CMF19)

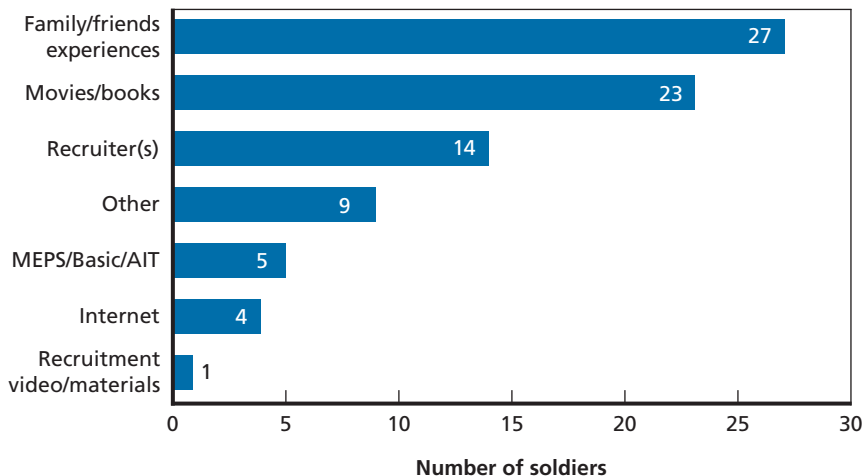
[The recruiter] showed me this video of this guy riding around on a dirt bike in a ghillie suit, shooting a sniper rifle. I was like, that looks like it's a lot of fun. I've not ridden a dirt bike or shot a sniper rifle. (CMF19)

[The recruiters] show you this awesome video with Bradleys shooting stuff and motorcycles and all this cool stuff and we don't actually do any of that stuff. (CMF19)

Enlistees Used Multiple but Different Sources for Expectations About Army Life

In comparison with the inquiry on sources of MOS expectations, here we probed into privates' preenlistment sources of expectations on deployment, work-life balance, and overall Army culture. Recent enlistees ranked family and friends (n=27) and movies and books (n=23) as the top two sources of Army expectations (see Figure 3.6).

Figure 3.6
Sources of Expectations for Army Life



NOTE: "Where did you get your expectations about what life would be like in the Army?" n=63; more than one response allowed. This question was added after the first installation visit.

Recent enlistees reported family and friends as the top source of Army expectations (n=27; 43 percent). Family members currently serving in the Army may offer a firsthand entrée into Army life. For example, one private whose father worked in the barracks saw early on the routine and predictability of Army life:

My dad was at this unit for a little bit, too. We used to come over to Alpha Company barracks all the time when he did his checks, whenever he was on stat duty or brigade stat duty or something like that, just walking around the barracks and seeing stuff like that. (CMF11)

Nevertheless, some soldiers expected more exposure to deployment based on the military experiences of family and friends. For example, this private talked with his Vietnam veteran uncle about life in the Army. According to the private, his uncle deployed often and spent little time in garrison. “[I learned about my expectations] mainly from my uncle, but he was always deployed so that’s kind of like a big thing now that you start thinking about it more” (CMF11).

Teachers also emerged as a unique source of expectations. Four privates mentioned high school teachers as influential advisers. According to one soldier, “From my friends and family that have been in, they told me what they’d experienced and all that, so I used that as basic judgment for when I first joined, when I first got here. I [also] had a lot of teachers that were prior service and they told me what they experienced, as well. . . . They all said I would like it, and I did” (CMF19).

Movies, Television, and Books

Hollywood is a major source of Army expectations (n=23; 27 percent). Movies offer a dramatized and extraordinary depiction of Army life. Disproportionately, Hollywood movies portray the stark sacrifices and glorious triumphs that occurred to a very limited number of soldiers at specific periods in American history. Although widely distributed, these feature films are not representative of the experience the majority of U.S. soldiers have or will have. Moreover, movies tend to focus on deployment and boot camp rather than garrison life.

Nevertheless, recent enlistees reported films, books, and television shows as a top contributor to their expectations for Army life, citing the following movies:

- *Black Hawk Down* (n=6)
- *Saving Private Ryan* (n=6)
- *Full Metal Jacket* (n=5)
- *American Sniper* (n=1)
- *Major Payne* (n=1)
- *Dear John* (n=1)
- *Fury* (n=1).

In one interview, an armor-MOS private listed a number of movies that erroneously informed his Army expectations.

. . . Watching *Lone Survivor*, *Black Hawk Down*, *Full Metal Jacket*, all that other stuff, that's where I thought it's hardcore, but of course it's not like it was back in the day. But that's where I got my expectations how it's going to be and the field training, doing all this, doing all that. (CMF19)

Combat memoirs also influenced recent enlistees' expectations:

Well, so I read *Lone Survivor*. I always remember that. I read—I don't know if you ever heard of it—*House to House*? It's written by a staff sergeant who was in Fallujah the second time that we went in. That book I always remember. Oh, my God, I've read a ton of books. It's kind of hard to recall names. But I read a lot of books just on like written by guys from the global war on terror generation, guys who had served in Iraq and Afghanistan. (CMF11)

Soldier Considerations in Changing Their MOS

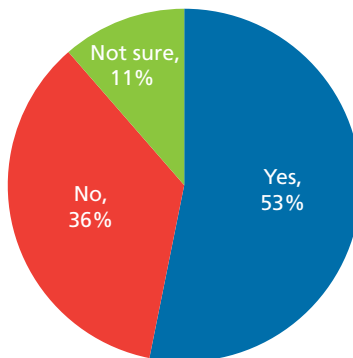
Another approach to capturing soldier perspectives on their MOS is to examine the degree to which soldiers would want to change their MOS. In the civilian sector, changing jobs or even careers has become

commonplace. Recent data from Gallup suggests that 21 percent of the millennial generation has changed jobs within the past year, more than three times the number of nonmillennials who report the same.⁹ Of course, making such changes is more difficult in the Army, but we wanted to capture the degree to which soldiers might find such a change attractive.

We asked participants, “Would you ever want to change your MOS? If so, to what?” The responses to this query yielded observations on the percentage of soldiers who would consider changing their MOS, the general career field that they would reclassify to, and reasons for wanting to make the MOS change. Because the query is phrased in terms of “ever want” to change MOS, it more likely assesses notional desires for an MOS change rather than an intent to actually effect one.

Figure 3.7 presents the responses to the question, “Would you ever want to change your MOS?” We see that just over half of participants (n=42; 53 percent) report that they may like to make such a

Figure 3.7
Percentage of Soldiers Who Would Consider
Changing Their MOS



NOTE: “Would you ever want to change your MOS?”
 n=79.

RAND RR2252-3.7

⁹ Amy Adkins, “Millennials: The Job-Hopping Generation,” Gallup.com, May 2016.

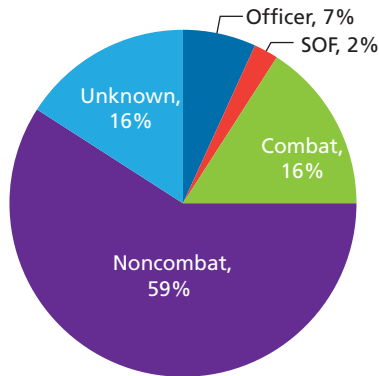
change at some point in the future, with over a third stating that they do not envision changing their MOS (n=28).

Figure 3.8 presents the categories for participants' reclassification choice. Soldiers, in general, preferred to reclassify to noncombat positions (n=28; 59 percent). A minority of participants (n=7; 16 percent) selected reclassifying to a combat MOS, and a handful of participants selected either an officer reclassification (n=3; 7 percent) or special operations forces (n=1; 2 percent). We did not find any obvious differences in responses for participants belonging to either combat or noncombat CMFs.

Nearly all the participants who said they would consider changing their MOS provided some explanation as to why they would make this change (see Figure 3.9). The most popular factors were future career intentions (17 out of 40) and personal interest (16 out of 40).

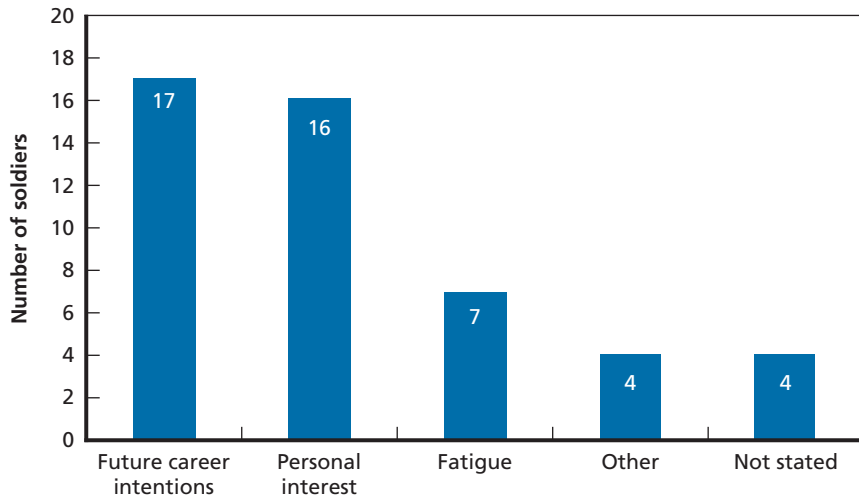
In general, interview participants were aware that they would someday leave the Army, and they seemed to consider carefully what MOS options would most prepare them for this transition. These considerations were often independent of current job satisfaction. A

Figure 3.8
Preferred Reclassification Choice



NOTES: For soldiers who reported that they would consider a future reclassification, the figure depicts the response to the question, "If so, [reclassify to] what?" n=44. SOF = Special Operations Forces.

Figure 3.9
Soldier Reasons for Reclassification



NOTE: In all but four interviews, interviewers asked participants why they would change their MOS. This question was not specifically included in the interview protocol.

RAND RR2252-3.9

number of participants wanted to go into the field of medicine and thus eyed reclassification to a medical field. One infantryman stated that he would consider working with unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). He also would consider “satellite surveillance, human intelligence, cybersecurity” and other “really intelligent jobs that you can actually do in the civilian world.” He explained,

I know that I’m going to eventually change my MOS, not because I don’t like my job—because I love my job, it’s fun, going out there to the range all the time. But I want to learn a skill, something really sophisticated I could do outside in civilian world, that I can get a good paycheck doing while I try to go to school. (CMF11)

Some soldiers characterized their choice in terms of personal interest (n=16). One soldier wanted to reclassify to a military police officer

because that is what he “just always wanted to be” (CMF92). Another soldier was considering operating room specialist because, in addition to previous experience in the medical field, he likes “the whole needles and drawing blood and all of that” (CMF91).

Other soldiers, virtually all from the ranks of combat units, reported that fatigue plays a factor in wanting a different job ($n=7$). Soldiers in these combat units often endure arduous physical exercises and long rucksack marches. They participate in intense training exercises. These physical demands can have a toll on soldiers’ bodies. One soldier in particular looked to make a change soon because “. . . my knees and back can’t really handle this too much longer, I think” (CMF19). Looking to the future, an infantryman thought that for his third contract he would like to be a mechanic. Asked why, he explained, “Like the physical part of it, there’s a lot of—not here at my unit, but I’ve talked to a lot of vets that are out of the Army and they were like, yeah, their backs are messed up, their knees are messed up. By the time they’re like 50, 55 they’re all torn up” (CMF11).

Summary

The soldiers we interviewed recognized that the Army gave them an opportunity to become a military professional. Soldiers chose combat occupations (e.g., infantry) because it exposed them to excitement and adventure unique to the Army. A number of soldiers in noncombat occupations (e.g., mechanics) said the Army exposed them to unique work experience that could help their employment prospects when they separate or retire. Put simply, most soldiers acknowledged the unique benefits they hoped to get from their Army service.

However, many of these same soldiers expressed frustration with the bureaucratic characteristics of work in the Army. Soldiers complained about not being able to perform the jobs they trained for during BCT and AIT. Others expressed frustration with boredom, the lack of desired time spent training down range, and doing tasks that did not relate to their occupation; a few soldiers wanted more deploy-

ment opportunities. But when asked about broader life in the Army, the majority of soldier experiences were better than they expected.

The information soldiers consume prior to joining their first unit likely has a significant impact on the expectations they derive about Army service. While it is likely that many recruiters perform admirably, others may paint an unrealistic picture of day-to-day soldier life, thereby creating unusually high expectations. A steady diet of World War II action movies may likewise leave a prospective soldier misinformed about modern life in the Army. Efforts that instill more accurate portraits of soldier work and life may ultimately improve satisfaction with the Army experience.

The results from this chapter suggest differences in expectations for what it means to be an Army professional versus the reality of working as a soldier each day. Soldiers' responses in this chapter indicate that bonds formed through shared work are important to their satisfaction with the military. About one-half of soldiers expressed interest in changing their occupations sometime in the future.

Life in the Unit

I've barely been at this unit for a little over two months and I've already met really close friends, especially one of my friends here, we're together every day, eat breakfast, lunch and dinner in my room together, work out together, all the time. And especially the people that are above you, the people you work with, are higher than you, the NCOs, they're some of the best people you meet because they don't always teach you about Army stuff and your job, they teach you how to actually live your life; they care about you.

Infantryman

At their initial duty station, Army life shifts from the immersive experience of boot camp to something approaching a more conventional job, and many soldiers learn for the first time what it means to build a life away from one's hometown. Key to a successful transition is a positive experience in the Army unit. Our research here finds that relationships, with both peers and leaders, broadly shape the Army experience. There is over a century of research showing that unit cohesion plays a key role in motivating soldiers to fight in war.¹ Similarly, research from

¹ See, for example, Ardant Du Picq, *Battle Studies*, New York: Macmillan, 1880 [1921]; Robert J. MacCoun, Elizabeth Kier, and Aaron Belkin, "Does Social Cohesion Determine Motivation in Combat? An Old Question with an Old Answer," *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 32, No. 1, 2006, pp. 646–654; Paul L. Savage and Richard A. Gabriel, "Cohesion and Disintegration in the American Army," *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 2, 1976, pp. 340–376;

the U.S. Army finds that cohesion is an important characteristic for constructing and maintaining effective combat units.² Typically, theories of cohesion describe both task cohesion, bonding through shared experience, and social cohesion, bonding through similar characteristics. While research on the military often focuses on the latter of these, respondents to this study described bonding in both ways. What soldiers think about life inside the unit is the focus of this chapter. The first section examines soldier perspectives about arriving at their installation. Next, we examine what soldiers like the most and least about unit life. Finally, we examine how soldiers get along with others in their unit.

Soldiers' Early Perceptions About Their Installations

After they have finished basic and advanced training, soldiers face the prospect of having to travel to their new installations and live in what is likely a distant and unfamiliar place. To better understand how soldiers learn about their new installation, we asked participants, "What did you know about the reputation of [installation] or your unit before arriving here?" Of the 78 soldiers who described what they had heard about their installations before arriving, we heard 47 comments that we classified as negative, 26 that we classified as positive, and 18 that

Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz, "Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 12, 1948, pp. 280–315; Guy L. Siebold, "The Essence of Military Group Cohesion," *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2007, pp. 286–295; Thomas S. Szayna, Eric V. Larson, Angela O'Mahony, Sean Robson, Agnes Gereben Schaefer, Miriam Matthews, J. Michael Polich, Lynsay Ayer, Derek Eaton, William Marcellino, Lisa Miyashiro, Marek Posard, James Syme, Zev Winkelman, Cameron Wright, Megan Zander-Cotugno, and William Welser, *Considerations for Integrating Women into Closed Occupations in the U.S. Special Operations Forces*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1058-USSOCOM, 2015.

² Francis B. Kish, *Cohesion: The Vital Ingredient for Successful Army Units*, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: Army War College, 1982; Guy L. Siebold and Dennis R. Kelly, *Development of the Combat Platoon Cohesion Questionnaire*, No. ARI-TR-817, Alexandria, Va.: U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, 1988; Leonard Wong, Thomas A. Kolditz, Raymond A. Millen, and Terrence M. Potter, *Why They Fight: Combat Motivation in the Iraq War*, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2003.

were more neutral in tone. In general, soldiers seem to have only a vague idea of what the specific installation they are assigned to will be like. Often, the reputation of the installation boils down to a few well-used tropes. While Fort Bragg appeared to be less stereotyped, other soldiers quipped that Fort Drum is cold, Fort Hood is dangerous, and Fort Riley is in the middle of nowhere. For example, one soldier preparing to go to Fort Drum reported that he was told, “Oh, you’re going to hate it” and “That place is horrible. It gets cold” (CMF13). A soldier from Fort Hood commented that he heard it was just “hot” and that there was “nothing really to do” there (CMF11). Other soldiers from Fort Hood commented on the danger, with one soldier saying he heard it was “one of the most dangerous posts in the country” (CMF68). This seems to have been a reference to a 2016 training accident that took the lives of nine Fort Hood soldiers, as well as possibly the 2009 terrorist attack that took place on the installation.³ In contrast, in a typical reference, a soldier from Fort Riley reported that he heard that Fort Riley “sucks” because “there’s nothing to do out here and that the weather sucks” (CMF92). For the vast majority of soldiers, though, the reality of life at the installation overcame many of the worst-case descriptions of the bases. A Fort Bragg soldier was told, “There’s nothing but like hookers and druggies outside [the base] walls” but noted that “I have not had any bad experiences, though. I like it here” (CMF68).

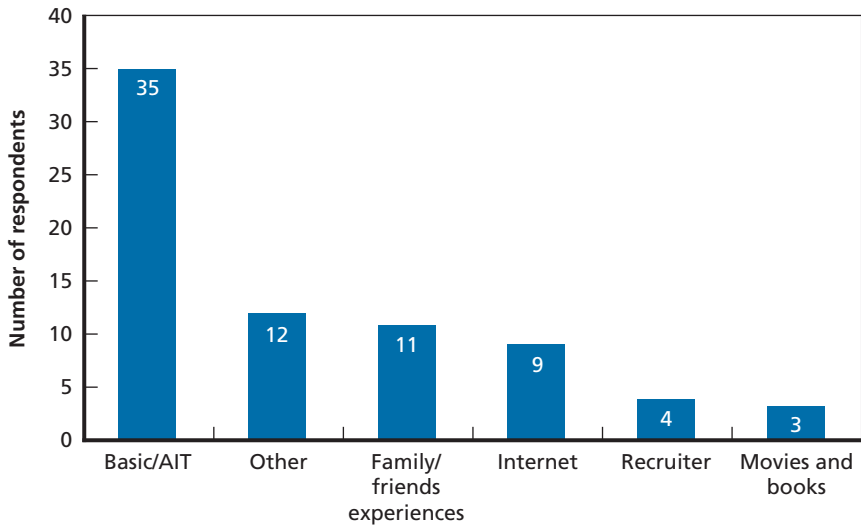
Next, we asked where soldiers get their information on their installations.⁴ As seen in Figure 4.1, nearly half of participants (35 out of 72 respondents) reported that they received their information at early entry training.⁵ In a commonly heard observation, one soldier explained, “Drill sergeants and then other guys in basic training who

³ David Caplan, “Fort Hood Releases Names of Soldiers Killed in Accident,” *ABC News*, June 5, 2016.

