

By Julian Brazier M.P., T.D.

Right at the end of the last Parliamentary term, just as an increasingly ill-tempered House was about to break for the Summer recess, the All Party Reserve Forces Group published the second part of its report into the Reserve Forces, *Recognising the Opportunity*. (<http://www.reserveforcesparliament.com/upload/upload15.pdf>). Last year we looked at the Territorial Army. This time we focused on the Maritime and Air Reserves and tri-service conclusions.

The TA's hundredth anniversary has made this a good year to be looking into the Reserves. Colleagues from all parts of both Houses have been taking an interest and the MoD has launched its own report into the nature and future of the Reserves. John Hutton, Secretary of State for Business has written a remarkable book on Barrow's citizen battalions during the First World War, called *Kitchener's Men*.

Remembering how the TA, which was derided by Lord Kitchener as a "town clerk's army", went on to provide 2/5 of the combat units in the Great War and win 71 VCs is a good framework within which to consider the modern reserves. Last year we pointed out that, in Britain, the TA is only around one quarter of land force, against around half in the USA, Canada and Australia. This latest report concludes:

- Britain's Maritime and Air reserves are extremely small, and working very hard to support the regular forces in Afghanistan and Iraq - unsustainably hard in the case of the Air Reserves, who have deployed nearly double their strength since 2001.
- The Royal Auxiliary Air Force has only 19 volunteer reserve pilots in total. In contrast, English-speaking counterparts make much more use of volunteer air reserves; Australia, with a third of our population has larger air reserves and the US even has fast jet fighter squadrons in its Air Guard. Both the USA and Canada use air reservists in Afghanistan.
- Plans for cutting the large pool of reserve aircrew in the Royal Naval Reserve and to disband the TA's aviation regiment should be scrapped. Instead the RAuxAF should be expanded.
- As a large range of skills migrate to the civilian contracting world, it becomes even more important to have reserve capability to ensure deployability.
- New areas such as Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) – on display at this year's Farnborough Air Show – could be cost-effectively manned by reserves.
- The threat from maritime mining is serious to a country as dependent on maritime trade as the UK. 95% of all British imports, by weight, arrive by sea and Britain is critically short of port capacity for unloading containers. Even more important, stockpiles of many categories of food would only last a matter of days.

- So mine warfare capabilities in the Royal Naval Reserve should be expanded with more divers and, for the first time, crews to operate REMUS.
- There is a weakness in the MoD's Joint Personnel Administration in keeping in touch with regular reservists and the skill base they represent. The JPA "has no method of assessing such skills, let alone tracking them.
- "The imminent threat round the corner in 1914, 1982, 1990 and 2001 bore no relation to the priority challenges we faced at the beginning of each of those years. The same may well be true today. We believe that the most important role of reserve forces is to provide a low-cost capacity to expand and provide for the unexpected, both directly through their structures and training and more widely, by keeping alive an understanding of, and interest in, matters military in wider society."

Connection with civil society matters. History offers no example of a major democracy sustaining quality armed forces for a long period without either conscription or a substantial volunteer reserve, ensuring that some civilians get military experience. This is not just a matter of representation but participation. While some regular officers still query the need for Territorials to have opportunities to serve in companies, or even sections, the Americans regularly deploy the National Guard in brigades.

Understanding how to organise reserve service involves certain principles and characteristics of volunteer organisations which hold true for political parties, religious groups, sports clubs and charities. Those serving must feel valued by the community at large, respected by their professional colleagues and, crucially a volunteer's role must fit into a comfortable triangle with the main job and family life.

A combination of too many demands and too little recognition has led to a manning crisis in reserve forces worse than in their regular counterparts. The Government is conducting a tri-service review of reserves, with an able team and good terms of reference. Volunteer reservists are waiting to see whether the reforms needed, in training, command opportunities and recognition will emerge, offering a settlement for the 21st Century.

You can find copies of both parts of the report online at the All Party Reserve Forces Group website: www.reserveforcesparliament.com.

Julian Brazier is co-chairman of the All-Party Reserve forces Group. He served for 13 years as an officer in the TA, including five in 21 SAS (Artists).