

Senior NCOs contemplate dedication through traditionally arduous duty as Army Reserve celebrates 109th Birthday

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NCOIC, NCO Journal



U.S. Army Lt. Gen. Curtis M. Scaparrotti, commander, International Security Assistance Force Joint Command and deputy commander, U.S. Forces – Afghanistan, reads the oath of enlistment to 23 service members April 23. The re-enlistment ceremony was part of celebrating the U.S. Army Reserve 104th birthday.

As Command Sgt. Maj. Mark C. Allen contemplated more than a century of history from the days of the Dough Boy to today's comparatively high tech U.S. Army Reserve noncommissioned officer, he thought of the technical and capability changes,

the Reserve's ongoing struggle for resources, the change in the sentiment of the nation, and the inherently challenging nature of the citizen-Soldier.

Though citizen-Soldiers have played a central role in the nation's defense since the 18th Century, today marks the official 109th birthday of the Reserves. It was created by Congress before World War I to provide medical reserves for what promised to be a bloody war. After the war, under the National Defense Act of 1920, Congress reorganized U.S. land forces by authorizing a Regular Army, a National Guard, and an Organized Reserve, which later became the Army Reserve.¹

Allen is the top senior enlisted leader for one of the Reserve's five modern, streamlined, functional command structure training commands (1st Brigade, Gulf Training Division, 75th Training Command in Fort Jackson, SC.)

"The educational and technical proficiency of the reserve NCO has changed. The sentiment of the nation has changed. But the core values of the Reserve NCO today is no different than in 1775," Allen said.

Today, the Reserve comprises about 20 percent of the Total Army force. It is manned by 205,000 Soldiers and 12,600 civilians, which provide 75 percent of key support units and capabilities like logistics, medical, engineering, military information support, and civil affairs.²

The Army has relied greatly on the Reserve since Sept. 11, 2001, as more than 280,000 reserve Soldiers have deployed to support the active Army in global operations.³

“The Army Reserve has proven itself through the years,” Allen said, noting that, besides their military skills, reservists also bring interpersonal and technical civilian skills and closer ties to the community than their active duty counterparts.

The education and technical proficiency of today’s Reserve Soldier is at a higher level than at any time in history, which has a positive impact on problem resolution, Allen said, adding that due to the rise in information technology and social media they are much more informed and connected than their predecessors. However, this is a two-edged sword in today’s environment of “unconstrained social media,” he said, because, like their active duty counterparts, many reserve Soldiers do not exercise enough care about what they post.

Although today’s Reserve NCOs and Soldiers are more technically capable than their counterparts throughout history, it has largely come at the expense of their physical fitness, which Allen described as “our biggest challenge today.” The Reserve is countering this challenge with resiliency program designed to give their Soldiers a more holistic approach to fitness and be better able to deal with challenges and overcome adversity, Allen said.

Not only is the capability of the Armed Forces’ Soldiers the best it’s ever been, so is that of their equipment, Allen noted. However, this advanced state of military protection, weaponry, and other kinds of military equipment is dependent on the defense funding allowed by Congress.

Allen has had a hand in progressive military equipment himself as he oversaw the shipping, unloading and training on the first M117 Armored Security Vehicles deployed in Operation Iraqi Freedom, he said.

The Reserve also struggled with facilities, historically as well as now. The then Organized Reserve Corps of the mid-20th Century had literally no training or storage facilities.⁴

Now, the Army Reserve has mixed success with securing adequate facilities, Allen said, noting many modern Joint Reserve Centers are presently in existence, but Army reservists also use numerous older, repurposed buildings that are not fully maintained. Many of these buildings do not have fences or safety zones to protect them from potential risk, he said. Congress has acknowledged dilapidated Reserve facilities as a problem in various sessions in the new millennium.⁵

Obtaining needed resources is always a struggle in the Reserves, Allen said.

“The Reserve and National Guard seem to fall to the rear as far as funding. We’re constantly fighting for resources,” he said.

Like their mid-20th century forerunners, the organizational structure of the Army Reserve is in a state of constant evolution. Reserve forces were realigned so frequently in the 1950s that it seemed the government did not know what to do with them. The re-planning and repurposing continues today, though it educates Soldiers by exposing them to other aspects of the Reserves, Allen described it as “disruptive” to operations.

Then again, adapting to changing circumstances is an intrinsic part of being a reservist. Besides having to frequently shift their responsibilities due to command re-organization, their present duties, ratcheted-up by war, are considerable.

Command Sgt. Maj. Corbett L. Whitmore, command sergeant major of the Army's School for Command Preparation, has heard the discussions of many Senior NCO reservists as they go through the course. He says their greatest challenge is simply "Army Reserve life."

Senior reserve NCOs attend a minimum of one weekend of training a month, but most serve up to two. Additionally, time is spent each week between battle assemblies assessing readiness metrics, briefing the battalion, brigade, and division, and attending weekly and/or monthly training meetings, Whitmore said.

Senior NCOs also ensure their junior Soldiers are progressing in their Professional Military Education and perform Physical Readiness Training. They also coach, teach, and mentor their Soldiers. As a ready Force, they accomplish all of the mandatory training requirements of the active force on top of their reserve specific responsibilities all within 12 weekends and 2-4 weeks of training per year, he said.

They must balance all this with a civilian job, as well as with their families. Combine this formidable challenge with a nation that sometimes sends mixed signals about its support.

It is this kind of steely commitment and dedication to serving the nation that prompted Col. James H. Murphy, commander of the 3297th U.S. Army Hospital before it deactivated in 2016, to say of Reservists,

“You’re not twice the citizen. You are twice the patriot.”

Pointing out that reservists still need backing, financial and otherwise, Allen said of these citizen-Soldiers and their families, who today celebrate their long service to the nation,

“Reservist’s ability and agility to change, to extend themselves in order to continue to be ready and relevant for the nation is a great tribute to these Soldiers and their families.”

References

- 1) “Army Reserve: A Concise History,” Office of Army Reserve History, United States Army Reserve Command; Fort Bragg, North Carolina (2013).**
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- 3) IBID.
- 4) "Maneuver and Firepower: The Evolution of Divisions and Separate Brigades,"
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- 5) "Military Construction Appropriation Bill (S. 2521)," 106th Congress,
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