⁴ Interviewers posed this question to 58 of the 72 participants who answered our initial query on installation reputations. This particular question was drafted as a subquestion or prompt in our interview protocol, so it was not routinely asked to all participants.

⁵ This question allowed multiple responses, and in 13 of 35 cases, Basic/AIT was not the sole source of information.

Figure 4.1
Source of Installation Reputation



NOTE: “Where did you hear about this reputation?” n=72; more than one response allowed.

RAND RR2252-4.1

claimed to know stuff about different units in the Army. That’s where I heard it from” (CMF11).⁶

“Family/friends,” “Internet,” “Recruiter,” and “Movies and books” were each cited by a relatively smaller number of participants. The relatively small number of “Internet” responses (n=9 out of 72 respondents) proved surprising, given the popularity of using the internet to inform an MOS choice. Only four in 63 participants stated that they used the Internet to learn about Army life in general. With the preponderance of negative and rather unofficial information about soldiers’ prospective posts, it suggests that programs delivering accurate information about installations and base life may help ease the transition to base

⁶ Responses categorized as “Other” included a variety of additional responses that ranged from soldiers who heard about installations from prior units (some soldiers briefly served in Korea before their present assignments) to those that gave generalized and nonspecific answers such as “everyone.”

life. Such programs could provide examples of on- and off-post activities, descriptions of the nearest towns, or an orientation to the history of the post.

What Soldiers Like the Most and Least About Unit Life

We asked soldiers a series of questions about their experiences in their Army units to gauge their perspectives about both the best and worst aspects of unit life, unit work functioning, and other soldiers' perceptions of soldiers who don't fit in.

What Is a Unit?

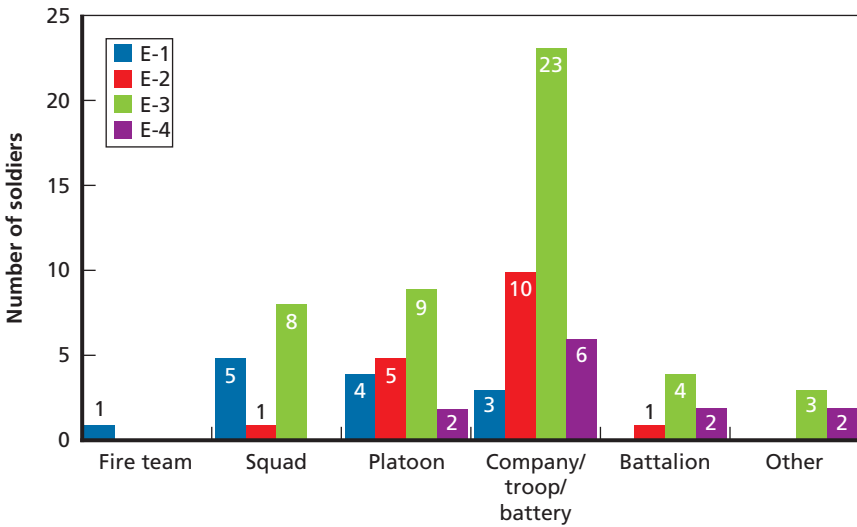
The Army is characterized by a series of echelons, from the squad, a group of four to ten soldiers, up to the field army, consisting of two corps and 50,000–90,000 people. In junior ranks of the Army, soldiers' primary identification tends to be with small units. In ascending order, these are squad, section (two squads), platoon, company (also called troop or battery), and battalion. Rather than impose a particular echelon as the unit in our questions, such as platoon or company, we allowed soldiers to decide for themselves what size unit or echelon was the most relevant to their Army experience. To do this, we asked soldiers, "When I ask you to talk about 'your unit,' which do you mostly think of, your squad or your platoon or your company?"

Roughly one-half of all soldiers said that they thought of "their" unit as the company level ($n=42$; 52 percent, or the sum of all those respondents by ranks in the "Company/troop" bar in Figure 4.2). E-1 and E-2 soldiers were more likely to identify with smaller units, whereas E-3 and E-4 soldiers were more likely to identify with company and above, as shown in Figure 4.2.

What Soldiers Like Best About Their Units

To understand what soldiers most like about their unit life, we asked participants, "What is the best thing about being in your unit?" Soldiers tended to focus on the relationship dynamics of the unit, with a specific focus on leadership and camaraderie (see Figure 4.3), rather

Figure 4.2
Soldier Choice of Reference Unit



NOTE: “When I ask you to talk about ‘your unit,’ which do you mostly think of, your squad or your platoon or your company?” n=81; in six cases, soldiers responded with more than one preferred reference units. This is reflected in the chart and comparison. Where responses were “Other,” soldiers’ responses were difficult to categorize, for example, where the soldier was part of a very small unit attached to a unit of a different type, and didn’t feel a strong association to a particular unit at all.

RAND RR2252-4.2

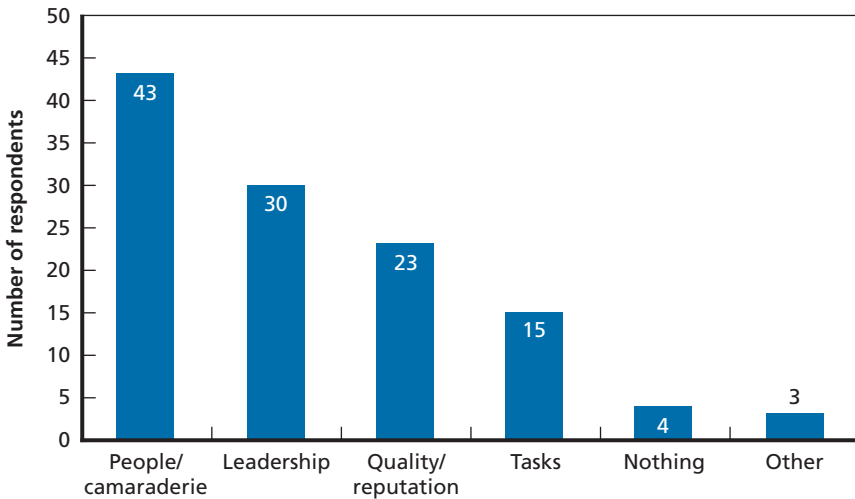
than on the material aspects of unit life, such as work hours or specific tasks.

Camaraderie

When asked the best thing about being in their unit, over half of the soldiers said the camaraderie they feel toward the other soldiers in their unit (n=43; 53 percent):

We’re very serious and we take our training seriously. But at the same time we know how to have fun and not be so serious that we lose sight of the fact that we are pretty much just human. Yeah, we’re supposed to be big soldiers and we’re not supposed to show sensitive emotions and things, but we are human and as much as we train we still need to have time to relax. (CMF19)

Figure 4.3
The “Best” Attributes of Unit Life



NOTE: “What’s the best thing about being in your unit?” n=81; more than one response allowed.

RAND RR2252-4.3

Soldiers, for example, talk of a “family-like feeling” toward their comrades in arms, a distinction that blurs the line between the workplace and social life (CMF68). As one combat medic observed, his peers were “my absolute best friends through everything; I can talk to them about anything that’s going on. . . . Like, guys that always know what’s going on with you, and they’re always willing to help and willing to see what they can do” (CMF68). While cohesion is often assumed to be the result of social bonds, these responses suggest a more nuanced view: The immersive experience of shared work develops social bonds leading to greater satisfaction with Army life.

Leadership

Over a third of soldiers expressed admiration for small-unit leadership (n=30; 37 percent). Soldiers offered general praise for leadership and referenced specific acts of good management and often believed that their leadership genuinely cared about them as people. As one armor soldier observed, “They take care of you. They may have you doing

some dumb stuff that you don't like to do, but they take care of you at the end of the day . . . everybody, in my command: my platoon sergeant, my section leader, my section sergeant, everybody" (CMF19). Other soldiers expressed appreciation for what they saw as their leaders' commitment to training and developing privates as soldiers. As one private said,

It's a bond, so they care for me to know more, have more knowledge. I guess I want to say, it's not like they have to teach me, they're willing to teach me, they want to teach me. In AIT, they make plans and they have to teach the soldiers, it's not one-on-one time, they have to teach it to the mass[es]. Here, you get to work one-on-one with somebody and learn the different techniques and stuff like that. (CMF91)

In addition, soldiers credit leadership when they are able to focus on completing their work without frustrating work details:

The best thing is my NCOIC [NCO in charge]. He takes care of me and he makes sure I'm good. And he doesn't send me out on little dumb tasks and like cutting-grass details and all of that type stuff. He actually utilizes me instead of—some NCOs they're just like, "Oh, we just need a body. We don't care what you have going on. Just go cut the grass," that type of stuff. (CMF92)

As we will see in greater detail below, this is important because the nature of the tasks and how they are assigned influenced cohesion and satisfaction: One of soldiers' biggest complaints about unit life is being given non-CMF-relevant tasks.

Quality and Reputation

More than a quarter of soldiers cited perceived quality and reputation of the soldier's unit (n=23; 28 percent). The pride created by a sense of eliteness serves as a sustaining force, for example:

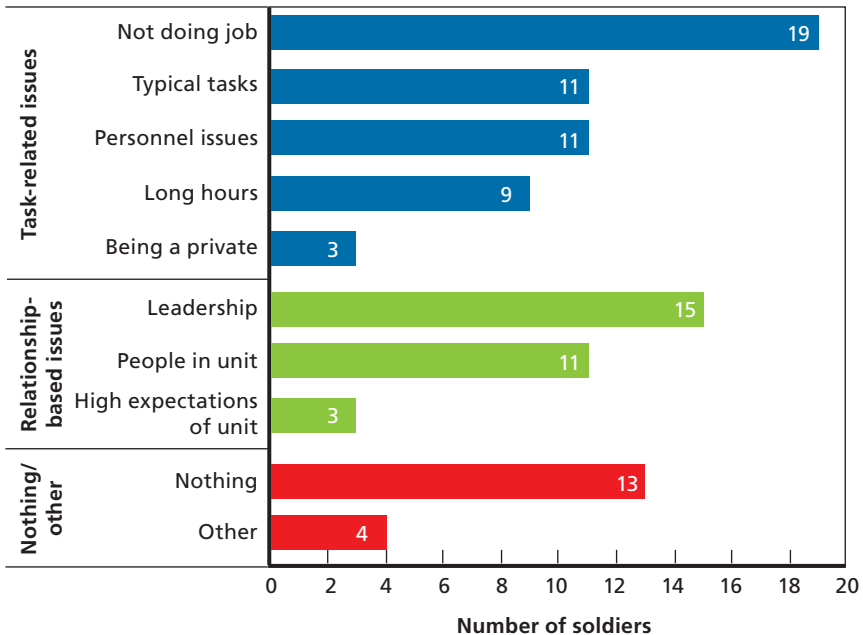
The best thing is standard-wise, as we've been told we're the best company in our battalion and it's the best battalion on [our installation]. So, we hold that standard and everyone's just a little

bit higher up than everyone else because you hear about all this other bad stuff that happens to these other units, all these other companies and forts. (CMF91)

What Soldiers Like Least About Their Units

We also wanted to know what soldiers like the least about their units. They offer a diverse range of responses (see Figure 4.4). In general, 68 out of 81 respondents reported some form of criticism of their unit. In total, there were 86 negative comments about units. Most soldier comments focused on tangible, task-based problems rather than relationship-based issues, although soldiers did cite leadership as a problem. Of course, leadership issues are inherently tied to most task-

Figure 4.4
The “Worst” Attributes of Unit Life



NOTE: “What is the worst thing about being in your [reference unit]?” n=81; more than one response allowed.

related issues, since the preponderance of tasks are assigned by leaders. Where respondents specifically cited leadership style, it has been coded as leadership; where they cited the nature of the task, it has been coded under the relevant task code. Where the respondent discussed these both in a single answer, responses have been coded as both. We have clarified this in the text of the report. We explore these responses next.

Task-Based Issues

The most common complaints by soldiers focused on those times when they felt they were not doing their job (n=19; 23 percent)—being given tasks not related to their jobs, being inefficiently tasked, being given busywork, or repetition of tasks, for example:

I've got more important stuff to do than fill out this packet for the third time and then hand it in, just so that waiting two weeks I can be asked, "Hey, did you ever hand that in? Can you fill it out again?" I'm like, come on, guys. And yet there's just so much better stuff that I could be doing than this stupid stuff. (CMF68)

Eleven soldiers (14 percent) complained about various personnel issues, including complaints about high turnover, high numbers of soldiers on loan to other units or tasks, not being physically collocated with other members of their unit, and promotion. These social aspects of task assignment were grating for some soldiers. One soldier, for example, complained, "I've been here for eight months and I've already had two first sergeants and two commanders" (CMF91). He continued: "Everything's constantly being upturned. One moment we have one person acting as our leader, and the next month they're getting out and somebody else is having to suddenly jump in and take over. . . . It's annoying often, though it can also be fun simply learning something that's actually above your pay grade" (CMF11). In other cases, soldiers described a lack of personnel at their own level. This meant that privates, as the lowest on the totem pole, would often be scrambling to get everything done:

In reality, we should probably have at least two or three more people, just to do daily tasks and stuff, so we can get our work

done. I find myself spending a lot more time running back and forth between places, trying to get stuff done, instead of being in front of the computer and executing the tasks that I need to do for the day. So a lot of my stuff gets done, but I have to stay later than everyone else. (CMF19)

Another coding category, “typical tasks,” explored instances where soldiers were assigned tasks appropriately but did not enjoy their assignments. These soldiers complained not so much about inappropriate or CMF-irrelevant taskings but about normal work tasks they found objectionable or unpleasant (n=11; 14 percent). Soldiers, for example, complained about having to clean oil spills or carry a weighty M240 machine gun, both part of their assigned jobs.

Soldiers sometimes complained about long hours spent away from family, or the unpredictability of their work schedules (n=9; 11 percent). And a few soldiers (n=3; 3.7 percent) described their greatest problem as being at the “bottom” of their unit’s “totem pole.”

Relationship-Based Issues

While the preponderance of criticisms of unit life focused on the kinds of work and working conditions soldiers encountered, an important subset of responses addressed relationships with other soldiers in the unit. One key relationship problem focused on unit leadership. Overall, 15 participants reported that they experienced problems with unit leaders (19 percent).

In some cases, soldiers felt that unit leadership set a poor example or took credit for their own efforts. A medic observed,

I see more E-4 [soldiers] and below taking on jobs [of] leaders or even higher-up. Leaders should be doing that job, but they're not. They're handing it down to E-4 and below to make them do the work. (CMF68)

Having recently left basic training where drill instructors stressed the importance of upholding standards, at least one soldier seemed particularly frustrated when faced with leadership that failed to uphold standards:

It's when they expect you to do something the right way, but then they don't do it the right way. It's like if you're like an NCO, you're supposed to uphold the standard. But then if you tell someone to do that but then you go ahead and do the opposite, it just doesn't make you look good. Or just not treating people fairly, I would say. (CMF11)

Soldiers also complained about their leaders' lack of organization and communication skills that at times led to "everyone running around like chickens with their head[s] cut off, not knowing what to do, not knowing what comes next" (CMF91). One soldier observed,

The last-minute bullshit and just random, pointless stuff that comes down and we're doing it for no reason, other than because someone said to. . . . Just people stepping all over each other's toes, and we'll have an NCO say OK, well this is the task, this is how we're going to do it, and then an officer steps in . . . and says why are you doing it like this, let's do it this way, and they'll go back and forth like that on stuff, for days sometimes. (CMF68)

Finally, soldiers sometimes complained more generally about how leaders treated them: "They treat you like a child; they micromanage. They assume you're a liar because you're E-4 or below, stuff like that."

In 11 cases (14 percent) (as shown in Figure 4.4), soldiers had issues with specific individuals in their unit, generally peers. For example, one soldier took exception to bad behavior on the part of his peers, saying, "we've had a lot of problems with DUIs [driving under the influence] and a lot of people getting into trouble, lot of Article 15s just the last couple of months, a lot of trouble going on with a bunch of soldiers. That's probably the worst thing is stupid decisions" (CMF91). Taken together, these relationship-based problems highlight the important interrelationship between workplace and social acts: Bad leadership creates negative affect in soldiers, and peers who are not mindful of the greater social good are bad soldiers.

No Significant Problems in Unit

A third significant group of soldiers responded with “nothing” (n=13). These soldiers gave responses such as, “I don’t think there is a bad thing. I really like my platoon” (CMF11).

Social Dynamics in the Unit

Soldiers Who Don’t Fit In

While a great many of our questions focused on soldiers’ direct experiences in the unit, we also asked, “Are there Soldiers who just don’t fit in or take away from your unit’s success?”

Over one-third of soldiers (n=26; 35 percent) reported that everybody in their unit fit in, and 42 (54 percent) of soldiers stated that someone in their unit did not fit in. Of those soldiers who did identify soldiers who did not fit in, 11 (out of 42) participants described them in terms of poor work performance, “. . . lack of PT or can’t shoot” (CMF11). However, in the majority of cases (30 out of 42 soldiers), soldiers attributed the poor fit to a soldier’s attitude rather than lack of aptitude or physical ability. Other responses (11 out of 42) characterized those not fitting in in terms of poor interpersonal skills, though this did not necessarily mean these were “bad” soldiers.

