



Better Not Re-Invent the Wheel: How Ireland Might Benefit From Australia's Comprehensive Approach to its Army Reserve

Colonel Ronald Ti (Australian Army Reserve)

Abstract

This article will highlight measures taken to incentivise and enable reserve force service in the Australian Defence Force, with a focus on the Army Reserve. Even with the significant economic, geographical, and cultural differences between Australia and Ireland as they are reflected in the Australian and Irish Defence Forces, some of the measures presented here may be relevant to Ireland's situation. The interested Irish reader must decide the extent to which some, all, or none of the points raised here are relevant to the Irish Reserve Defence Force in 2021.

Note: The views expressed in this article are the author's personal views and do not represent the viewpoint of the Australian Department of Defence.

Introduction

This article considers the question: 'how can the abilities, talents, and service-orientated nature of members of the Reserve Defence Force (RDF) be better harnessed and integrated into an Irish total force package?' The current shortfalls in Defence Force Reserves reflecting wider manpower shortages in the Irish Defence Forces are long standing, ongoing, persistent, and chronic.¹ Discussion of the causes of this situation together with possible solutions was presented in the 2019 Defence Forces Review (Carroll, 2019),² which was then followed by a more comprehensive journal article by the same author (Carroll, 2020).³ Based on the prominence given to the publication of these views, together with this author's own impressions and conversations, it would seem that the views expressed by the author of these articles regarding the current state of the RDF are indeed widely-held. Taking what was presented as an accurate reflection of the challenges facing the RDF, this article will argue that the key to unlocking the abilities, talents, and service-oriented natures of reservists (not just in Ireland but worldwide) lies in adopting a comprehensive approach that integrates, amongst other factors, effective reserve force policy, legislation, public and private sector partnership, and, ultimately, financial incentivisation.

Aim of This Paper

Firstly, this paper will focus on Australian Army Reservists, as these currently form the largest proportion of reservists within the Australian Defence Force (ADF).⁴ It will discuss key factors which have aided the recruitment and retention of Army reservists and highlight recent measures which have not merely been nominal, but genuinely attempted to integrate reservists into an ADF total force package. These include the application of a number of initiatives, in particular Army reserve force integration (through Army's 'Plan Beersheba'), key legislative changes supporting all tri-service ADF reserves, (particularly through the Defence Reserve Service (Protection) Act

¹ And currently in the Irish media. For recent examples see: 3 June 2021, <https://www.irishexaminer.com/opinion/commentanalysis/arid-40304219.html> or 29 June 2021: <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-40325327.html>

² Jonathan Carroll, 'Relying on the goodwill of the individual, and luck: the problematic nature of utilising the Army Reserve skills base in the Single Force Concept', 2019 Defence Forces Review, ISSN 1649-7066, pp 30-41.

³ Jonathan Carroll, 'Conceptually Ambitious, Hardly Novel, and Currently Failing: The Irish Army Reserve in the Single Force Concept', The Journal of Military History and Defence Studies Vol 1. Issue 1.(January 2020), pp 193-252.

⁴ In 2019, there were 12,059 Army Reservists with 2,950 in training. The principal reserve formation, 2nd Division, had 10,500 personnel out of an establishment of 12,500. Source: MAJGEN K Campbell, COMD 2 DIV, Defence Reserves Association National conference presentation 2019, quoted in 'The Australian Reservist', Issue 33, Nov 2019. Downloaded from: https://dra.org.au/conference-2019-item/41046/growing-the-pie-the-total-workforce-model-in-army/?type_fr=1085

2001,⁵), and enhanced reserve force funding. Australia's unique taxation treatment of ADF reserve salaries is also highlighted. Overarching measures have included consistent Australian government support (which has enjoyed bi-partisan support from Australia's two principal political parties) as well as popular societal recognition of the importance of reserve service to Australia's national security. In particular, the ADF also enjoys high levels of community support and trust within contemporary Australian society with recent surveys indicating that it is '...easily the highest ranked institution in society, followed by the police and universities...'⁶. In summary, this paper will present and discuss some of the measures undertaken in Australia to address the kinds of challenges facing the Irish RDF.

An Important Disclaimer

It is worth stating from the outset what this article will not discuss. The author of this article has little direct experience of either the permanent Irish Defence Forces or the RDF. There will be no 'recommendations' or 'advice' as to what Ireland 'should' do in order to resolve the RDF's critical issues of recruitment and retention. It will be left entirely to the discerning reader to consider what factors appear to have succeeded in the ADF experience, draw his or her own conclusions, and then apply any 'lessons learnt' to the Irish RDF situation, all whilst accounting for the obvious differences in geography, history, and culture between the ADF and the Irish Defence Forces.

