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We ask too much of citizen soldiers

When George W. Bush was in the Texas Air National Guard during the Vietnam War, few troops sent to Vietnam were drawn from the Army and Air National Guard and Army, Naval, Marine Corps, Air Force and Coast Guard Reserves. Today, about a third of the men and women serving in Iraq come from these ranks, and many others serve in Afghanistan, Kuwait, Bosnia, and other hot spots around the world. Nearly 400,000 "citizen" soldiers have been activated, compared to about 38,000 during the Vietnam War.

No longer a force of last resort, the Guard and Reserves are now an integral, vital part of the U.S. military on a daily

Tom Allen

basis. This transformation, however, has been accompanied by worrisome growing pains. These include what appears to be second-class treatment of these soldiers when it comes to equipment, rotation and other matters.

Scott Durst, a Buxton resident and staff sergeant in the Army Reserves' 94th Military Police Company headquartered in Saco, is now stationed in Iraq. He and his platoon were activated in the fall of 2002, and sent to Iraq in April 2003, where they perform MP and civil affairs duties in treacherous parts of that country. A year and a half before, they were deployed to Bosnia for nine months. They have been away from their homes and families for the better part of the last four years.

Scott, a Maine State drug enforcement

agent in civilian life, is a 15-year veteran of the Reserves. He knew when he signed up and re-enlisted that he might be sent to dangerous places for long periods of time. He has done his job effectively, courageously and without complaint. But he, other deployed Maine reservists, and their families have raised some troubling questions with me.

First, they are worried about persistent safety issues. For too long, the soldiers in Scott's unit were not issued the Kevlar interceptor body armor that has proven so effective in protecting regular Army members. Some reservist families went so far as to purchase these vests for their loved ones. While this equipment shortage has been rectified, another one persists: The Humvees assigned to the 94th are "thin-skinned." Unlike the armored versions provided to regular Army units, these vehicles are highly vulnerable to attack. Indeed, Scott saw one of his men sustain permanent, life-threatening injuries when his Humvee was blown up. He has little doubt that if the vehicle had been armored, this carnage could have been avoided. The Army, however, is not promising to supply the fully armored Humvees until the summer of 2005.

In the meantime, the Army has begun to add steel plates to the doors and floors of the 94th's Humvees. However, many soldiers view this as a band-aid that may increase their risks. These vehicles, they note, were not designed to carry the extra weight, making them more prone to breakdowns while on patrol and serving as escorts, a clear invitation to a disastrous ambush. What is par-

ticularly galling is that the regular Army company to which the 94th is attached has more than enough up-armored Humvees, but sharing them with the reservists is prohibited.

The issue that is the most demoralizing, Scott notes, is the failure of top officials to communicate honestly with his soldiers about their tour of duty. His unit had been given a date when they would be shipped home, only to learn, after months of rumors, that it would be postponed another six months. Few feel confident that the new date will hold.

Unless these problems are rectified, the Guard and Reserves will have a serious retention problem once stop-loss orders (which prevent soldiers from leaving the military for retirement or because their enlistment period has ended) are lifted. Scott says he will not re-enlist in the Army Reserves. Losing experienced, dedicated soldiers like him will be a serious blow to our military strength.

These inequities, which have made life more perilous and discouraging for these brave soldiers, must be ended. It is also time to take a good, hard look at the underlying policies that created this heavy dependence on the Guard and Reserves. Active military forces have been stretched too thin. Over-reliance on citizen soldiers to mask the true cost of our military engagements is unfair to our armed forces and dishonest to the American people.

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Tom Allen represents Maine's 1st District in the U.S. House. He lives in Portland.