Attitude Problems

As noted, 30 participants (out of 42) described soldiers who did not “fit in” based on their attitudes. The nature of the attitude problems described by soldiers varied, but aggregated into a few groups. One set of responses focused on those who did not pull their weight with the team, “that one person who doesn’t do anything to help out”:

There are some soldiers that I feel are completely selfish. It’s okay to be selfish to a certain extent, because of course you’ve got to take care of yourself, but if we’ve got trucks to get done, there’s some guys who will set all these appointments and they’re just never there. Then, the one day that they’re there and they have to work late, they want to complain and be mad. But it’s like we’re

here every day working late, you finally came one day out of two weeks and you're mad. (CMF91)

Soldiers also expressed concern with a related attitude problem, the lack of desire for self-improvement or self-discipline. Soldiers saw those who were not “motivated” as detracting from the unit. These soldiers “just don't strive to improve themselves in any way. And they just let themselves waste away” (CMF68). As one soldier said, “some of them, their problems are extremely simple to fix, [they] just need to put in some effort in their personal time” (CMF68).

A final attitude-related problem often cited by soldiers was the general perception that some soldiers simply did not want to be in the Army. This is sometimes related to poor performance, but at other times it stands alone. Not wanting to be in the Army is itself sufficient reason for a soldier to be seen as a problem. For example, we heard from one soldier who had rashly joined the Army and regretted it. The belief that his peers sensed this regret appeared to increase his sense of isolation:

Yeah. I feel like I could be one of those people because sometimes, like working and stuff, I don't feel like working. But I don't show it. I try to, but sometimes I just show the lack of wanting to be there and a lot of people notice, like they know. But I feel like sometimes I'm one of the only ones because I feel like, almost all of my battery, they want to be there and they want to be soldiers and stuff. (CMF13)

Another soldier echoed this sentiment, saying, “There's a few that push themselves to be on the outside just because they don't maybe want to be a part of the organization. They don't like life in the Army. They don't want to be part of that Army standard so they achieve the bare minimum, for most of them” (CMF68).

Lack of Belonging

Eleven participants characterized a peer as not seeming to belong. One soldier described a peer who did not fit in this way:

We had one kid that just didn't say anything, just never talked. So it's just he was really awkward around everyone. Even when we were just trying to be nice he was just really awkward. So [I don't] mind it, but it's just weird. . . . They do their stuff. If we tell them they just do it. It's just how they act. It's not really antisocial. They just do their own thing. So if they get told an order they will do it. It's just when you come to talking and interacting, they kind of like shy away from it. (CMF19)

Another soldier voiced this concern by describing himself:

Me, personally, I see myself more of an outcast but I guess. . . . The reason why I see myself more of an outcast is because . . . [the rest of the unit is] on the road and I can't really get to know them as well as I'd like, but also due to the fact that I've just been somebody who prefers to keep my distance from a group due to the fact once a group starts talking I like to hear both sides of the story. (CMF68)

Taken together, these responses suggest that there is a strong group ethos at the small unit level. Even where soldiers said there were no problems with soldiers in their units, their reasoning showed the same value for a positive attitude, pulling one's weight, and getting along. Soldiers said things like, "everyone does their part," or "I think everyone fits in; no one is made to feel pushed out," and "my platoon, my section, we pick these guys up, even though you may be having a bad day, but you're with us, we're going to take care of you, we're going to get this done." While to some degree attitude is important in any workplace, the special emphasis placed on self-improvement, the desire to be part of the institution, and social belonging reflect the unique nature of the Army mission and organizational culture. This is consistent with other findings in this chapter, such as the value of camaraderie.

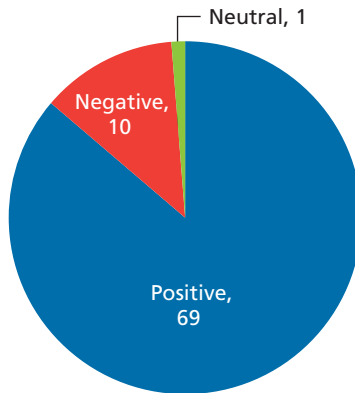
Taken together, these findings suggest a possible profound inter-relationship of task and social cohesion. Soldiers who do not place the collective accomplishment of a task above personal preference are excluded from the bonds of social cohesion. These soldiers simply do

not fit, either as colleagues or as comrades. By contrast, a soldier who is socially different but has the right attitude toward work and the collective good is accepted as a good soldier and good comrade, despite social differences.

Working Together

We asked soldiers, “How well does your unit work together?” Soldiers overwhelmingly answered this in the positive (n=69; 85 percent), as shown in Figure 4.5. Soldiers felt a sense of pride in the ability of their unit to set a goal and accomplish it together. As one said, “We communicate very well. If you need something, call whoever’s nearby. Like if you need a wrench, a toolbox or anything like, ‘Hey, I need this right now, bring it,’ have it there in about 10 seconds, and we get the job done” (CMF91). Others felt their platoon had a special drive to succeed: “We push each other to be better; we’re constantly on each other about getting better and stuff. I don’t know personally about other platoons; I see them, but I don’t know what their little groupings or

Figure 4.5
Soldier Perceptions of How Well the Unit Works Together



NOTE: “How well does your [reference unit] work together?”
 n=80.

RAND RR2252-4.5

discussions are about, but I feel like my platoon is the best platoon” (CMF19).

In the few cases where soldiers felt their unit did not work well together (n=10; 12 percent), their responses focused on poor organization and communication as factors that impede unit function.

As one soldier described it,

Let’s say if something changes, some people won’t get the notification until you get the call, “Hey where you at?” And you’re like, “What are you talking about where I’m at?” “You’re supposed to be here.” “I didn’t know about it.” You get a lot of people that say, “I don’t know about it.” It’s because they really don’t, because somebody’s being lazy and not passing it down, or a platoon sergeant will pass it down to one of the squad sergeants and it still won’t get passed down. Or they’ll tell certain people and expect those people to tell other people. Communications suck, period. (CMF92)

Summary

In general, soldiers highlighted the importance of their relationships with other soldiers. These relationships typically begin to form once soldiers enter their first duty stations. However, before arriving, most soldiers know very little about their new duty stations or about the units where they would forge these important relationships. Upon arrival, soldiers began to forge strong relationships with other service members.

For example, soldiers identified their “unit” at the squad, platoon, or company level. When asked about the best characteristics of their life in these units, most described the camaraderie with other soldiers or their unit leadership. Much as we found and discussed in Chapter Three, soldiers frequently complained about not doing their job and personnel issues. In some cases, these problems seemed to impinge on soldier opinions about their peers and leadership in units. Nonetheless, the overwhelming majority of soldiers were positive when asked about

how well their units work together. Our results in this chapter suggest that task cohesion and social cohesion are both important for Army satisfaction. But they also suggest that having what can be thought of as a social attitude toward work accomplishment—pulling one’s weight and helping others—can foster social relationships, and that soldiers who do not pursue the collective good in the workplace are seen as social outcasts.

The critical importance of camaraderie and good small unit leadership suggest avenues to enhance soldier recruitment and retention. As we note in Chapter Seven, it may be wise for the Army to increase its policy of leveraging small unit leaders and peers to motivate soldiers to reenlist. The Army could also emphasize peer bonds as part of its value proposition. This would not only help the Army remind enlisted personnel of this key service benefit, but the value of peer bonds may prove a critical enticement to soldier recruitment.

Financial, Health, and Social Lives of Soldiers

We all get together on group chat and we'll say, "Hey, cookout." And then everybody will say I'll bring this, I'll bring that, and this and that. We'll pull a car up to the grill and we'll just be in the back and just hanging out.

Armor soldier

From the time soldiers arrive at basic training and as they transition to their first duty stations, they begin to build personal lives in the larger context of the Army. For most of the soldiers in our sample—single and living in Army barracks—the military suffuses most parts of their personal life. Some soldiers, perhaps with children or sick parents, must integrate the demands of home life with Army service. All these influences come into play in the complex notion of soldier well-being. This chapter highlights the financial, health, and social lives of soldiers. The first section examines the financial, physical health, and social lives of soldiers. In particular, we view social life from the perspective of life after the work whistle blows. In other words, in contrast to soldiers' "unit" experience, reviewed in the previous chapter, this chapter focuses on after-work social life, in which the unit may or may not play a key role. Regardless, we next examine the sources of support. The third section discusses the importance of having multiple sources of support to maintain well-being.

Financial, Health, and Social Well-Being of Junior Enlisted

This section reviews the overall well-being of junior enlisted soldiers: financial well-being, physical health, and social well-being. In general, most soldiers expressed a positive sense of well-being.

Financial Well-Being of Soldiers

The U.S. military offers service members attractive employment, offering them job security, regulated promotions, housing allowances, medical care, subsidized childcare, postsecondary education benefits, and a generous pension after serving 20 years.¹ In exchange, service members expose themselves to the unique demands of military service: risks of death or injury, frequent geographic moves, family separations, residence in foreign countries, and normative constraints on their behaviors.²

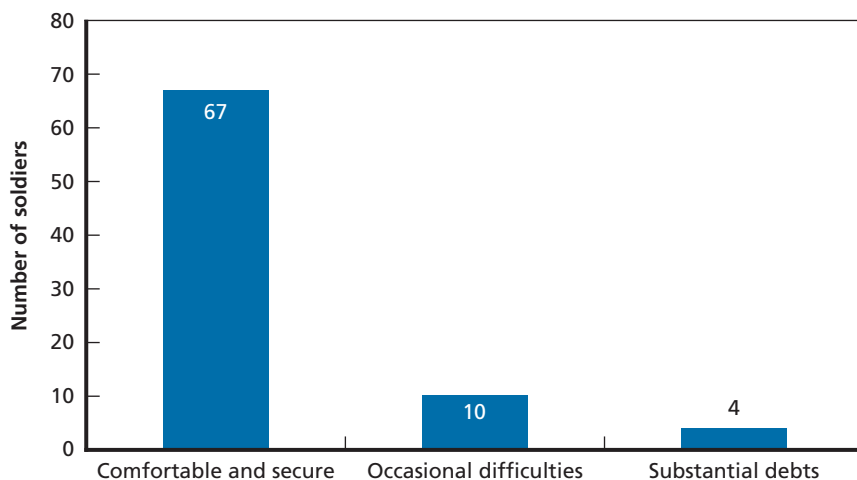
Most soldiers indicated they were satisfied with their current financial situation from military service. Figure 5.1 displays the frequency of themes for a set of questions about the financial situations of soldiers in our sample. Specifically, interviewers asked soldiers the following: “Tell me a little bit about your financial situation. Do you feel comfortable and secure? Occasionally have some difficulty making ends meet? In over your head?” Figure 5.1 shows that soldiers most frequently expressed feelings of financial comfort and security in response to interviewers (n=67; 83 percent). Twelve percent of soldiers stated they had occasional financial difficulties (n=10), while 5 percent of interviewees said they had substantial debts (n=4).

Several soldiers expressed vigilance in managing their personal financial debts. For example, one soldier said that he doesn’t “. . . use credit cards. I avoid loans simply because it’s unnecessary at the moment” (CMF11). Other soldiers said they were thrifty when deciding what they will buy with their money. For example, one person told

¹ James Hosek and Shelley MacDermid Wadsworth, “Economic Conditions of Military Families,” *Future of Children*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 2013, pp. 41–59; Ryan Kelty, Meredith Kleykamp, and David R. Segal, “The Military and the Transition to Adulthood,” *Future of Children*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2010, pp. 181–207.

² M. Segal, 1986, pp. 9–38.

Figure 5.1
Financial Well-Being of Soldiers



NOTE: “Tell me a little bit about your financial situation. Do you feel comfortable and secure? Occasionally have some difficulty making ends meet? In over your head?”
 n=81.

RAND RR2252-5.1

us that he still drives a “’99 Silverado with 300,000-something miles on it now, where like basically the rust falls off it and it gets lighter. I don’t really need to have all the new technology—I don’t really spend my money on too much more than gasoline. . . . It’s just all about management” (CMF11).

The answers from other respondents suggested that their current salary and benefits were adequate for their current lifestyle. For example, one soldier said that after paying for his student loans and car payment, he still had “\$300 from my first paycheck left over. Then my second paycheck [each month] pretty much goes straight to savings, so that’s nice” (CMF11). While many soldiers said they felt comfortable with their finances, 5 percent (n=4) said they were struggling financially. For example, one soldier felt over his head financially and suggested the Army have a more formal “financial planning system” and even proposed that the Army force personnel to save, in the event they have to leave the military after serving a term or two (CMF68).

Other soldiers, however, highlight financial struggles driven by hardship. One soldier's pregnant wife lives across the country, and so the soldier sends off his checks in support of her. In another case, a single mother struggles to pay bills:

I wish I made more money. And when you think about it, you're a single mom paying rent and paying daycare, car note and everything else, like that shit is expensive. Daycare by itself is \$420 a month, and it can be even \$600. I have a neighbor; she has a newborn baby, \$600 a month. Like that's half of your paycheck. That's too much. I wish I made more money.

. . . I have the loans from when I was going to get my certificate in medical assisting. And then I have a repo from this past year when I left my husband. They repossessed the car because I got stuck in a flood and it was in the shop for a long time. And I was paying to get it fixed and I was just like, "No, . . . I don't care if they take the car anymore." So I have a repo on my car. (CMF92)

While we did not ask soldiers about the relationship between marital status and finances, some volunteered this information to interviewers. We then reviewed these soldiers' responses to questions about their personal finances. In general, soldiers reported feeling comfortable if their spouse lived with them on or near post. The military provides generous family benefits to married personnel, including cash allowance for housing, health care coverage for dependents, commissary and exchange benefits, and other family support services.³ The Army designed many of these services for spouses who live with soldiers in garrison, however. One married soldier described the financial hardship of having a spouse who lived in another part of the country:

. . . I really don't have anything to spend it on, but most of the time the reason my money got shorter is because I had to spend money on tickets home. And most of the time they're like 700 to 900 [dollars], depending. And that's what always took my money

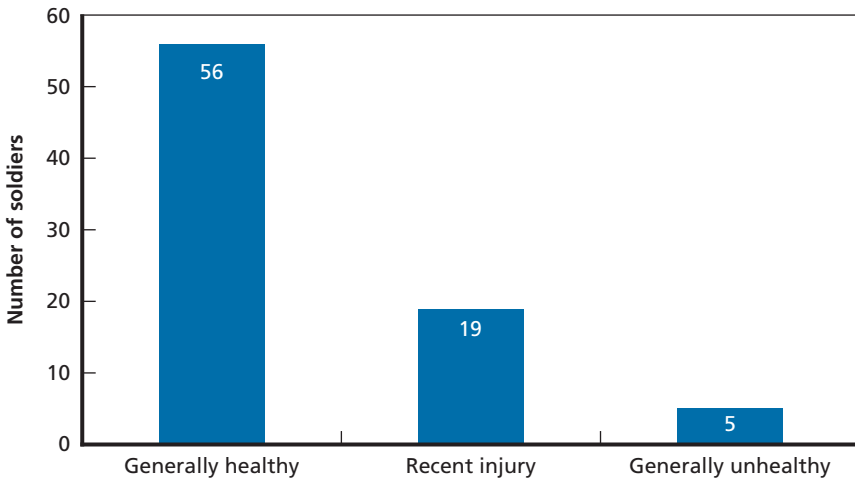
³ Paul F. Hogan and Rita Furst Seifert, "Marriage and the Military: Evidence That Those Who Serve Marry Earlier and Divorce Earlier," *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2010, pp. 420–438.

away. Whenever I'd save up a good amount, it'd go back. And then I bought my wife a nice ring because I wanted her to have a nice one. And I just bought me this one, whatever. And then just other stuff, too, like clothes. I wanted to buy her clothes and stuff. But other than that, I feel like it's always the leave that messes it up. I always got to go home and it takes a chunk out. (CMF13)

Soldiers' Physical Health

Military service places substantial demands on the physical health of service members.⁴ We asked our participants, "How is your physical health?" Figure 5.2 shows that most soldiers were generally healthy (n=56; 70 percent), with smaller subsets of responses indicating a recent injury

Figure 5.2
Physical Health of Soldiers



NOTE: "How is your physical health?" n=80.

RAND RR2252-5.2

⁴ Joseph J. Knapik, Bruce H. Jones, Marilyn A. Sharp, Salima Darakjy, and Sarah Jones, *The Case for Pre-Enlistment Physical Fitness Testing: Research and Recommendations*, Ft. Belvoir, Va.: Defense Technical Information Center, 2004; Sean Robson, *Physical Fitness and Resilience: A Review of Relevant Constructs, Measures, and Links to Well-Being*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-104-AF, 2013; Szayna et al., 2015.

injury (n=19; 24 percent). Only a few soldiers said they were generally unhealthy (n=5; 6 percent).

Unsurprisingly, more often than not, soldiers told interviewers that feeling healthy affected their Army satisfaction (53 out of 72 soldiers; data not shown). Further, more soldiers said that their Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) scores were average or above average (n=65) versus those who said they performed poorly on this test (n=12). Several soldiers told interviewers how the Army changed their approach to physical fitness in life. For example, one soldier said,

As far as healthwise, the Army has really curved me towards a more healthy lifestyle. When I joined I was like 260 pounds and then when I left Basic, I was like 175. They really put it into perspective, they weren't soft about it, you're fat, you're going to get skinny, this is what we're going to do for you. . . . (CMF19)

Another soldier said that he improved his physical fitness since beginning his enlistment: "I've actually gotten into decent shape since I got here. . . . I definitely know I'm fit. . . . I mean, I've been eating well; I've been exercising a lot" (CMF19).

However, some soldiers said they struggled with physical problems that were mostly because of their work in the military. Several soldiers in the combat arms occupations mentioned that they were experiencing physical health problems because of their work. For example, one soldier from an armor unit said that his knees "felt a little bit funny after a weird landing" (CMF19), while another said that he "got injured a while back during a jump . . . [but it was] just a twisted ankle" (CMF19). Most soldiers (as evidenced in Figure 5.2) reported that they were in general good health. However, even one of these soldiers told interviewers how he had multiple surgeries because "[military physicians] kind of messed up, just because it was such a large-scale surgery. . . . And then the second surgery was to try and fix the mess-up, which it didn't" (CMF68).