Avoiding 'Stranded Assets'

In economics, 'stranded assets' are defined as those assets which '...have suffered from unanticipated or premature write-downs, devaluations or conversion to liabilities...'⁷. When applied in a Defence context, '...we may define Stranded Capability as those assets that "have suffered from accelerated or premature dilution of their effect or purpose"...'⁸. The existential challenge for reserve forces everywhere is to avoid the aforementioned 'dilution of effect or purpose', thereby continuing to remaining both relevant to the mission and ready to respond with applied capability. That this was the subject of an opinion piece by a high-ranking current Army Reserve Brigade commander as recently as May 2020, speaks not only to it being an ongoing issue for the Australian Army Reserve but for reserve forces everywhere. This appears to be the crux of the problem: how to avoid the 'Stranded Capability' potential of military bodies such as reserve forces? This manifests as decline into entropy brought on by factors such as a lack of strategic direction, a lack of resourcing, or the lack of a clearly defined role?

5 For details see: <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2006C00054>

6 Department of Defence, 'Guarding against uncertainty: Australian attitudes to defence 2015', External expert panel to the 2015 Defence White Paper, Defence Publishing Service, Canberra, 2015, p 93p 103-106. Accessed via: <https://www.defence.gov.au/Whitepaper/docs/GuardingUncertainty.pdf>

7 See: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140327230917/http://www.smithschool.ox.ac.uk/research/stranded-assets/>. The Smith School is a subsidiary of Oxford University, UK, see: <https://www.smithschool.ox.ac.uk/>

8 Mike Calms, 'Stranded capability: the value of the Army Reserve asset in 2020', from 'The Cove', 7 May 2020, accessed via: <https://cove.army.gov.au/article/stranded-capability-the-value-the-army-reserve-asset-2020>

Legislation: The key to Securing ADF Reserve Service

Australia's Defence Reserve Service (Protection) Act 2001 ('The Act'), provides a solid foundation for enabling participation in reserve service. It provides legal safeguards for reservists undertaking periods of reserve service obliging employers to release employees for reserve service. The Act obliges employers to grant reserve service leave and prohibits an employer from compelling an employee to utilise recreational leave or other type of leave. Anti-discrimination provisions are written into both the Act, and under Australian workplace regulations⁹. With regard to fulltime tertiary students, The Act also provides for non-discrimination in case of study and periods of service rendered during the academic year. The Act has significant coercive powers written into it should an employer refuse to grant a reservist leave to render service under a written Notice without good reason and given reasonable warning, providing sanctions in terms of the Commonwealth Crimes Act. To date no prosecution has occurred, however, the point being that this sanction does exist, sitting in the background as a very large, if hitherto untested, 'big stick'. In practice, consultation, coordination, and de-confliction is very strongly emphasised, with a number of bodies and mechanisms set up to harmonise military and civilian sides. These include a National Defence Reserve Support Council¹⁰, which acts as a point of contact for employers, and which also coordinates strategic communications and employer interactions. A good example of the latter is Exercise 'Boss Lift' which immerses employers in the ADF in order to give employers better understanding of the situation of their reserve employees. This has included an overseas deployment of employers to Malaysia, where the Army Reserve currently maintains a company-size unit on rotation at the Royal Malaysian Air Force base in Butterworth, conducting jungle warfare training in the surrounding area. Each Australian State or Territory has its own DRSC which coordinates yearly awards for supportive employers: these are presented at highly visible functions with extensive paid publicity coupled with highly favourable strategic messaging.

The Australian Army's 'Total Force'

All Australian Army reservists who are suitable may volunteer for overseas or operational service. There is no extant legislation in Australia making this illegal. If a reservist has a suitable skills-set, he or she may offer to render continuous full-time service either inside or outside Australia without restriction. It should be noted that whilst rendering operational service, reservists will be paid according to the equivalent full-time regular rank and skill pay level. For example, the ADF does not propose to pay deployed Reserve medical specialists at the same rate as a 2 star Irish Defence Forces Private¹¹. To do so would represent a grievous act of corporate self-harm, disrupting a critical pillar of the ADF's centre of gravity construct for deployed medical support. Under recent ADF Total workforce arrangements, all operational positions are now offered to all reservists who are suitably qualified, undergo the preparation training, and who voluntarily apply. Army Reserve medical and health personnel comprise a key group providing critical capabilities who have been singled out, specifically through targeted incentives. ADF Reserve support is not limited to Combat Service Support or Combat Support roles, as shown by recent deployments of Army Reserve commandos in Afghanistan undertaking full kinetic operations during winter months, in order to rotate Regular Army elements out of theatre for rest and leave.

