

Written evidence submitted by Professor Vince Connelly

Terms of Reference addressed in this submission. What are the main gaps in capability and/or readiness, and what will it take to fill these gaps? What are the consequences of the army having been “hollowed out and underfunded”?

Background. The author of this submission is an academic psychologist who has carried out research for the Army and MOD related to Regular/Reserve interactions, Reservist recruiting and retention, integration of the Whole Force and the welfare of Reservist families. He is also a serving reservist. The views expressed here are his own as an academic researcher on reserve forces. He has authored many publications on reserves and army issues ranging from a recent book on [international reserve forces](#) and an article for RUSI on [improving British Army productivity](#).

Summary. **The Army needs to re-adopt the dual purpose reserve system abandoned post-Cold War and build an Army Reserve that can cost effectively deliver collective reinforcement in parallel with a reinvigorated Regular Reserve to provide individual reinforcement. This will substantially improve Army capability and readiness, be affordable, contribute to deterrence and deliver a reserve focused on reinforcing warfighting.**

The recent RUSI paper “[Mass, Mobilisation and Reserve Forces](#)” (Brazier, 2022) details that the purpose of the British Army Reserve has moved away from its historical role to be ready to provide mass and additional unit level capability to reinforce the Army. The paper provides, using history and comparisons with our near Allies, a set of recommendations as to how the Army Reserve could be reformed so as to provide its more traditional role of providing reinforcing mass to land operations. Many of these recommendations have been made repeatedly over the last few decades and more recently by the [External Scrutiny Team](#) (CRFCA, 2022) but have failed to yet materialise. There are many positive indications changes are actually moving forward but there is a risk that the Army will find it difficult to move ahead as fast as may be required.

For most of the 20th Century the British Army had a broadly dual-purpose reserve system. The Regular Reserve was a pool of personnel with previous full time service experience who retained a liability to be called back in a crisis. They provided the crucial individual backfill for Regular Army units and staffs on mobilisation for war, since in a volunteer based army they are always understaffed and unit establishments are always paired back. The other key part of the reserve was the Territorial Army (now the Army Reserve) who provided the formed unit reinforcement needed for large scale conflict. These were the formed units required to surge capacity and provide focused reinforcement (providing utility but not equivalence to regulars) in key areas. This gave the sustained depth for large scale conflicts, providing an echelon for the deployed force, as well as often providing a home defence capability.

However, the perceived demand for the Regular Reserve was de facto abandoned at the end of the Cold War in 1991. The renewed focus on small to medium scale expeditionary operations had little need for a system designed for mass mobilisation.

The regular reserve was last called upon in large numbers in 2003 for Op Telic 1 & 2, the invasion of Iraq, where peacetime regular unit establishments needed augmentation for high intensity conflict, albeit for a “medium scale” operation. With only one in five able to be mobilized from a compulsory call out, the Regular Reserve was perceived as wanting in comparison to the much higher Army Reserve compulsory call out ratio of 1.25:1. The Army Reserve became the “reserve of choice” for both backfill and for collective capability reinforcement.

Post 2008, choice literally became the watchword since, for the small number of Army reservists being mobilised, it no longer became expedient to compulsory call out Army Reservists unless they had volunteered beforehand using “intelligent mobilization”. This has continued, even during the national pandemic, and has had implications for the perception of the Army Reserve as unreliable since mobilisation is “voluntary” despite the legislation to compel always being present and the clear evidence that the Army Reserve has always turned out for compulsory mobilisation.

In fact, historically the British Army has always had some difficulty accepting the utility of part time Army Reserve formed unit capability. At the root of this is the reality that Army Reserve units would, of course, be less capable than full time regular units but it is driven as much by culture and identity rather than grounded evidence. There is a cultural, often unconscious, bias against part time reserve formed unit capability. My previous research has explained how this arises and why this persists using a theoretically grounded, empirically evidenced, [explanatory framework \(Connelly, 2021; 2023\)](#).

Thus, it is much easier for the Army to deal with small numbers of Army Reserves who can be assimilated into the dominant full-time culture, for very good reasons, and so there will be an institutional pressure to bear down on Army Reservists to supply individuals or small groups only. The proposal for routine Army Reserve formed unit deployments in the 2013 White Paper (MOD, 2013) first proposed by senior politicians, [assisted by ex-regular officers](#) (Williams & Lamb, 2010) under [FR20](#) (MOD, 2011) gained initial political traction since the Army had tried to effectively shrink the Army Reserve to an individual augmentation pool. However, by 2015, the institutional pressure re-asserted itself and the proposals for formed unit deployments had been successfully resisted as detailed by [Patrick Bury and Sergio Catignani](#). (Bury & Catignani, 2018).