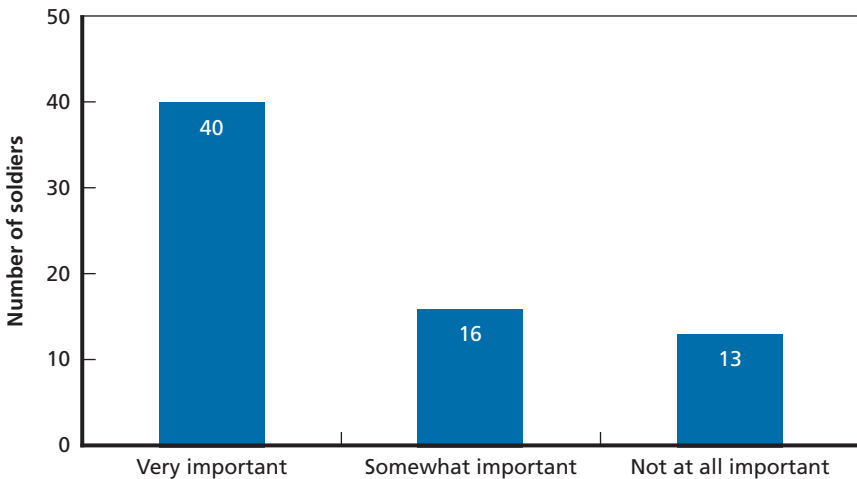
Many soldiers also report adequate hours of sleep. In response to the question, "How many hours of sleep do you get on an average night?", 44 participants stated that they get seven or more hours of sleep; 33 stated that they get only four to six hours of sleep; and only

four participants stated that they get four hours of sleep. Four participants stated that their sleep hours vary considerably.

Social Well-Being of Soldiers

There is substantial research evidence that relationships with other personnel help motivate service members.⁵ We found a similar pattern of results when asking soldiers about the importance of socializing during nonwork hours. Figure 5.3 shows the responses to this question. The overwhelming majority, 81 percent (n=56), emphasized the importance of nonwork socialization. The remainder, 19 percent (n=13), indicated that nonwork socialization was not at all important to them. Obviously, these findings do not indicate whether soldiers are satisfied with their nonwork social life, but they do convey that such socialization is an important part of Army life for the majority of soldiers we inter-

Figure 5.3
The Importance of Socializing After Work



NOTE: "How important is socializing to you during nonwork hours?" n=69.

RAND RR2252-5.3

⁵ See MacCoun, Kier, and Belkin, 2006, pp. 646–654; Siebold, 2007; and Szayna et al., 2015.

viewed. We offer several insights gleaned from the interviews that show why social life is so important for Army life.

In general, soldiers gave two interrelated reasons for why socialization was an important part of their military service. The first related to their own well-being. Several soldiers told interviewers that being around other personnel helped them maintain their mental well-being. For example, one soldier said that she tries to get out of her room because “if you stay in the barracks, it can get depressing” (CMF92). Another soldier said that socializing helped “relieve the stress from the day. . . . Sometimes you release the anger by saying if something really made you mad. You just talk and they’ll agree and you get to release that anger; they’ll let you talk to them to release it” (CMF19). Yet another soldier said that socializing with others was “really important because if you’re alone with yourself for so long, you can drive yourself crazy, and you can overthink, and you can get depressed.” (CMF92).

Further emphasizing the interrelationship between task and social cohesion, soldiers pointed out that socializing helped improve work performance. A number of soldiers said that socializing outside of work had a positive effect on their relationships during work. For example, one infantry soldier described postwork social activities as “team building” exercises that helped enhance connections between colleagues.

Another soldier explained how socializing outside of work was a way to prevent getting into a “weird funk” that would affect work:

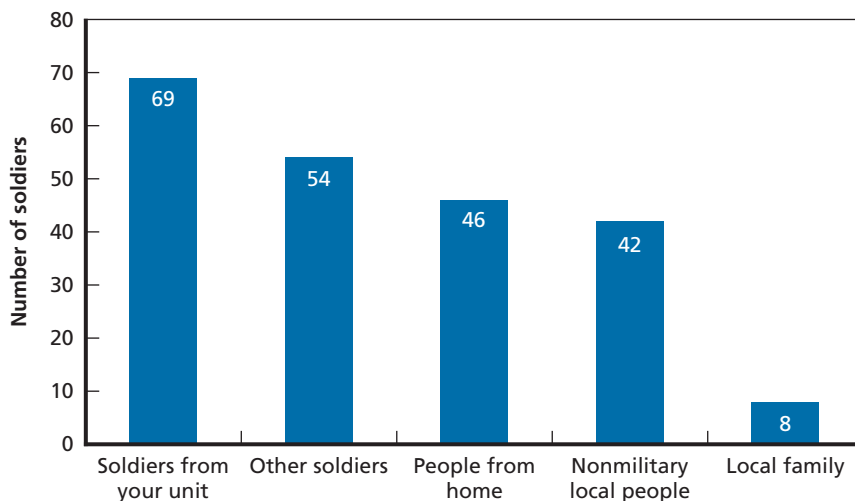
In general it’s very important just so that you don’t end up getting into some sort of weird funk where you start to become antisocial and then you withdraw, especially in a job like mine where you have to be able to talk to people and try and dig deeper and figure out what’s going on. (CMF68)

He continued by discussing how socialization allows soldiers to monitor the mental well-being of their peers. Specifically, he said,

I know the Army is very concerned about mental health, particularly suicides and depression. You have to make sure that you have some contact to a point where you’ll be able to recognize something’s not right with this soldier, so it’s very important. (CMF68)

Similarly, we found evidence that many soldiers socialize with other soldiers outside of work. Figure 5.4 displays the number of soldiers who report socializing outside of work with different associates. We derived this from responses to the question, “How much of your free time do you spend with each of these: the soldiers from your unit, other soldiers, nonmilitary people here, connecting with people from home?” We show three patterns in this figure. First, as the most frequent type of response, soldiers reported that they socialized with fellow soldiers from their unit (n=68; 86 percent) or other soldiers not assigned to their unit (n=54; 68 percent). Second, 45 respondents (57 percent) stated that they socialized with people from home. We believe that various communication technologies (e.g., telephone, texting, social media, online gaming platforms) aid this socialization. A small number of soldiers mentioned socializing with their local family

Figure 5.4
Whom Soldiers Socialize with Outside of Work



NOTE: We asked participants “How much of your free time do you spend with each of these: the soldiers from your unit, other soldiers, nonmilitary people here, connecting with people from home?” We then re-coded the responses to these questions to capture the number of participants who interacted with different classes of associate. Data are presented for 79 participants.

(n=8; 10 percent). Third, half of the participants (n=41; 52 percent) reported socializing with nonmilitary people.

The social lives of married soldiers appeared to differ from those of unmarried ones who mentioned their current relationship status. For example, some married soldiers discussed how they socialize with other married soldiers:

There are, there are a couple guys especially medics from our over-all unit that me and my wife will go over their house or whatever or they'll come over our house and we'll have dinner together or we'll do something, go out to activities together, especially when we all go out to say local BBQs or stuff like that, we'll meet up with other Army spouses and stuff. (CMF68)

Many of these soldiers discussed the importance of their spouses and their leadership as sources of support for coping with the unique demands of military service. Specifically, some married soldiers expressed the importance of support for personal versus professional concerns. One soldier said his wife cares most about his well-being but, when asked about where he would go for help with work-related problems, explained, "Oh yeah, I can always go to my sergeants if I'm in serious trouble, but I usually stay away from trouble. I'm too old for that" (CMF91). In another example, a soldier said that his squad leader cares most about his well-being in the Army, but that his wife cares most about him in general (CMF11). However, this same infantryman explained how he would go to his squad leadership if he were having not just work problems, but social and personal issues. The reported experiences by some married soldiers highlight the commitment that military service and family life demands from personnel.⁶

For more than a half-century, research has documented that relationships between soldiers are an important facet of social life in the military.⁷ Similarly, almost 90 percent of our participants spend time with fellow soldiers outside of work. Soldiers tend to socialize with

⁶ M. Segal, 1986.

⁷ Du Picq, 1880; MacCoun, Kier, and Belkin, 2006; Shils and Janowitz, 1948; Siebold, 2007; Szayna et al., 2015.

people with whom they interact a lot on a daily basis. For example, one soldier spoke about his assignment at a new post:

I didn't really know anybody here so I would spend time with friends from Basic. And then I started working with a lot of people in my platoon and then I started to get away from my friends in Basic. (CMF19)

Similarity seemed to breed friendship for a number of soldiers in the sample. One soldier explained that he “hang[s] out a lot” with fellow mechanics (CMF91). Another interviewee said that he typically socializes only with fellow soldiers “in the motor pool” but admitted that “Every so often I'll socialize with an MP [Military Police], but I try to keep my distance” (CMF91).

Soldiers also keep the relationships that they forged during their time in basic training. One soldier said he has “friends that came up from Basic too that I met down when I was in Basic and stuff. Like they're up here too, so I hang out with them still” (CMF11). Another soldier said that he “didn't really have any close friends” except for “one guy I went to AIT with.” This soldier said he and his friend from AIT sometimes will go “bowling, out for a couple drinks; nothing too crazy” (CMF68).

Soldiers socialized with soldiers outside their immediate unit. For example, one soldier said he had “some friends in [another brigade]” (CMF11). Another soldier estimated he spends “probably a quarter of my time” with soldiers from other units (CMF68), while another estimated that she spends about 70 percent of her time with personnel outside her unit. However, many more participants stated that they have formed friendship bonds with soldiers from their individual unit.

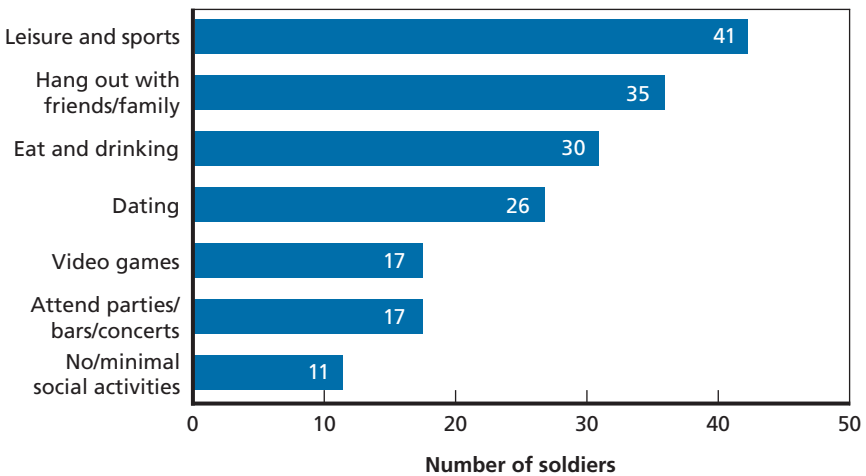
Many of the soldiers we interviewed rarely socialize with civilians outside of work, largely because they lack commonality in their work experiences. When asked if he hangs out with civilians a lot, one soldier emphatically said, “No, absolutely not.” And he continued by saying that he did “not [have] enough in common. I'm a different kind of person now” (CMF68). When asked the same question, another soldier succinctly said, “Like never” and explained how civilians “don't

really understand what we do, so I mean it’s kind of weird” (CMF19). However, not all soldiers said they avoided civilians. For example:

I think it’s important to interact with people, especially nonmilitary, just so that you realize there is a life that’s still outside of the military and that the military itself, while is not a bad organization, can lead to people changing to just fit that military image, which is not necessarily completely healthy. (CMF91)

We asked soldiers two interrelated questions about what they do outside of work. We first asked, “While not at work, what kind of things do you do with your free time?” Figure 5.5 displays responses to this question. Leisure and sports was the most popular response (n=41; 53 percent), followed by hanging out with friends and family (n=35; 45 percent); eating and drinking (n=30; 39 percent); dating (n=26; 34 percent); video games (n=17; 22 percent); and attending parties, bars, or concerts (n=17; 22 percent). Participants gave similar results when we posed the question as “What kinds of social activities do you

Figure 5.5
Top Responses About Social Activities of Soldiers



NOTE: “What kind of social activities do you do?” n=77.

do?” indicating that many soldiers think of their free time primarily in terms of social activities rather than solo leisure time.

Sources of Support

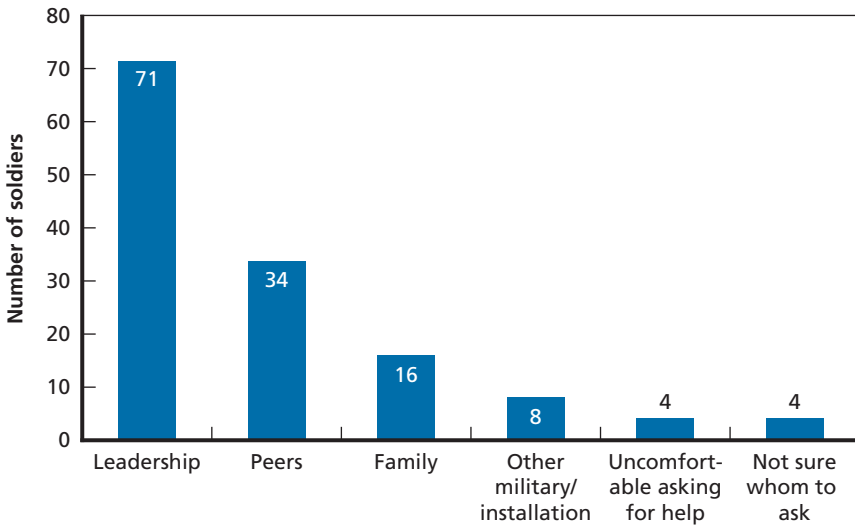
Social support is an important resource for service members, given the unique demands that military service places on them and their families.⁸ We broadly define social support as relationships that personnel find helpful to them in some way.⁹ We asked soldiers, “Who here cares about you the most?” and clarified that we were not just referring to their work but to their overall well-being. To emphasize the point, we added a follow-up prompt: “Is there someone you ask for help when you are having issues (social, work-related, personal/financial)?” Evidence from our interviews, in Figure 5.6, suggests that leadership is the most important source of support for soldiers, with that being the most frequent response (n=70; 86 percent). The second most common response was their peers (n=34; 42 percent), with family being the third most popular response given (n=16; 20 percent).¹⁰ Smaller percentages of soldiers stated that they use formal military or installation support services (n=8; 10 percent) or that they felt uncomfortable asking for help if necessary (n=4; 5 percent) or were not sure whom they should ask for help (n=4; 5 percent).

⁸ James Griffith and Mark Vaitkus, “Relating Cohesion to Stress, Strain, Disintegration, and Performance: An Organizing Framework,” *Military Psychology*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 1999, pp. 27–55; Jeffrey W. Lucas, Yuko Whitestone, David R. Segal, Mady W. Segal, Michael A. White, Jacqueline A. Mottern, and Rorie N. Harris, *The Role of Social Support in First-Term Sailors’ Attrition from Recruit Training*, Millington, Tenn.: Navy Personnel Research Studies and Technology, 2008; David R. Segal, “Measuring the Institutional/Occupational Change Thesis,” *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 1986, pp. 351–375.

⁹ Lucas et al., 2008.

¹⁰ This low prevalence of family as a response is likely skewed by the fact that our question was “Who *here* cares about you the most?” (emphasis added), because our goal was to understand local social support. Some soldiers had local family. Some asked for clarification, in which case they were told the question was about local support. And some answered the question as they interpreted it.

Figure 5.6
Sources of Support



NOTE: “Who here cares the most about your wellbeing?” n=81.

RAND RR2252-5.6

How Soldiers Are Supported by Leadership

During many of the interviews, soldiers said their NCOs were an important source of support for them.

Two soldiers described the role that their NCOs have in supporting them both at work and outside the workplace:

... your NCOs care more than you think they do. They always have your back. They always tell you, if you're going to go out and drink either call someone or call me, I'll go pick you up. They always have your back. Every weekend, they're always telling me to be safe, what not to do, what to avoid, their own personal experiences, stuff like that. They give you helpful advice, they're always looking out for you. (CMF11)

... my NCOs that are above me. I always am talking to them and stuff like that. And it was funny because just yesterday my platoon sergeant was asking me, “Hey, man, how 'ya doing? Like,

everything going all right?” blah, blah, blah. He was just asking me a bunch of questions and stuff like that and he was asking me about what I thought about the Army and stuff like that. (CMF68)

One soldier told an interviewer that no one cares about him, but then he eventually said his NCO cares because “it’s his job for me to be on time where I need to be and stuff” (CMF68). Similarly, another soldier described his NCO as an important resource because “it’s his job to care. . . . [I] can go to him. I mean, it’s his job to make sure I’m taken care of, and he does his job” (CMF68).

And soldiers described different kinds of support provided by their leadership. Several soldiers described NCOs and officers as having an “open door” policy or frequently asking subordinates about their welfare. As one soldier observed, “[My NCO] is always constantly checking up on me, making sure I’m doing all right, asking if I need anything.” Another soldier described his NCO as ensuring that everyone in the platoon got along. “They check in and make sure that you’re not making yourself socially awkward, [that you are] trying to get involved with what the platoon does and what the company does and stuff like that. They want to see you actually go out and hang out with everyone.” Others described NCOs who would go the extra distance to help subordinate soldiers in times of need. One soldier lauded his NCO for being willing to meet him at the post gates when that soldier had forgotten his military ID. A number of soldiers acknowledged the importance of seeking support through proper channels instead of going directly to more senior leaders. For example, one soldier said that he goes to his “immediate leadership” and explained how “they’re probably the most concerned because they deal with you day in and day out” (CMF11).