⁹ See: <https://www.fairwork.gov.au/tools-and-resources/fact-sheets/rights-and-obligations/defence-reservists-rights-and-responsibilities-at-work>

¹⁰ For information on the DRSC, see: <https://www.defencereservessupport.gov.au/>

¹¹ Jonathan Carroll, 'Conceptually Ambitious, Hardly Novel, and Currently Failing: The Irish Army Reserve in the Single Force Concept', *The Journal of Military History and Defence Studies* Vol 1. Issue 1.(January 2020), p 199.

The ADF Total Workforce Model (TWM)

The ADF TWM was implemented in 2016 in response to recruitment and retention issues occurring across the entire ADF workforce spectrum. At that time, the situation was exacerbated by Australia's resources sector boom contributing to increased ADF separations. Summarised briefly, the TWM provides up to seven Service Categories (SERCAT 1-7) allowing a combination of flexible alternatives, dependent on the employment category, of full, part time, casual, and 'hybrid' employment.¹² In the case of the latter, this may be a 'shared' employment arrangement between the ADF and a civilian sector employer. The case of trade trading, for example, vehicle mechanics, or even medical specialists, are both occupationally diverse examples of ADF TWM arrangements. In the case of medical specialist trainees, employment is shared in partnership between the major tertiary level hospital and the ADF. This arrangement, in particular, provides clinically current, experienced health professionals with lower rates of 'skill fade'. Interoperability between regular and reserve forces is provided by expediting intra-force administrative movements, with conversion from reserve to full-time service done relatively seamlessly, enabling a high degree of mobility between forces.

Army's 'Plan Beersheba'

Plan Beersheba was a significant restructure of the Australian Army that was announced in 2011 and completed in 2017.¹³ Much of the imperative behind the restructure lay in the impetus to reorganise combined arms teams within Army and not reserve force integration per se¹⁴. A principal effect of Plan Beersheba on the Army Reserve was the much closer pairing of Reserve brigades with regular multirole combat brigades in order to provide three reinforcing battlegroups comprised of Army Reserve personnel. The readiness cycle of these battlegroups mirrors that of their paired regular Army brigade.¹⁵ Major changes in the composition of Army Reserve units themselves also occurred, generally characterised by separation of Reserve personnel and sophisticated systems (reflecting the lower rates of occupational exposure of reserve personnel to systems thereby reducing both training liabilities and risk). When coupled with the ADF-wide TWM, Plan Beersheba has resulted in greater functional integration of reserve and regular elements within the Australian Army.

Proof of Concept:

The ADF Reserves in a National Bushfire Emergency

Every summer, much of the Australian continent is regularly swept by large wildfires. The situation overwhelmed civil authorities in the southern summer of 2019-2020 resulting in the first peacetime 'call out' of ADF reserves. This resulted in the largest Aid to the Civil Authority (ATCA) operation ever undertaken by the ADF.¹⁶

¹² For a summary, see: <https://www.defence.gov.au/PayandConditions/ADF/ADF-TWS.asp>

¹³ <https://news.defence.gov.au/media/media-releases/army-delivers-final-component-plan-beersheba>

¹⁴ For background on the combined arms doctrine reasons for Beersheba, see: Craig Bickell, 'Plan Beersheba: The Combined Arms Imperative behind the Reorganisation of the Army' in Australian Army Journal, Vol X, number 4, Summer edition, Canberra 2013, pp 38-49.

¹⁵ MAJGEN Kathryn Campbell, COMD 2 DIV, Defence Reserves Association National conference presentation 2019, quoted in 'The Australian Reservist', Issue 33, Nov 2019. Downloaded from: https://dra.org.au/conference-2019-item/41046/growing-the-pie-the-total-workforce-model-in-army/?type_fr=1085

¹⁶ 'ATCA' is an Irish military acronym; Australia uses the term 'Defence Aid to the Civil Community' (DACC).

In this instance:

ADF numbers involved in the bushfire support efforts surged from under 900 to over 6,500 personnel over several weeks in January and early February 2020...the ADF response featured thousands of members of the Army Reserve called out for mandatory service on 4 January 2020...Rather than calling for volunteers, the government was enacting provisions of the Defence Act 1903 to order reservists to report for duty in a national emergency. Reserve units and formations activated...transferred to...full-time service and deployed...as formed bodies¹⁷.

Theoretical issues which have been raised in Ireland regarding discipline or call out legality as well as reservists potentially ignoring the call out were not apparent during this operation¹⁸.

In essence, Operation Bushfire Assist (OP BA) stress tested key aspects of the ADF TWM as well as command and control systems operating over the spectrum of both regular and reserve army formations, enabling valuable lessons which will enable the future deployment of the Army Reserve should the situation require it. In today's Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA) geopolitical environment, all defence strategic and force planners would do well to study their own potential threat situation and prepare force structures and capabilities accordingly. In this regard, Australia recognises that a reserve capability is worth nurturing, funding, and integrating, to prepare for a future event when every capability will matter. For a smaller country like Ireland in much closer proximity to geostrategic areas of Great Power interest, it would seem prudent to prepare in a similar manner.