Yet the lessons of Ukraine show that more than individuals are needed. A recent RUSI article (Bielieskov, 2023) demonstrates that having formed reservist units in place with officers and SNCO's with some training and experience and who are expected to provide focused collective capability helped Ukraine survive the first months of the war. The war in Ukraine has highlighted the need to counter attrition and replace units in the line and reminded us that wars are not necessarily short in nature, even large scale conflicts. History also shows that when there is a sudden high demand for army units in crisis then reservist units will be deployed, whatever their level of readiness, making it all the more important they are as ready in peacetime as can be (Shnaubelt et al, 2017).

The Army Reserve during the Cold War trained to provide many formed units at relatively high readiness and at low cost for the British Army of the Rhine compared

to today. These units were not expected to fulfill all the missions and tasks of regular army units but instead provided a narrower and more focused set of missions and tasks that were considered achievable by a part time organisation when compulsory mobilised. For example, light role reservist infantry battalions trained solely to reinforce the anti-tank guided weapon defence of a regular armoured brigade. Jim Storr (2021) has recently written about the effectiveness of these reservist units. Other reservist units provided reinforcement and sustainment to functions such as ground based air defence, communications, logistics, engineering and undertook missions such as rear area security and homeland defence. This is not to say the Cold War provides a blueprint for the future but provides evidence that part time reserves can provide formed unit utility for reinforcement.

Over the last 30 years the Army's approach to training, for many rational reasons, has become more centralised and less suited to the devolved and part time nature of most Army Reserve service. This has meant that Army Reserve's individual and collective capability is now generally held to regular standards against a wide set of mission and tasks that make it very difficult for Army Reserve units to even achieve sub-unit levels of training.

It may well be difficult to move away from this to deliver an Army Reserve training system that works to the time available to deliver Army Reserve formed unit readiness. Readiness for reserves is often a relative measure where the point of comparison is between regular and reserve readiness rather than measuring the actual readiness and capabilities of the total force (the regular and reserves combined) compared against the force of a potential adversary (Clouston et al, 2008). The length of time until reserves are ready is important to consider but, even in a rapid deployment scenario, not all forces are needed immediately; some can deploy later in the flow, allowing other forces some additional time to get ready before they need to begin deployment operations (Klimas & Gentile, 2018).

The Army Reserve, now smaller than it has ever been, is currently required to fulfill two roles, individual backfill and some measure of collective capability, at a scale that impairs meaningful training and value and judged against full time standards. Presently the British Army is taking risk on having the collective capability depth to guarantee a swift initial victory while also lacking the insurance policy to sustain itself in an enduring high intensity large scale conflict. The pendulum has swung back to the need for the Army to have its dual reserve system of reinforcing collective capability from the Army Reserve and individual backfill from the Regular Reserve.

It will take internal cultural change from within the Army to bring back a reliable Regular Reserve to supplement and reinforce both the Regular Army (and the Army Reserve) with individuals. The Reserve Forces 2030 programme identified this requirement for a "Strategic Reserve" to be reconstituted (MOD, 2021). This will take time but is achievable. The key criterion required to make it happen I have set out [elsewhere](#) (Connelly, 2021b) but again this will require a step change in current thinking. The Army has been enormously successful at encouraging ex-regulars into the Army Reserve that past ten years enormously boosting the experience levels in units so change can be delivered.

In summary, for the reasons spelt out above it will be difficult for the British Army to move back to a level of trust that is now demanded to provide a formed unit or sub-unit collective capability readiness from the Army Reserve. This is despite the military capability arguments in favour of having a reserve that reinforces and sustains the army, the cost effective economic sense of investing in formed units of reserves and the lead our allies show us in their collective use of reserves. The temptation will be to spend funds on the regular component to improve their already stretched readiness and remove funds from collective training for reserve units. Brazier's (2022) paper, has provided guidance on what to change but real change must come from within the Army to deliver improved reserve readiness based on the dual-purpose reserve system of the Army Reserve providing collective reinforcement with the Regular Reserve providing individual reinforcement. This will substantially improve Army readiness, be affordable, contribute to deterrence and deliver a Reserve that is focused on reinforcing warfighting.

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