Peer Support

Several soldiers said their peers were an important source of support for them if they had personal troubles. In general, a number of these soldiers emphasized the belief that fellow soldiers from their unit cared

about their well-being. For example, one soldier talked about the importance of his squad:

. . . my whole squad. . . We all talk to each other, say how are we doing, how life is going. Then after that, my leadership will ask me almost every day, hey how am I doing, doing good, OK. Then every other day, my platoon sergeant would ask me how am I doing, how are you liking it, it's like a little checking in on what's going on. You're never there asking yourself, why isn't nobody caring? Everybody cares there, because we're all a team, we're all going to take care of each other. (CMF19)

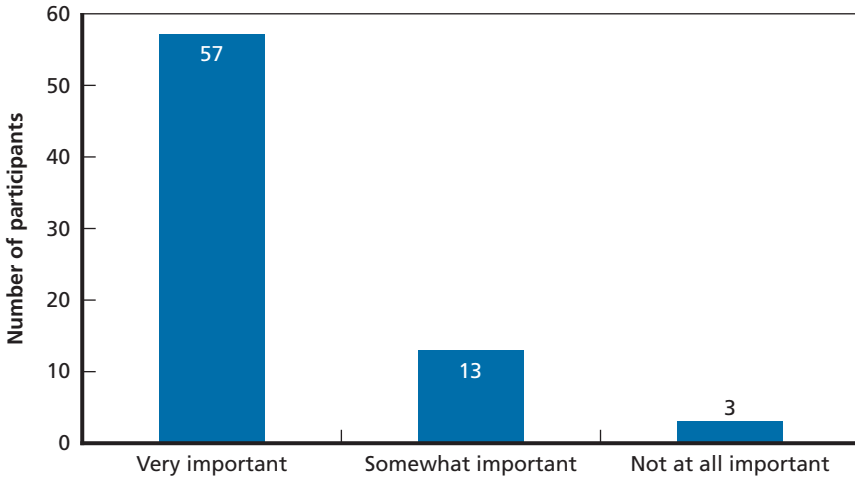
Similarly, another soldier discussed in detail the importance of her platoon for support:

My platoon, because I'm working with them and around them every day, so yeah, we do all care about each other, from our sergeant to the other clerks. I do the same thing to them, like I care about how they feel, ask if they're doing OK, if I see that they're not feeling well, and ask if I can help them. Yeah, like that. Our chain of command also does care, too, they do ask, if we need help with something, then we can use the open-door policy and ask the commander or first sergeant, if we need help or talk or feel like something's wrong, or need to get it off our chest, in a sense. But mostly I would have to say [I lean on my] platoon. (CMF92)

Other Forms of Support

While important, the leadership and peers were not the only source of support that soldiers talked about during their interviews. We found evidence that staying in touch with people outside of military life was important. Figure 5.7 shows the responses to the question, "How important is it to you to stay in touch with people outside of your military life?" The overwhelming majority of answers indicate that soldiers thought staying in touch with nonmilitary people was very important ($n=57$; 78 percent) or somewhat important ($n=13$; 18 percent). A few soldiers said that staying in touch with people outside the military was not at all important to them ($n=3$; 4 percent).

Figure 5.7
Frequency of Responses About the Importance of Staying in Touch with People Outside of the Military



NOTE: “How important is it to you to stay in touch with people outside of your military life?” n=73.

RAND RR2252-5.7

Several soldiers acknowledged the importance of their family as they transitioned into the Army. For example, one soldier explained how his family had a “big influence on my life prior; helped build who I am now. . . . [I] talk to them daily and see how they’re doing, see what they’ve been up to” (CMF92). Other soldiers expressed a similar sentiment about the importance of family. For example, an infantry soldier told interviewers the following: “Pretty important. I mean, I really don’t have too many friends, so my very close friend and [my] family [back home], that’s—it is what it is. I like to stay in touch with them because they’re a big part of my life back home.” And another soldier likewise observed,

I think it’s important, because it’s always nice to have a conversation that’s not about work, that’s not about your job or what you did today. It’s nice to talk about something else. Like, me and Mom like to talk about baseball. So, she’ll call me and she’ll ask me how the baseball games are going, and we’ll just talk about

baseball for a while. So it's nice to get away from the military. (CMF13)

Some soldiers were losing touch with their friends back home. Much of this seemed to be a function of their normal transitions into adulthood. For example, some soldiers viewed their civilian friends back home as part of their former life:

I don't really talk to some of my friends back home as much as I used to. When I first got here, I talked to them a lot, and then it just kind of died out since then. (CMF68)

I'm trying to actually stay away from [people back home who were bad influences on me]. If they hit me up on Facebook or something, I'll say hello but I don't text or call anybody from the civilian world. (CMF92)

However, other soldiers said that they still kept in touch with their friends back home, mainly through phone calls, social media, and texting. One soldier explained how keeping in touch with people back home served as a point of reference for understanding his experience in the Army:

Really important because it gets me two different views on . . . life. Because military life and civilian life, they're two completely different things. And even within the little bit over a year of being in the Army I've noticed it, because I've noticed that my friends are struggling with different things while I struggle with other things. . . . (CMF68)

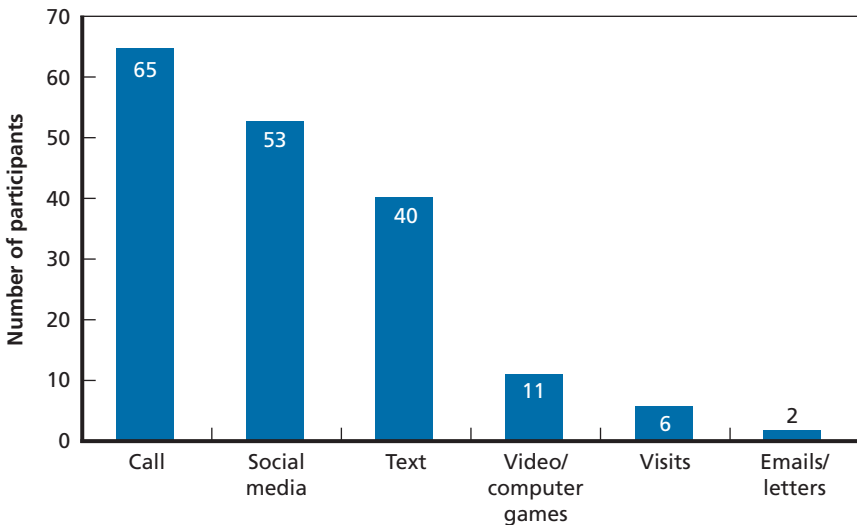
This same soldier continued to describe how knowing his friends back home helped motivate him to serve in the Army:

. . . So it's kind of really important to me because it also reminds me why I'm fighting/why I joined the military/why I'm protecting those who don't want to go out and kill the enemy themselves. (CMF68)

Today's soldiers have more opportunities to keep in touch with friends and family back home than in the past. For example, telephone calls and postal delivery were the two primary means for personnel to keep in touch with people back home before the proliferation of information communication technologies. Soldiers told interviewers that they keep in touch with people using various forms of these technologies. For example, one soldier said, "As far as friends go, I keep in touch with them through Facebook sometimes, or if I'm playing Xbox and one of them gets on . . ." (CMF19). Other soldiers said they used a wide variety of social media platforms: "I call my parents every week, call my best friend every week; I stay in touch. . . . [I use] phone, Skype . . . Facebook, social media, Instagram, all that" (CMF13).

Figure 5.8 shows the distribution of responses for the various means by which soldiers said they connect with people back home. Telephone calls were the most frequently mentioned medium for communicating with friends and family (n=65; 89 percent). Social media

Figure 5.8
Methods for Soldiers to Connect with People Back Home



NOTE: "How do you stay in touch [with people outside your military life]?" n=73.

(n=53; 73 percent) and text messaging (n=40; 55 percent) were also frequently mentioned during interviews. Figure 5.8 also shows that a subset of soldiers socialize with people back home while playing video games on a console or through their computers (n=11; 15 percent). There were relatively few mentions of face-to-face visits (n=6) or emails and paper letters (n=2; 3 percent) by interviewees.

Soldiers use the same technologies as civilians, but they may not be expected forms of communication when thinking about life in the Army. And the speed and spontaneity of the social media platforms obviously demonstrate that people who do join the Army remain connected to their pre-Army lives.

Summary

In general, most soldiers we interviewed gave positive self-evaluations of their well-being. Further, the majority of soldiers were vigilant about managing their salaries and personal debt. Most said they were in good health, with some describing physical problems because of the demands of their work. Finally, most soldiers in the sample told our interviewers that social life was an important dimension of their military service.

While most soldiers said that their leadership and peers were an important source of support, they also valued other sources. Put another way, the results suggest that soldiers have multiple sources of support available to them during their first terms as a soldier. In comparison with soldiers in the past, today's soldiers have access to information technology that gives them opportunities to keep in touch with family and friends back home. During the interviews, a number of soldiers seemed to view their family and friends as a distinct and separate source of support from their fellow soldiers and the leadership. The latter were by far the most important source of motivation, camaraderie, and overall social support for personnel in our sample.

Satisfaction with the Army Experience

Hell yeah. . . . The more and more I stay in this job, the more and more I feel like I was built for this, I can do this. I mean, it's just a state of mind, you have to have the right mindset. But yeah, someone like me, all day, every day, I'd tell them to join up immediately.

Artilleryman

The biggest sacrifice is just being away from family for long periods of time.

Artilleryman

When the U.S. military transitioned from conscription to the All-Volunteer Force (AVF) in 1973, it had to compete with civilian society for quality personnel.¹ As a result, satisfaction with Army life is an important consideration as the Army competes with other entities for talent. This means that the diverse range of expectations must, to some degree, be met for soldiers if they are to see the Army as measuring up to other options. This chapter reviews three dimensions of Army satisfaction: overall satisfaction, perceptions of positive and negative aspects of Army life, and reenlistment and post-Army plans.

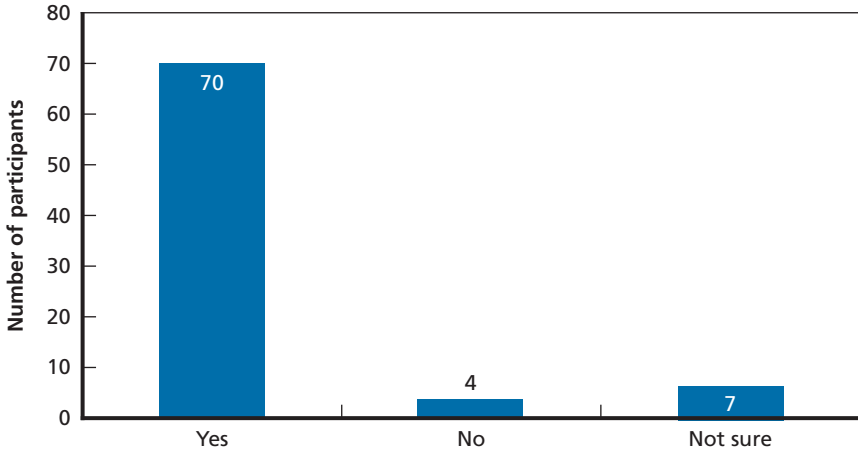
¹ Bernard Rostker, *I Want You! The Evolution of the All-Volunteer Force*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-265-RC, 2006; D. Segal, 1986, pp. 351–375.

Satisfaction with the Army

There is evidence that job satisfaction is an important factor for understanding the retention of military personnel.² In general, most soldiers in our sample were satisfied with life in the Army. We captured these self-reports of job satisfaction using five interview questions.

The first question asked soldiers, “Do you still think that joining the Army was the best option for you?” Figure 6.1 displays the frequency of responses to this interview question. This figure shows that 70 interviewees (86 percent) said that they believe the Army was the best option for them, while only four interviewees (5 percent) said they did not believe the Army was their best option, and seven interviewees (9 percent) said they were unsure.

Figure 6.1
Is the Army the Best Option?



NOTE: “Do you still think that joining the Army was the best option for you? Yes or no?” n=81.

RAND RR2252-6.1

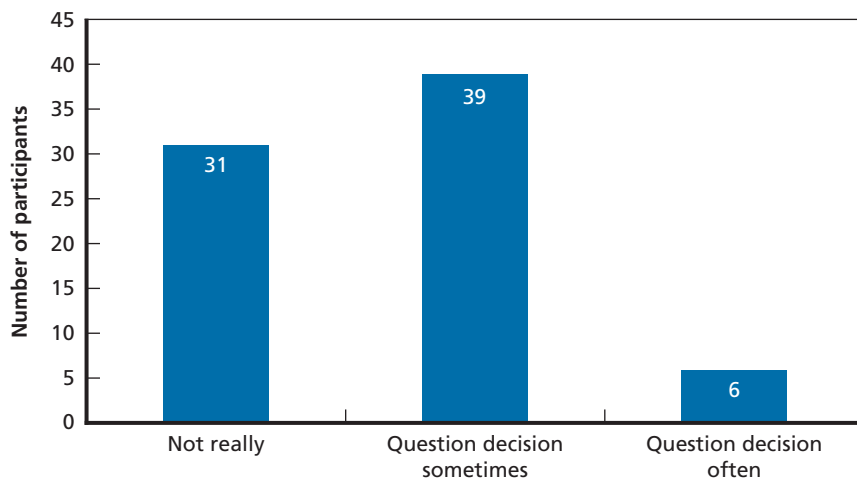
² James Hosek, Jennifer Kavanagh, and Laura L. Miller, *How Deployments Affect Service Members*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-432-RC, 2006; George A. Zangaro and Patricia A. Watts Kelley, “Job Satisfaction and Retention of Military Nurses: A Review of the Literature,” *Annual Review of Nursing Research*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2010, pp. 19–41.

The second question asked soldiers whether they ever reevaluated their initial decision to join the Army. Figure 6.2 shows the frequency of responses for soldiers' answers to this question. This figure shows that few soldiers ($n=6$; 8 percent) often second-guessed their decision to join. The majority of the soldiers ($n=39$; 51 percent) said they second-guessed this decision sometimes, while a sizable number said they rarely second-guessed that decision ($n=31$; 41 percent).

Figure 6.3 displays the frequency for answers to "Would you recommend someone like you join the Army?" Three-quarters of the soldiers we spoke to ($n=60$; 75 percent) would recommend the Army to someone like them. Only a small number said they would not recommend the Army ($n=7$; 9 percent) or were uncertain about their recommendation ($n=12$; 15 percent).

Toward the end of the interview, we asked soldiers to map their satisfaction on a Likert scale that ranged from 1 (most satisfied) to 5

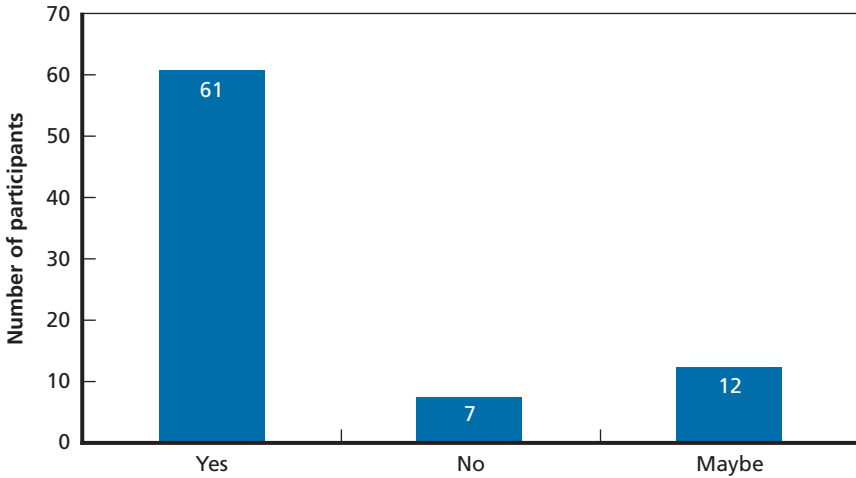
Figure 6.2
Ever Second-Guess Your Decision to Join?



NOTE: "Do you ever second-guess your decision to join?" $n=76$.

RAND RR2252-6.2

Figure 6.3
Recommend Someone Like You Join the Army?



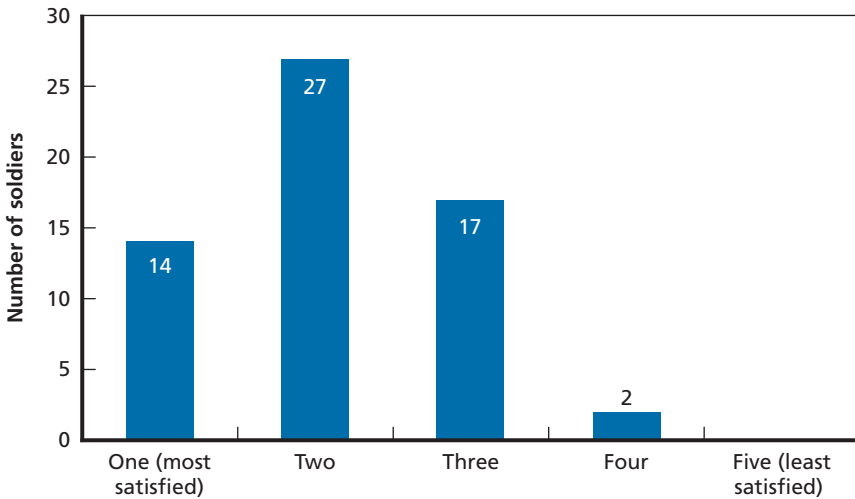
NOTE: “Would you recommend someone like you join the Army?” n=80.

RAND RR2252-6.3

(least satisfied).³ Figure 6.4 displays the frequency of responses to the question, with which a majority expressed satisfaction (n=43; 72 percent). Fewer soldiers gave ratings that represented either moderate or less satisfaction (n=19; 32 percent).

³ This question on satisfaction in the Army asks soldiers to map their answers using a scale that ranged from 1 to 5, with lower values represented higher levels of satisfaction. This may have created errors in responses by soldiers. Research finds that numerical values used on rating scales may affect the answers that respondents give on surveys. See Norbert Schwarz, Bärbel Knauper, Hans-J. Hippler, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, and Leslie Clark, “Rating Scales Numeric Values May Change the Meaning of Scale Labels,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 4, 1991, pp. 570–582. We acknowledge that the wording of this question may have created error in the response patterns of interviewees.

Figure 6.4
Self-Reported Ratings for Overall Satisfaction in the Army



NOTE: “On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being most satisfied and 5 being least satisfied, how satisfied are you with your Army experience?” n=60; this question was added after the first installation visit.