Financial Incentives

A unique aspect of the ADF reserves is that all Reserve pay is exempt from income tax, leaving Reserve members with their full gross pay. Earnings of Reserve members are excluded from the definition of 'salary or wages' under the Superannuation Guarantee (Administration) Act 1992, and all ADF reserve income is exempt from tax under the Income Tax Assessment Act 1997. In the context of the ADF reserves being an organisation holding significant numbers of former full-time, regular, ADF personnel, this works to confer some advantage to these personnel who in many cases will be collecting taxable pensions for which ADF Reserve salary is, for all intents and purposes, 'invisible' income, leaving pensions and other social security benefits unaffected. This is a powerful incentive for ex-regular personnel to continue to contribute to ADF capability. Finally, it is also worth noting that voluntary, unpaid service is only possible in the ADF under a small and very limited set of circumstances. Put bluntly, the ADF does not consider routine uncompensated service a sound basis to underpinning Reserve capability.

A number of unique financial incentives exist on both sides of the employer-employee equation for ADF reserve service. The Employer Support Payment Scheme (ESPS) commenced in 2005, and provides weekly payments to either employers or employees, depending on the particular situation,

¹⁷ Mark Armstrong, 'Every Possible Capability: Some Implications of the Army Reserve Call Out for Operation Bushfire Assist 2019-20', Australian Army Research Centre, Canberra 2020, p 1 and p 29. Accessed via: <https://researchcentre.army.gov.au/library/seminar-series/every-possible-capability>. Paper downloaded from: <https://researchcentre.army.gov.au/library/occasional-papers/every-possible-capability-some-implications-army-reserve-call-out-operation-bushfire-assist-2019-2020>

¹⁸ Jonathan Carroll, 'Conceptually Ambitious, Hardly Novel, and Currently Failing: The Irish Army Reserve in the Single Force Concept', *The Journal of Military History and Defence Studies* Vol 1. Issue 1.(January 2020), p 197.

of an amount equivalent to Australian Average Working Ordinary Time Earnings (AWOTE).¹⁹ In the 2022 Australian Financial Year (FY), which extends from 1 July to 30 June annually²⁰, AWOTE will be equivalent to a taxable amount of \$AUD 1,711.60 per week, which at present July 2021 retail exchange rates (\$AUD 1.00=EUR 0.63) equates to approximately EUR 1,078.31 per week. ESPS is paid to either the employer (to compensate for the absence of the reservist) or directly to the reservist, should that reservist be self-employed. Currently, most State and Commonwealth government bodies provide up to 4 weeks' paid Reserve service leave. In the case of a reservist in the public service rendering 4 weeks' reserve service, he or she will be paid a full ordinary time salary in addition to 4 weeks' reserve pay, essentially receiving double pay, half of which is tax exempt. The Government department itself will receive the ESPS. This situation accounts for the high numbers of State and Commonwealth public servants, particularly police officers, health personnel, and teachers, serving in the Army Reserve. In the case of health professions, ESPS is higher, with rates varying according to profession. In FY 2022, this will range from \$AUD 5,403.33 (approx. EUR 3,404) per week for a registered nurse, to \$AUD 9,662.40 (approx. EUR 6,087.31) per week for a procedural specialist such as a surgeon or an anaesthetist.²¹ The scale of payments to health reservists gives an indication of the critical role of health reservists in providing ADF capability, particularly for operational service.

Conclusion

This short article has attempted to highlight specific measures which have been applied in Australia to achieve a number of reserve force outcomes. Amongst these are enabling recruitment, retention, and enhancing total force capability. Space limitations here do not allow for a more complete discussion of preliminary results, however, in the author's experience at both the unit and formation level, most of these measures appear to have been well accepted and to achieve what they have been intended to do. This is not to say that the debate over the role and employment of reserve forces in Australia has been resolved or settled: on the contrary, the debate is ongoing and, at times, vociferous. Nevertheless, a national discussion is present. Underlying the Australian approach has been the term: 'comprehensive' and as can be seen in this article, approaches have included integrated reserve force policy, effective legislation, public and private sector partnerships, and a range of financial incentives. Perhaps this should be the final thought for Irish readers: that a society-wide discussion leading to a comprehensive approach might be the best way forward for the RDF?

¹⁹ See: <https://www.defencereservessupport.gov.au/benefits/employer-support-payment-scheme/>

²⁰ The Australian financial year extends from 1 July to 30 June of each year.

²¹ Accessed via the DRSC 'CDF approval payment rate' factsheet, See: <https://www.defencereservessupport.gov.au/forms-publications/>