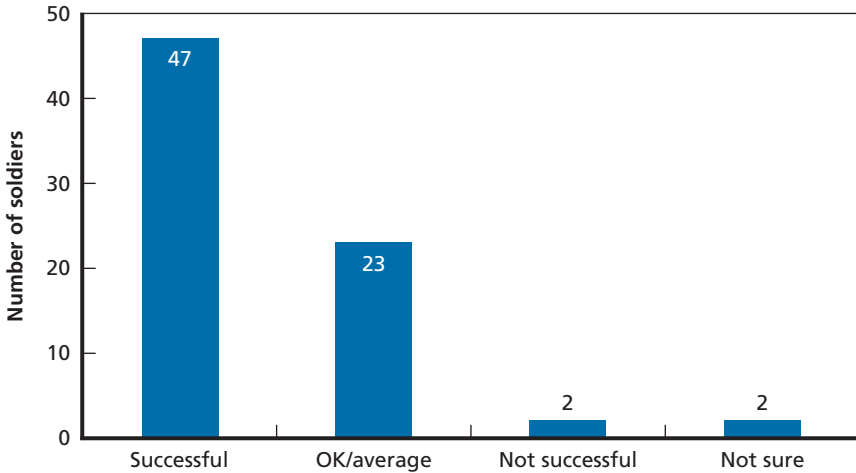
RAND RR2252-6.4

Finally, we asked soldiers to briefly assess their own performance in the military so far. We specifically asked participants, “So, how do you think you’re doing in the Army?” While this question is less a measure of satisfaction with the Army per se, it does capture a sense of how soldiers view their individual performance in the Army. As seen in Figure 6.5, nearly two-thirds of participants rate themselves as successful (n=47; 64 percent), with nearly a third of participants rating themselves as OK or average (n=23; 31 percent). Only two participants labeled themselves as unsuccessful.

Reasons for Dissatisfaction

Given the relatively small number of participants who responded negatively to the first four questions above, we decided to closely examine the negative responses. First, nine unique soldiers provided negative responses to “Was the Army still the best option?” and “Would

Figure 6.5
Soldiers Satisfaction with Performance in Army



NOTE: "How do you think you're doing in the Army?" n=74.

RAND RR2252-6.5

you recommend the Army?" There was no an apparent trend in the responses across these nine participants. Two participants stated that they wanted more money than the Army could pay them, two reported that they missed family, and two lamented a lack of freedom in the Army. The responses for the other three participants were unclear. Six participants stated that they "often" question their decision to join the Army. One participant, showing evidence of considerable regret, flatly stated, "I could have been in school right now" (CMF68). For all other responses, however, participants stated that it was during times of peak stress that they most questioned their decision to join the Army. As one participant observed,

When we have to do pointless things, last-minute things. When it's the end of the day and we have to do layouts and it's just like, why are we doing this at the very end of the day? I'm ready to go back to my room, because I'm tired. I know everybody's tired, nobody wants to stay after work. (CMF92)

Finally, we examined all “3” and “4” responses to our Likert scale satisfaction question, which indicated less than optimal satisfaction. First, several soldiers did not provide an explanation for their score. Of the others, two classes of responses predominated. In some cases, participants stated that they were too early in their careers to give a more positive rating. “I haven’t done the whole Army experience so far.” Observed one soldier, “That’s what people ask me in Rear D[etachment], is how do you like the Army so far, I would answer I don’t know yet, I just got here, I don’t know what it’s like” (CMF19). Other participants cited some negative aspect of Army service, including leadership that “doesn’t care” or leadership that can “change drastically” from one leader to another, and a desire for “more explosions and fun.”

Two soldiers indicated they were unsuccessful in the Army. The first suffered a serious injury in basic training that has made it difficult to serve:

Well, I am doing well because I haven’t lost any rank, I haven’t lost any money, I haven’t gotten in any trouble, so I’m doing good. But emotionally and mentally I’m not—and physically as well because I [sustained an injury] in basic training. They sent me home for 30 days while I was in basic training. But they let me graduate. . . . But it hurts, like my body hurts. (CMF92)

The second individual had trouble articulating why he felt he was an unsuccessful soldier, but like the other soldier, he also has had both physical and behavioral health problems and has more financial constraints than most privates. The two “not sure” responses we received were from soldiers who felt uncomfortable self-assessing and suggested that their leadership would be more appropriate to provide these assessments.

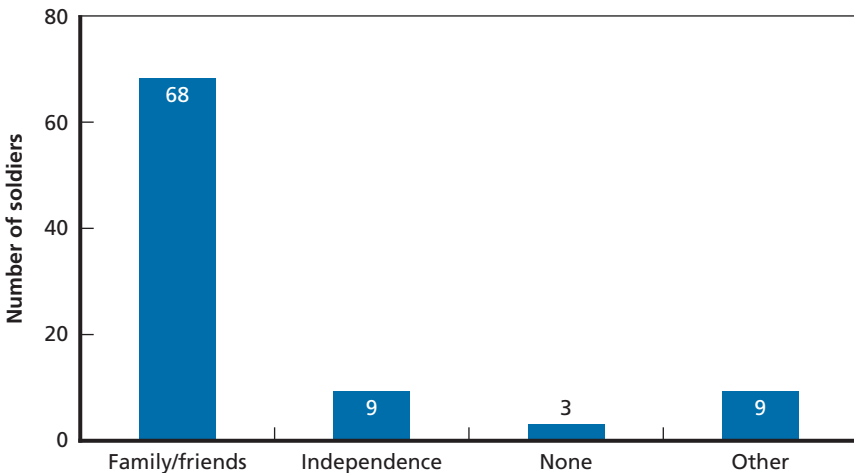
Positive and Negative Aspects of Army Life

Some have characterized military organizations as “greedy institutions,” meaning that they demand a high degree of commitment and

loyalty from those who serve within them (and from their families).⁴ The characteristics of these organizations may contribute to positive and negative aspects of life in the Army. On the one hand, the unique demands of military service may place strains on service members and their families. On the other hand, these demands carry responsibilities and status for soldiers that they might otherwise not find in the civilian labor market given their age, education, and past work experience. In Chapter Four, we reported on soldier perceptions regarding the best and worst features of unit life. In this section, we focus on how soldiers describe the positive and negative aspects of Army life. As will be seen, the appraisal of Army life takes a far more holistic view of the soldier experience than just that seen in the unit.

Figure 6.6 depicts the responses for the biggest sacrifices associated with joining the Army. Many respondents cited homesickness. An overwhelming majority of participants (n=68; 86 percent) reported

Figure 6.6
Largest Sacrifice by Being in the Army?



NOTE: “What do you think is the largest sacrifice you make by being in the Army?” n=79; more than one response allowed.

RAND RR2252-6.6

⁴ M. Segal, 1986.

that separation from family and friends was the largest sacrifice they had to make. One respondent remarked, “the biggest sacrifice is just being away from family for long periods of time. I would say that’s probably the only big sacrifice” (CMF13).

Independence and personal time were also listed as sacrifices by a smaller subset of respondents (n=9; 11 percent). These respondents felt that barracks life, work-life balance, and/or Army rules and regulations limit personal freedom in one way or another. During this discussion, one participant compared joining the Army with working as a civilian: “. . . In a regular job, you can wake up and say you quit. You can’t do that here. You can’t call in sick” (CMF92).

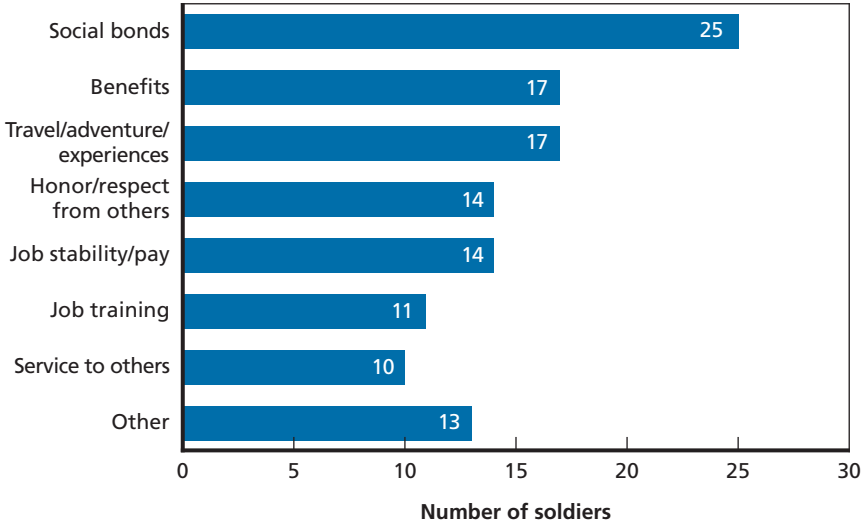
A few soldiers with responses labeled “Other” (n=9; 11 percent) added earning potential, social and dating life, and alternative job options to the list of sacrifices. Only a small fraction of participants (n=3; 4 percent) felt they did not have to make any major sacrifices when they decided to join the Army. As one soldier explained,

It’s not hard to do this, what I do, I don’t think it is. Especially if you’re a young, single, unmarried dude [as] I am. I don’t have to pay for rent, I know every two weeks I get a paycheck coming, I don’t have to pay for food if I don’t want to. And it’s pretty easy, as long as I go do PT and then listen to what the dude with stripes on his chest tells me to do, it’s super easy. Life especially as a private is so easy. The government has put thousands of dollars into me and so I know they’re going to want to keep me. (CMF19)

We also asked participants, “What’s the best part about being in the Army?” Most soldiers provided multiple positive characteristics (see Figure 6.7). First, most soldiers highlighted social bonds or camaraderie. Just under one-third of respondents (n=25; 32 percent) highlighted social aspects like building lifelong friendships with peers, interacting with supportive and caring leadership, and “the guys I work with” as the best part of the Army. Remarks like those following suggest that social life and relationships are extremely valuable to Army privates:

Making new friends from different places. I never thought I was going to make this many friends. Yeah, the people. Even

Figure 6.7
Best Part of Being in the Army?



NOTE: “What is the best part of being in the Army?” n=78; more than one response allowed.

RAND RR2252-6.7

the people with bad attitudes, you still—everybody, just being around everybody in the same uniform trying to do the same thing. (CMF92)

The people you meet, the diversity, people come from so many different places, it’s just amazing. (CMF91)

The best part about the Army is the chemistry you build with your friends, the bond is like family, it makes it so much better. That’s the best part. (CMF19)

Army benefits and travel/adventure were the next most frequently cited positive aspects of being in the Army. Benefits such as health care, education and the GI Bill, and room and board were mentioned by a little less than a quarter of study participants (n=17; 22 percent). An

equal number of combat and noncombat privates underlined one or more of these perks.

Seventeen participants (22 percent), two-thirds of whom were in combat MOSs, placed travel, adventure, and exposure to unique Army experiences among the top of their lists. An infantry soldier stated the best part of the Army was “just getting to do cool stuff like your friends wouldn’t do, like riding in Chinooks or going to Afghanistan and stuff like that, life experiences.” Other respondents echoed the same appreciation for the Army exposing them to new life experiences:

I like being able to travel. This is actually my second duty station. My first duty station was Korea. And just being able to go over and see a new culture, somewhere I’ve never imagined that I would have been. And I definitely have to say the traveling is the best part and just meeting all the different people that you meet. (CMF68)

Additionally, respondents listed job stability (n=14; 18 percent) and job training (n=11; 14 percent) among the best features of the Army. In both categories, noncombat MOS soldiers provided at least two-thirds of the responses. A stable paycheck provided comfort for one CMF92, who was pleasantly surprised that he enjoyed the extra training experiences, specifically learning combatives. One soldier noted how the variety of training opportunities in the Army would prepare him for his life and career:

. . . if I wanted to learn anything, I just ask my sergeants and they’ll tell me or help me learn it. . . . I get to learn a lot, too, I can study for different languages or sign up for schools where I can learn scuba diving and other civilian useful things. Right now, I’m signed up for a bunch of communication classes, so I get to learn a lot of radio stuff, which is actually very helpful later on for computer engineering and stuff. You can learn how to repair radios just because it makes fixing computers easier. . . . The Army is actually probably the best job ever. You’ll get a lot more career opportunities if you’ve been in the Army, because people know you’re a lot more mature than some of these people who are just straight out of high school. (CMF19)

Taking pride in the uniform and/or receiving praise and recognition from others for serving was also a major positive for soldiers (n=14; 18 percent). Similarly, 10 soldiers (13 percent) consider service to others as a highpoint; most of these ten responses were from combat MOSs (n=8; 80 percent). One soldier noted, “The best part about being in the Army—there’s lots to it, but I think one of the good things that you get from it is . . . actually doing something worth risking your life for. . . . It’s all about just serving your country and actually doing something meaningful” (CMF13). Another observed, “Doing what I love and still getting paid and recognized highly like, ‘Oh, you’re in the Army’—protect, serve, you’re making a sacrifice” (CMF91).

Soldiers appreciated recognition from civilians. A simple thank you from a stranger or someone from their hometown reinforced this private’s decision to join: “So when people say, ‘Thank you for serving’ and stuff, it kind of puts me like, yeah, I want to stay in a little bit longer; I like this. I like the feeling” (CMF13). Clearly, soldiers see many positive aspects of the Army, and one soldier concisely observed, “Learning a trade, meeting new people, making great friends and just doing something that a lot of people don’t do. Wearing the uniform’s nice, just knowing that I’m a soldier, and I’m out here sacrificing my time and just trying to make a difference. That’s definitely it” (CMF91).

Soldiers’ Future Plans

The U.S. Army competes with a variety of civilian entities to retain its personnel. While some personnel decide to stay in the Army, others separate and find employment in the civilian sector or enroll at institutions of higher education. The U.S. military is a microcosm of society, but it is not representative of the entire population.⁵ For example, the military requires that its personnel meet minimum education, physical, mental, aptitude, and moral standards to enlist.⁶ Thus, civilian

⁵ David R. Segal and Mady Wechsler Segal, “America’s Military Population,” *Population Bulletin*, Vol. 59, No. 4, 2004.

⁶ See Kelty, Kleykamp, and Segal, 2010; Segal and Segal, 2004.

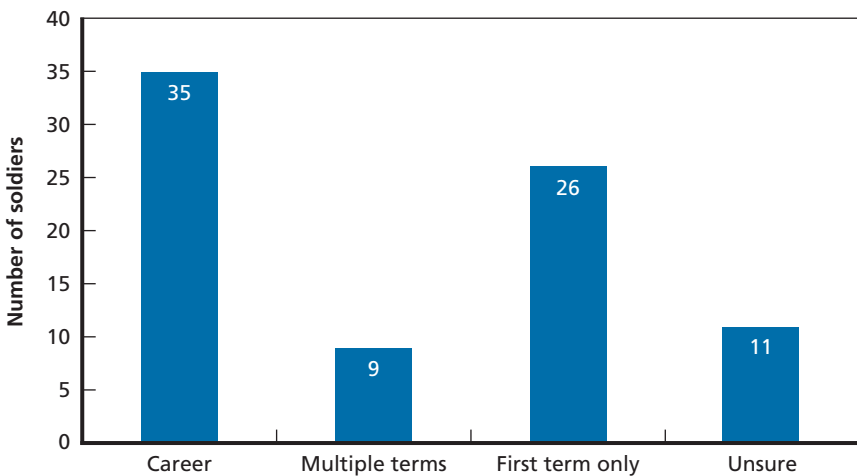
employers know soldiers have met these minimum standards. In addition, many soldiers gain valuable experiences from their time in the military that civilian employers may find valuable.

In making their plans for the future, soldiers confront two major decision points. First, they must decide whether they will reenlist. Second, if they decide to separate, they must make plans about what to do and where to go. We asked soldiers about both of these decision points.

Reenlistment Intentions and What Could Influence Them

During the beginning of each interview, we asked soldiers, “How long did you initially plan to remain in the military?” As necessary, we further probed soldiers by asking a follow-up question, “Did you think of it as an enlistment or a career?” Figure 6.8 shows the distribution of responses to the initial question and to the follow-up probe. First, 43 percent stated that they intended to remain in the Army for a career (n=35), while 11 percent stated that they would join for only multiple terms (n=9). Taken together, 54 percent (n=44) of participants planned

Figure 6.8
Initial, Preenlistment, Plans for Reenlistment



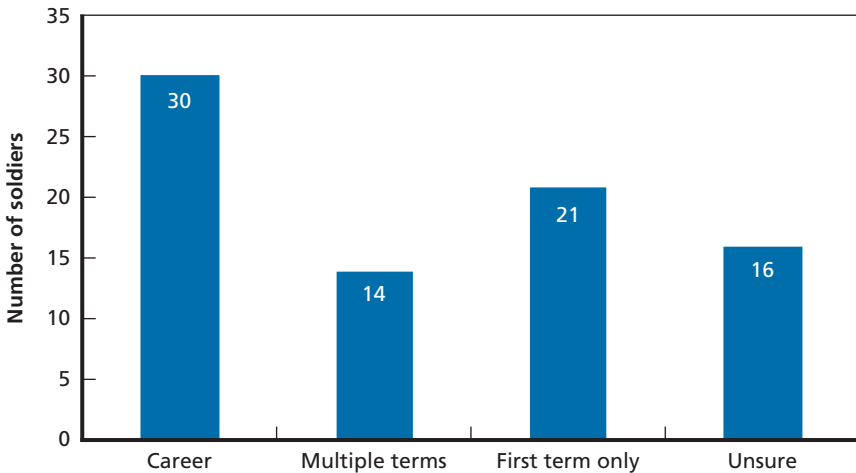
NOTE: “How long did you initially plan to remain in the military?” n=81.

to reenlist after their first term. Second, 14 percent of soldiers were unsure (n=11) whether they would reenlist, and a third expected to stay for only their first term (n=26).

Later in the same interview, we asked a related question about current intention to stay in the Army: “How long do you envision staying in the Army?” Figure 6.9 shows that 37 percent (n=30) and 17 percent (n=14) planned to stay for multiple terms. When these two data points are combined into an overall intent to reenlist metric (n=44; 54 percent), this total value remains unchanged from preenlistment intentions. The number who planned to stay in only for a single term dropped slightly to 26 percent (n=21).

We also examined individual-level responses. Overall, 31 participants of the 44 who originally planned to reenlist remain committed to doing so. Of those who changed their opinions, eight reported wanting to remain in for only a single term, and five were unsure. Twelve of the 26 who originally planned to stay one term remained committed to doing so. Eight decided to reenlist, and six were unsure. Finally, in terms of the 11 who were originally unsure about their commitment to

Figure 6.9
Participants’ Current Plans for Reenlistment



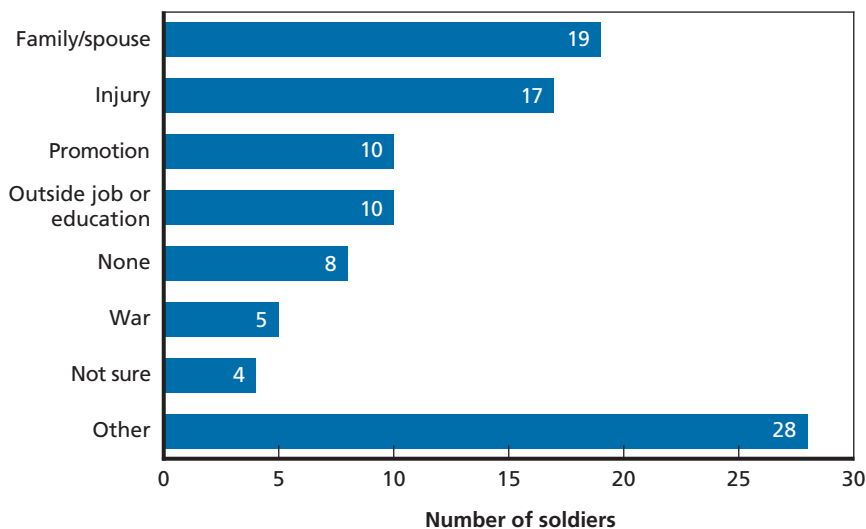
NOTE: “How long do you envision staying in the Army?” n=81.

the Army, five remained unsure, five planned on reenlisting, and one planned to remain for one term. We caveat that participants' current intentions are subject to change as they gain more experience in the Army.

There is some evidence soldiers consider multiple factors when making plans to reenlist or separate from the Army. We examined these considerations by asking soldiers, "What might happen to change those plans [to stay in the Army]?" Figure 6.10 shows soldiers' responses.

Soldiers provided a large assortment of factors that could affect their reenlistment or separation plans, as reflected by the more than one-third "other" responses (n=29; 36 percent). Some within this category felt that more time and general experience in the Army might help them determine whether they should stay or go. Furthermore, some of the participants indicated that a yearning for a civilian lifestyle might prevent them from reenlisting and that job factors, such as job satisfaction, guaranteed job stability, or the ability to switch to a prefer-

Figure 6.10
Factors That Could Change Retention Plans



NOTE: "What might happen to change those plans [to stay in the Army]?" n=81.

able MOS, would influence their choices. A few soldiers talked about how Army accolades—such as a Ranger tab or entry into flight paramedic training school—would motivate them to reenlist and potentially pursue a career in the Army. Similarly, a handful of participants told interviewers they were inclined to remain in the Army if they could be stationed at a different base in the States or at an installation overseas. Army policies, standards, and leadership were considered by a few individuals. One infantry soldier who valued a positive unit environment felt that “just having good leadership” would influence his decision to stay. Others indicated that lowering Army standards or dramatic changes in Army policy and beliefs would reduce their chances of pursuing additional contracts. One participant (in the 91 CMF) also indicated that he would leave the Army if he could no longer tolerate the Army bureaucracy.

About one-fifth of soldiers (n=17; 21 percent) spoke openly about how injury or health issues might prevent them from a career in the Army. These soldiers were aware of the Army’s emphasis on medical readiness and the reality of having a physically demanding career. Several participants also noted that outside job or education opportunities might motivate them to decline an Army reenlistment (n=9; 11 percent). A respondent stated that “a job offer, maybe if I change my mind and I want to go to college” (CMF92) would inspire him to reconsider his future in the Army. In contrast, promotion (n=10; 12 percent) was seen as a factor that might prompt participants to stay longer in the Army. For example, one CMF92 put it simply: “the only way I’m staying is if I got an E-5 and if I got a signing bonus” (CMF92).

Two other variables—family/spouse (n=19; 23 percent) and war (n=5; 6 percent)—appeared to have mixed effects, promoting reenlistment for some and promoting an early exit for others. In terms of family, one soldier from an artillery unit responded, “if something happens with my family, [or] I get married within the next two or three years or whatever, and she doesn’t want me in . . . I’d probably get out” (CMF13). Long-term separation from family and friends was also a valid reason to leave. Soldiers also mentioned that failing health or death of a parent would result in an exit from the Army. Then again, others felt that family provided greater incentive to stay in the Army.

Soldiers referred to the possibility of having children or a shift in family well-being that would increase the need for job stability and access to Army benefits.

Another factor that had opposing responses was the possibility of war and being deployed. A handful of soldiers felt that war would motivate them to stay. One infantryman argued that it made no sense to turn down the opportunity to serve in a war or overseas because of the time and energy invested in training. Another soldier factored in the type of war involvement:

[It] simply depends on how things are when my contract comes up. You know, are we at war and, if so, what kind of war? . . . a war which actually needs me as opposed to, say, what's happening right now wherein only a handful of people are actually deployed to the war zones and it's more simply as a support to allies, [or] an actual war where they need to have boots on the ground in larger numbers. (CMF11)

Pride and Respect Influence Soldiers' Reenlistment Decisions

Throughout their interviews, soldiers often expressed feelings of pride when those outside the military, particularly friends and family, saw them as soldiers in uniform. One soldier said the best part of being in the Army was that "I get a lot of respect . . . because when people know you're a soldier, I guess they like it and they want to talk to you about it. I get a lot of side conversations with people when they find out I'm a soldier and all that" (CMF19).

The Hometown Recruiter Assistance Program (HRAP) is a USAREC program of recruiter support, defined in Army Regulation 601-64.⁷ Through it, soldiers who have completed AIT or One Station Unit Training (OSUT) may be eligible to return to their hometowns to assist recruiters for a short period. Some of the soldiers in our sample either participated in the HRAP themselves or were recruited in part because of these types of visits. For example, one soldier said she was

⁷ Headquarters, Department of the Army, "Personnel Procurement: Hometown Recruiter Assistance Program," Washington, D.C., 1980.

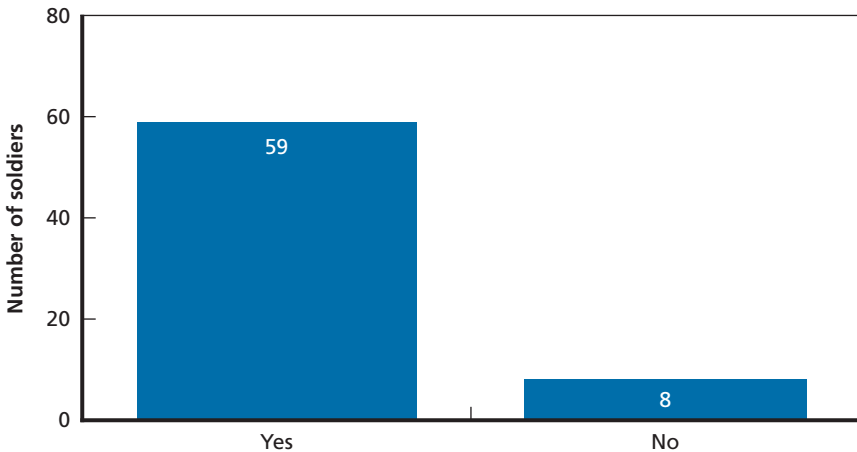
motivated to enlist because of this connection: “When the people in uniform come into school and I just looked up to them a lot, so I was like that’s really cool. I want to do that” (CMF91). But many comments about wearing the uniform when returning home suggest that doing so may do more than recruit the next crop of soldiers. In fact, wearing the uniform when they return home, whether as part of HRAP or otherwise, appears to reinforce the soldiers’ choice to join the military. One soldier made the connection clearly, saying, “I just like being in uniform, going home and showing off my uniform kind of, yeah.” This soldier continued by describing how wearing the uniform at home validates the decision to join the military and elevates interest in staying in it longer, “So when people say, ‘Thank you for serving’ and stuff, it kind of puts me like, yeah, I want to stay in a little bit longer, I like this. I like the feeling. Because, how I grew up, it just doesn’t seem like I’d be the one in the Army” (CMF13).

Soldiers’ Plans After They Leave the Army

Overall, soldiers were split between either attending school (n=64; 81 percent) or finding a job (n=49; 60 percent; many participants cited plans for both work and school) once they left the Army. While some talked about taking college courses while enlisted, others had plans to attend college once their time in the Army was over. Soldiers were well aware of the education benefits associated with time in service. Moreover, participants discussed pursuing a bachelor’s or graduate degree en route to a civilian career. For example, one medic said, “I plan on getting my degree right after I leave the Army, using my GI benefits to become either a nurse or something in the medical field, most likely a nurse” (CMF68). Others expressed a preference for going straight into a job or career (n=49; 60 percent). Of those who expressed interest in pursuing a job, most were from combat CMFs (35 out of 49 participants) and/or currently planning a career in the Army (26 out of 49 participants).

Participants overwhelmingly reported that they felt their Army experience would help them get into school and/or find a job in the civilian world. As seen in Figure 6.11, participants were specifically asked, “Will your Army experience help you find a job?” We posed this

Figure 6.11
Perceptions on Whether Army Experience Will Help Participants Find Work



NOTE: Coded response to the question, "Will your Army experience help you find a job?" n=67.

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question to 67 participants and 59 (88 percent) indicated that Army experience would help them. As one soldier, a CMF19, recalled, military service was an advance for acceptance into a college in his hometown. Another soldier talked about how Army experience looks good on a resume:

I think more jobs nowadays require you to have a bachelor's, master's degree, depending on what you do, but I think also people do look for a military background because you already have that type of discipline and drive to succeed and get things done. I guess just in general, you served the country and you did something well in your life, that's, I guess, what most people see. (CMF92)

Summary

In responding to a variety of different questions addressing satisfaction with Army life, junior enlisted personnel consistently report satisfac-

tion with the Army. Soldiers report both positive and negative aspects of their overall Army lives. Soldiers report social bonds or camaraderie as the single “best part” of Army life, while benefits and opportunities for travel and adventure were also commonly cited. Being away from friends and family, however, was reported as the biggest sacrifice of service. Of course, it remains to be seen whether such perceptions of Army life endure as participants continue to experience their full term of service.

Most participants report that they will either remain in the Army for a career or re-up for a second enlistment. For many of these soldiers, it is early in their term to know for certain whether they will reenlist, and indeed, many of the other positive assessments of Army life have yet to face the test of time. The presence of health problems or outside educational or employment opportunities could sway more participants to leave the Army after their first term, while receiving a promotion could promote reenlistment. One benefit of Army service cited by a majority of participants, however, was the belief that serving in the Army will pay dividends in terms of helping participants find future work outside the Army.

Conclusions and Implications

This study offers insight into the lives of enlisted soldiers as they begin their journey in the U.S. Army. It provides a portrait of their experiences as they enter the Army and as they join their first operational unit. In this final chapter, we provide conclusions and offer recommendations for the Army.

Conclusions

The interviews provided a vast number of findings that span the junior enlisted soldiers' experiences. Here, we draw from those findings to offer four higher-level conclusions.

Junior enlisted soldiers give their Army experience extremely high marks, and relatively few express discontent. More than 85 percent of our participants reported that they believed that joining the Army was still “the best option,” and more than 75 percent would recommend the Army to someone like themselves. Indeed, among those who second-guessed their experience and were discontented, that discontent was often only fleeting. Missing family was the most frequently cited sacrifice, and some also noted that they miss their independence.

Families play a critical role in soldiers' decisions to join the Army and in their later satisfaction in the Army. Family is a key and repeated theme, with the majority of soldiers reporting a family history of Army service and identifying family as key influencers in their enlistment decisions. Family also helps shape the expectations soldiers have for Army life. Moreover, the biggest sacrifice of Army life for soldiers

in our sample was being away from family, but soldiers frequently use text messages, phone calls, and social media to stay in regular contact with mothers, fathers, siblings, and grandparents. Efforts that engage families in the recruitment process may pay dividends for the Army.

Soldiers could have benefited from more accurate information about their occupational specialties, their Army lives, and their installations. Different information sources shape expectations for MOS and Army life (and, hence, the potential for satisfaction in soldiers' decisions to enter the Army). Many recruiters offered genuine help to soldiers seeking a job in the Army, but other recruiters (and recruitment materials) appeared to oversell an MOS and set overly high expectations for entering soldiers. Though one-third of participants stated their MOS met or exceeded expectations, other soldiers were disappointed with aspects of their occupational specialty choices, complaining about boredom, about lack of field time, and about having to perform tasks unrelated to their occupations. Efforts to provide more accurate expectations for Army life and work may set the stage for improved soldier satisfaction.

Relationships among soldiers (peer bonds) and with their leaders represent a critical dimension of Army satisfaction. Soldiers report that peer bonds and camaraderie represent the best elements of their unit life. Likewise, soldiers detail seemingly active and fulfilling social lives and, most critically, report that their commanders, NCOs, and peers “care the most” about their well-being. These social bonds may be leveraged to support recruitment or retention.

Implications

While painting a detailed portrait of privates' lives in the Army was a key study goal, we were also interested in understanding the implications of what that portrait shows when it comes to the current Army Value Proposition—the promise made by the Army to the men and women who enlist and a statement that, in part, guides Army adver-

tising and marketing programs. As noted in the first chapter, the AVP provides a succinct argument for why people should join the Army:¹

The U.S. Active Army is for those who want more than a job; they want to make a difference, every day, for themselves, their families, and the Nation. Through shared values and training that develops their potential, these men and women take pride in their ability to adapt, respond and prevail in complex environments at home and abroad.²

Specifically, the Army promises to develop soldiers to make a difference for themselves, their families, and the country.

In general, our participants told us that they believe the Army has kept this promise to them. We found evidence to support the AVP. First, many of the soldiers we interviewed cited institutional values that define their Army service as more than a job. These soldiers joined to experience adventure, to fulfill a calling to serve the nation, and to continue their family history of military service. Soldiers also talked about occupational values unique to the Army, such as Army adventure and travel, as well as typical motivators for most employees in the labor market. Salary, benefits, job training, and choice of occupation were common reasons soldiers gave us for why they joined. These findings are consistent with research showing that military personnel are “pragmatic professionals” who value both institutional and occupational values when deciding to serve.³

Soldiers frequently said that relationships with others in their unit were an important facet of their military service. The AVP mentions the importance of shared values among Army personnel. Soldiers consistently told us that the relationships they developed from these shared values and working well together were some of the most important

¹ As previously noted, a value proposition is defined as “an innovation, service, or feature intended to make a company or product attractive to customers,” and it is typically encapsulated by a relatively simple and straight-forward statement called a positioning statement (Google.com, undated).

² Army Marketing and Research Group, 2016.

³ M. Segal, 1986.

characteristics of their service in the Army—that is, the relationships they forged with peers in their units and leaders of these units.

Soldiers recognized that service in the Army is unique and can provide them with a broad range of opportunities. A number of soldiers said they wanted to reclassify into new occupations in the future so they could develop a broader range of skill sets.

Recommendations

Based on our analysis, we offer several recommendations for the Army. Several caveats should be considered. First, as noted in the introduction, one key limitation of this study is that our study sample is not representative of the U.S. Army or of any specific CMF category within the Army. In addition, as the study was primarily focused on the collection and analysis of interview data, we devoted limited resources to the analysis of various policy recommendations. We consequently urge the Army to consider follow-on research and analysis that replicates our findings with a more representative survey and that gives serious weight to policy alternatives and implications. Our recommendations are summarized in Table 7.1 and discussed in detail following.

Recommendations to Further Develop AVP and to Improve Enlistment and Retention

We found that the AVP aligns with the experiences of many of the soldiers we interviewed, but we also identified several opportunities to improve the perceived value of service in the Army among future recruits, current personnel, their families, and their friends. Specifically, based on the conclusions discussed earlier, we identified recommendations for possible changes to the current AVP and to recruiting and retention practices.

Consider Emphasizing Occupational Benefits and Adding Social Bonds to Current AVP

We recommend two changes to the AVP to improve recruitment and retention. First, the Army should consider emphasizing occupational values in this proposition to improve its ability to recruit. Our inter-

Table 7.1
Conclusions and Associated Recommendations

Conclusions	Associated Recommendations
<p>Soldiers report that peer bonds play an important and positive role in their Army experience.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider emphasizing occupational benefits and adding social bonds to current AVP. • Highlight social bonds as part of reenlistment campaigns. • Consider incentivizing first-term soldiers who successfully recruit from their friends and peer networks.
<p>Soldiers often had unrealistic expectations of their MOSs and of Army life.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure recruiters provide accurate information about MOS. • Improve the accuracy of information about Army life that new recruits receive. • Following BCT/AIT and OSUT, provide accurate information about installations and unit assignments.
<p>Families have a critical role in the recruitment and retention of soldiers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain or expand recruitment programs that build parental support.
<p>Soldiers complain of boredom and taskings unrelated to MOS.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help leaders engage soldiers in relevant and educational tasks and otherwise use soldiers' time more effectively.

views suggest that many soldiers are pragmatic professionals in that they are motivated by both institutional and occupational benefits. The current AVP primarily emphasizes the former, but the Army should consider the latter set of values to help improve the future recruitment of personnel. In terms of shaping recruit outreach, this could mean advertising that highlights travel and adventure as well as job stability, pay, benefits, and MOS guarantees.

Second, the Army should consider adding social bonds and camaraderie to its value proposition to improve retention of soldiers. While few soldiers told us that social bonds were the reason why they initially joined, most referenced such social bonds, including working well together, as what they like best about their units and Army life. We recommend that the Army revise the way in which it characterizes institutional benefits in the current value proposition by directly men-

tioning the importance of social bonds, camaraderie, and successful work together among their soldiers.

Continue to Leverage Social Bonds in Promoting Reenlistment

The vast majority of soldiers we interviewed said that relationships with their military peers and leadership were important to them. While these soldiers may join for a mix of institutional (e.g., service to country) and occupational (e.g., salary and benefits) reasons, most said social bonds within their units were a positive outcome of their service.

The Army should continue to leverage these relationships to influence retention decisions by their personnel. Current and former leaders of service members could influence decisions by soldiers about whether they want to reenlist for a second term. For example, a subset of soldiers talked about their relationships with former leaders during Basic Training or AIT. Many soldiers said their current NCOs had an effect on them professionally and/or personally.⁴ As is often the case, a letter, phone call, or in-person meeting by a current NCO of a soldier or past NCOs from Basic Training or AIT that encourages him or her to reenlist could influence final reenlistment decisions.

Consider Incentivizing First-Term Soldiers Who Successfully Recruit from Their Friends and Peer Networks

The majority of our participants stated that they would recommend the Army to someone like them. The relationships that soldiers have with their civilian peers could serve as a pipeline for future recruits. Specifically, current soldiers may influence their civilian friends to join. The Army could further incentivize first-term soldiers who successfully recruit from their friends and peer networks.

⁴ This question on satisfaction in the Army asks soldiers to map their answers using a scale that ranged from 1 to 5, with lower values representing higher levels of satisfaction. This may have created errors in responses by soldiers. Research finds that numerical values used on rating scales may affect the answers that respondents give on surveys (Schwarz et al., 1991). We acknowledge that the wording of this question may have created error in the response patterns of interviewees.

Ensure Recruiters Provide Accurate Information About MOS

We found a discrepancy in soldiers' initial entry MOS expectations versus their current experiences as a professional soldier. This discrepancy is important, as research has established that employees whose experience on the job fails to meet preemployment expectations suffer reduced employee satisfaction, increased intention to leave, and impaired job performance.⁵ Based in part on these findings, the human resources industry often relies on realistic job previews (RJPs), which, as the name suggests, help ensure that prospective employees have an accurate understanding of their new jobs. Such RJPs have been shown to improve positive work attitudes and reduce employee turnover.⁶

Consequently, we recommend that the Army ensure that its recruitment pitches and recruiting materials for military occupational specialties accurately reflect the character of those jobs. Specifically, we recommend that Army recruiters and recruitment tools such as recruitment videos both highlight the exciting facets of the MOS to potential recruits and acknowledge that there are less exciting moments, particularly in garrison.⁷ If they are not already, recruiters should be provided

⁵ Wanous et al., 1992, pp. 288–297.

⁶ Phillips, 1998, pp. 673–690; for meta-analytic studies, see Premack and Wanous, 1985, pp. 706–719.

⁷ While we observed the discrepancy in soldiers' initial entry MOS expectations versus their current experiences as a professional soldier, there is a question as to whether this discrepancy warrants significant attention by the Army. After all, the soldiers in our sample appeared relatively satisfied with their overall Army experience. To the extent these soldiers really are satisfied, should the Army dedicate additional resources to enhance that satisfaction?

This is a worthy issue for future study. Assuming a follow-on study used a traditional survey design to collect a representative sample, it would then be ideal to analyze the statistical relationship between complaints regarding MOS experience and satisfaction, intention to reenlist, or actual reenlistment rates. Absent this research, however, we believe that the nature and extent of concerns raised by soldiers is sufficient to warrant some attention. In addition, our proposed fixes, while requiring some costs, are inherent goods. There is, for example, inherent value in improving the forthrightness of recruiters and recruiting materials. In addition, as recommended at the conclusion of this chapter, efforts to help leaders engage soldiers in relevant and educational tasks and otherwise use soldiers' time more effectively can only lead to a better-trained soldier.

One potential question is whether improvements in the forthrightness of recruiters and recruitment materials may inadvertently hurt recruitment rates. Such recruitment pitches,

with more detailed information about specific MOS choices to pass on to prospective recruits. Online tools could be considered to help close this gap, providing realistic glimpses into the what a recruit's job might look like a year on. We recommend reviewing the current catalog of recruiting videos to ensure they present an accurate depiction of life in the Army.

And in a related recommendation, ensure that recruiters are evaluated on metrics other than the number of recruits that they sign. As one of the reviewers of this report, Dr. Mady Segal, suggests, one approach may be to survey recruited soldiers at their first duty station to assess recruiter performance. USAREC could supplement recruiter evaluations with data on the satisfaction of recruited soldiers or reports on the accuracy of recruiter information.

Improve the Accuracy of Information About Army Life That New Recruits Receive

Related to the issue of lack of accurate MOS-specific information, soldiers we spoke to also faced a gap between expectations and reality where Army life more generally was concerned. We found that most soldiers develop their expectations about Army life from family and friends or from the numerous movies and books about military duty. While in some cases these sources may be accurate, they also perpetuate misconceptions. Most movies and books focus on the action of combat or the trials of basic training. Recruiters and recruitment materials could even out this imbalance somewhat by focusing on the reality of Army life. While such portrayals should make clear that military service is not all action, the portrayals should focus on the upsides of Army life, and on both social and task cohesion, as described by soldiers in our sample and elsewhere—for example, the deep bonds with peers and culture of teamwork and self-improvement that infused many of our conversations.

however, need not be dour. Pitches that honestly highlight the good and acknowledge the sometimes not-so-good aspects of soldiering can, in theory, improve the credibility and ultimately the effectiveness of recruiters.

Following BCT/AIT and OSUT, Provide Accurate Information About Installations and Unit Assignments

Soldiers often told us that they lacked accurate information about their assigned installations and units after Basic Training and AIT. The absence of this information often created opportunities for rumors to develop about life at various installations and units. We recommend the Army counter these rumors by providing accurate and comprehensive information about first duty stations as they assign new soldiers to installations and units. This may be conducted by surveying soldiers about the types of information they want about pending duty stations. Regardless, it will be important that such information sets realistic expectations for the future.

Maintain or Expand Recruitment Programs That Build Parental Support

Army enlistment represents an important event in the life courses of most soldiers. Soldiers told us that their families had a critical role in their decision to join the Army. The Army should continue to leverage the prospect of parental support by maintaining or expanding recruitment programs that engage with parents in the recruitment process and address parental concerns.

Recommendations for Unit Leadership

While this study was conducted for USAREC, we do offer several observations that go beyond USAREC. In particular, we have reported that many soldiers, especially medics and those in combat CMFs, report significant concerns about not being adequately engaged in training or report that they were required to perform a lot of non-CMF-relevant tasks—or, as one soldier put it, “sweeping wet grass.” A number also complained about sitting around, doing nothing, only to be given tasks in the waning hours of a shift.

While there are limitations in terms of the Army engaging in frequent and long-term field training, it does seem possible for small-unit leaders to more effectively engage soldiers in relevant and educational tasks and otherwise use soldiers’ time more effectively. For example, leaders could assign soldiers reading that can help enhance MOS-

relevant knowledge and operational effectiveness. Unit commanders could require soldiers to participate in online courses, especially on light-duty days. And small-unit leaders could engage soldiers with relevant hands-on skill training. Leaders should also take care to avoid instances of poor planning that lead to unnecessarily late-day tasks that require soldiers to remain at work late in the day and into the evening.⁸

Summary

In conclusion, through in-depth interviews with over 80 first-term soldiers, we learn that soldiers speak fondly of their Army experience with relatively few soldiers expressing serious discontent. Relationships seem to play a significant role in this satisfaction. Our sample reports that social bonds with fellow soldiers and with leaders represent a critical dimension of Army satisfaction. Relationships with families are also important. Not only do families help lead many young recruits to join the Army, but families remain in constant touch with soldiers through modern technology and social media. Finally, through misperceptions driven by old stereotypes of Army service, sensational media depictions, or even the recruiters themselves, many soldiers enter the Army with errant expectations about work and Army life. Based on these conclusions, the study provides some recommendations to improve the current AVP and to improve the enlistment and retention of soldiers in the Army.

⁸ Mady Wechsler Segal, written correspondence to the author, June 15, 2017.

Interview Protocol

Life as a Private Interview Protocol

[Interviewer: read introduction, obtain consent or conclude interview, address any questions from the Soldier.]

Probes denote areas of *possible* follow up. Skip if already answered, not relevant, or other issues take priority. Clarification comments offer an alternate way of asking the question, in case the Soldier didn't understand it as originally framed.

MILITARY BACKGROUND

I have a series of background questions that we can move through quickly. Can you please provide the following:

MB1. MOS

MB2. Paygrade

MB3. Time in Service

MB4. Time in this unit

MB5. Time at this location

MB6. Number of deployments

MB7. Age

MB8. Gender [no need to ask]

MB9. Marital status

MB10. Number of children

MB11. Education level

CIVILIAN BACKGROUND

CB1. What is your hometown; where did you come from?

Probe:

- What type of community is that (e.g., small town, city, suburbs; good place, bad place)?

CB2. Did either of your parents serve in the military?

CB3. Do you have other family members who served or are serving?

ENLISTMENT DECISION

ED1. Why did you decide to join the Army?

Probes (if not covered):

- Why the Army, rather than another service?
- What initially interested you about joining the Army?
- When did you first think about joining the Army?
- When/at what age did you decide to join the Army?
- Who, if anyone, was especially influential in your decision?

ED2. How long did you initially plan to remain in the military?

Probe:

- Did you think of it as an enlistment or a career?

ED3. What did your family and friends think of your decision to join the military?

Probes:

- Were they surprised by your decision to join?
- Were they supportive of your decision to join?

ED3.1. Did you have any other jobs before joining the military?

ED4. What would you be doing if you weren't in the military; what had you otherwise planned to do?

EXPECTATIONS OF MOS AND ARMY SERVICE

EMAS1. A few questions about your MOS specifically: Why did you choose your MOS?

EMAS2. What did you think your MOS would be like; what did you envision?

Probes:

- What were you told about the MOS?
- Did you learn about the MOS from any additional sources? (e.g., online)

EMAS4. How is your MOS different from your expectation?

EMAS5. Would you ever want to change MOS? If so, to what?

EMAS6. Now looking at the Army experience generally: What did you think Army life would be like; what did you envision?

- Where did your expectations come from?

EMAS7. How is Army life similar to what you expected?

EMAS8. How is it different from your expectations?

DECISION VALIDATION

DV0.1. So, how do you think you're doing in the Army? [Clarification, if needed: Generally speaking, are you a successful Soldier? Average Soldier?]

DV1. Do you still think that joining the Army was the best option for you? Yes or no?

Probe:

- Are there times you second guess that decision?

DV2. What do you think is the largest sacrifice you make by being in the Army?

DV3. For you, what is the best part of being in the Army?

EXPERIENCE IN UNIT

EU1. What did you know about the reputation of [installation] or your unit before arriving here?

- Where did you hear about this reputation?

EU2. When I ask you to talk about "your unit," which do you mostly think of, your squad or your platoon or your company?

[Clarification: we've got some questions about your experience in your unit and we're trying to understand what level to ask them at. If you aren't sure you can answer each question with the unit(s) that makes most sense to you, just make sure to let us know what you mean.]

EU3. What is the best thing about being in your [reference unit]?

EU4. What is the worst thing about being in your [reference unit]?

Probe:

- Are these best and worse things because of your MOS; or different for Soldiers with other MOS?

EU5. How well does your [reference unit] work together?

EU6. How does your [reference unit] differ from others?

Probes:

- Are there Soldiers that just don't fit in or take away from your unit's success?
- Is there a [reference unit] you would prefer over your current?

EU7. [If Soldier has deployed] Have you deployed with your unit?

SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

SI1. When not at work, what kinds of things do you do with your free time? [Clarification: going out with friends, dating, video games, hobbies, time connecting on the phone/social media, etc.]

SI2. What kinds of social activities do you do?

Probes:

- How much of your free time do you spend with each of these: the Soldiers from your unit, other Soldiers, non-military people here, connecting with people from home?
- Do you do most of your socializing on or off base?
- How important is socializing to you during non-work hours?
- Do you think making friends in the military is important to how satisfied you are with your life in the military?

SI5. How important is it to you to stay in touch with people outside of your military life?

- How do you stay in touch?

SI5.1. What kind of a place is [installation]? Do people here party a lot? Date a lot?

SI3. What about installation and unit activities? Do things like unit social activities or base-wide events make you feel more connected to Army life?

SI4. Who here cares most about your wellbeing? [Clarification: not just whether you do your work, but are you doing okay, are you thriving, happy]

- Is there someone you ask for help when you are having issues (social, work related, personal/financial)?

CURRENT HEALTH AND WELLNESS

CHW1. How is your physical health?

Probes:

- Any injuries?
- Have you taken sick leave recently?
- How did you do on your last APFT?

CHW2. How many hours of sleep do you get on an average night?

CHW3. Does feeling physically healthy (or unhealthy) affect how you feel about Army life? [Clarification: for example, if you are tired all the time, you might not be happy to be in the Army; if you feel like you are in great shape, this might make you like the Army more]

Probe:

- Is it important to you to have a physically active career?

CHW4. Tell me a little bit about your financial situation. Do you feel comfortable and secure? Occasionally have some difficulty making ends meet? In over your head?

CHW5. Do you have substantial debts?

CHW6. Does your financial situation affect how you feel about a career in the Army?

RETENTION

R1. How long do you envision staying in the Army? [If already sufficiently answered, say something like, “you already told us you planned to stay in the Army for X years” and then move on to R2]

R2. What might happen to change those plans?

R3. What will you do when you leave the Army?

Probes:

- What will you do for employment?
- Will your Army experience help you find a job?
- Will you attend school? Studying what? Will the Army help you afford it?
- Where will you live?

CLOSING QUESTIONS

CQ1. If you could tell your company commander anything, without attribution, what would you tell him/her?

CQ2. Would you recommend that someone like you join the Army? Yes or no?

CQ3. What is the most important thing for Army leadership to know about what life is like as a Soldier?

CQ4. Are there ways in which you think the Army experience is different for people of your generation than in the past?

CQ5. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being most satisfied and 5 being least satisfied, how satisfied are you with your Army experience?

*****TURN OFF VOICE RECORDER*****

INVITATION

We are currently conducting interviews like this with 80 privates from four different installations. We plan to return to those installations, and conduct longer interviews with 3 to 5 Soldiers from each of those installations. If we select you, would you be willing to participate, assuming that your leadership would agree for you to spend a day with us? Here's how we would do that: If you provide us with your cell phone number or email, we would email you, probably in [AUGUST/SEPTEMBER], to let you know that we've selected you, and to confirm that you still agree to participate. And then we'd contact your leadership and arrange a day that you would spend with us.

I1. Would you be willing to participate in a longer interview?

I2. What is the best way to reach you?

Data Coding

In preparing to analyze the interview content, we carefully read and reviewed each interview transcription. For approximately half of the interviews, RAND Arroyo staff reviewed the transcript while listening to the interview recording, making sure to fix any apparent transcription errors. This process revealed relatively few observed errors, so for the remaining interviews, RAND Arroyo staff reviewed the transcriptions and then checked the recordings only if any mistakes were evident.

We created a coding scheme that defined specific variables that raters were to code and the relevant subcodes to those variables. We defined these variables based on the team's experience conducting the individual interviews and reviewing transcripts. In some we revisited and revised the coding structure after we coded an initial set of documents. To train raters and to estimate inter-rater reliability, we identified five interviews and assigned five research staff members to serve as raters. The platform that we used for coding the interview qualitative content was Dedoose.com. Dedoose is a secure, cloud-based system that allows for describing, coding, and analyzing complex data sets.¹ The team met twice to allow the coders to ask questions and discuss perspectives on the coding process and definitions of individual subcodes. At the conclusion of this process, the team conducted an inter-rater reliability test in Dedoose. To conduct these tests in Dedoose, it is necessary to identify a limited set of codes and excerpts (5–10 excerpts)

¹ Dedoose, website, undated.

for testing. The platform allows the researcher to identify 5–10 excerpts that each team member codes. For each excerpt, five coding options are presented. Each team member then selects the code option that he or she thinks best applies to the text. Dedoose calculates inter-rater reliability. Using this approach, our team achieved an inter-rater reliability coefficient (Cohen's Kappa) of 1.00—a perfect score. A perfect score is highly unusual, especially given the complex data source used in this study. We believe that had Dedoose allowed our team to code the text from an entire interview (rather than 5–10 text excerpts), the inter-rater reliability score would be lower than 1.00.

To help ensure more accurate inter-rater reliability, we conducted the coding process for all interviews in an iterative manner. Specifically, we coded documents in three separate tranches. For tranche one, raters coded 11 transcripts, with one transcript coded simultaneously by all raters.² A subsequent team meeting allowed raters an opportunity to discuss coding questions and concerns and develop a unified understanding of the coding criteria. In addition, a review of the team-coded transcript allowed for a more thorough vetting of coding accuracy. The rating team then repeated the process for tranche two (35 documents coded) and tranche three (35 documents coded). Such exercises are said to encourage “thoroughness, both in interrogating the data at hand and in providing an account of how an analysis was developed.”³ The results led to a revision to our coding inclusion/exclusion and disambiguation criteria to better reflect our shared understanding of the coding scheme.

It is likely that the accuracy of the coding process varied to some degree by topic. For example, some interview questions—“Why did you decide to join the Army?” “What did your family and friends think of your decision to join the military?” and “How is your MOS different from your expectation?”—likely achieved lower-than-desired inter-

² Ideally, we would have recalculated the Cohen's Kappa for each document coded simultaneously by our team (one document per iterative phase); however, the Dedoose platform did not support inter-rater analyses other than the approach that yielded a perfect score (Kappa = 1.00) for the subset of interviewer questions.

³ Rosaline S. Barbour, “Checklists for Improving Rigour in Qualitative Research: A Case of the Tail Wagging the Dog?” *British Medical Journal*, Vol. 322, May 2001, pp. 1115–1117.

rater reliability, while other questions, with more simple or bimodal response sets, likely achieved very high levels of inter-rater reliability. To address this, the lead authors of the report personally reviewed the codes for several questions. In several of these cases, the authors corrected evident inaccuracies and, at times, added new coding variables that better fit the data.

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The U.S. Army Recruiting Command asked RAND Arroyo Center to undertake research to improve its understanding of soldiers' motivations to join the Army, and how the reality of Army life matches up with expectations. Who joins, why, and how satisfied are they with their decisions? This study's portrayal of the U.S. Army private could serve as an educational tool for a variety of important audiences, such as Army senior leadership, junior officers, noncommissioned officers, and prospective new recruits.

To conduct this study, RAND researchers interviewed 81 soldiers, ranked E-1 to E-4, generally assigned to their first Modified Table of Organization and Equipment unit. The findings from this study offer a rich description of experiences by a select few junior enlisted Army personnel; however, due to sample size limitations, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to the U.S. Army as a whole or to any rank or Career Management Field category. The research found that soldiers join the Army for family, institutional, and occupational reasons, and many value the opportunity to become a military professional. They value their relationships with other soldiers, enjoy their social lives, and are satisfied with Army life.



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ISBN-10 0-8330-9969-8

ISBN-13 978-0-8330-9969-3



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