

Written Testimony of the Chief of the Army Reserve

To The House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

15 March 2006

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, good morning. I am Ron Helmly, an American Soldier. I am honored to appear before you to discuss education benefits, especially the Montgomery GI Bill for the Selected Reserve (MGIB-SR), and the proposed Total Force GI Bill.

Since September 11, 2001, the Army Reserve has mobilized more than 149,000 Soldiers, and nearly 40,000 are on Active Duty today. They have served magnificently – with courage, professionalism and a profound dedication and commitment to this Nation. However, the continuous state of mobilization in the Global War on Terrorism has presented some challenges to us in manning the force. So far in Fiscal Year 06 (through the end of January) we are achieving 95% of our reenlistment goal and we are achieving 99% of our recruiting goal. We are meeting the significant challenge of manning our force. But clearly we must continue to concentrate on strength management.

Certainly, educational benefits, especially the Montgomery GI Bill, continue to be among the most important benefits to our Soldiers, so I welcome this opportunity to discuss them today.

Recruiting and retention incentives and the authorities governing their use need to be evaluated regularly to ensure they remain effective. Educational benefits continue to be among our most important recruiting and retention tools. A recent study by the Army Research Institute revealed educational benefits to be one of the most significant factors considered by potential recruits. In four of the five years studied (1996, 1997, 1999, 2002, and 2005), the “educational benefits” factor was the top consideration by junior enlisted Soldiers. In 2005, educational benefits ranked second only to “the desire to serve my country.”

We are highly supportive of this committee's efforts to ensure that the educational benefits, particularly the Montgomery GI Bill for the Selected Reserve, continue to provide the benefits that our Soldiers desire and deserve. We are supportive not only for the benefits provided to our Soldiers, but also to the benefit provided to our military services. Education provides our Soldiers the knowledge and mind set that allows them to better meet the challenges they will encounter.

The Montgomery GI Bill for the Selected Reserve has continued to be a functional tool in our recruiting and retention arsenal. However, the cost of college education has risen dramatically over the past ten years, and there now is a significant disparity in the dollar amount for the Active Component's Montgomery GI Bill (Chapter 30) and the MGIB for the Selected Reserve (Chapters 1606 and 1607).

While the Chapter 30 Montgomery GI Bill pays up to \$1034 monthly, the Montgomery GI Bill-Selected Reserve pays only a maximum of \$297 monthly; it hasn't kept up with increasing tuition costs, and is not commensurate with the expanded role of the Army Reserve.

In the past, the Reserve Components benefit was about 48% of the Active benefit, and we are far short of that today. An increase in the monetary benefit is needed in the Montgomery GI Bill-Selected Reserve in order to help keep the Army Reserve competitive in attracting and retaining quality individuals in today's economy. While the Montgomery GI Bill-Selected Reserve is still one of our most popular programs, the value of its benefit is eroding steadily with the increased cost of college education.

The proposed Total Force Montgomery GI Bill would be a step toward achieving the important goal of integrating Active and Reserve programs and increasing the financial assistance for the Reserve Components. It is more beneficial financially for both mobilized and non-mobilized Army Reserve Soldiers.

The bottom line is that it would be a welcome step toward eliminating the perceived disparity between the Active Army's and the Reserve Component's educational benefits.

Currently MGIB-SR (Chapter 1606) authorizes Army Reserve Soldiers to receive monthly benefits up to \$297 per month. Tier Two of the Total Force MGIB proposes an increase proportionate to the Active Duty rate. The Central Office of Veterans Affairs has defined "proportionate" as 35% of the Active Duty

rate. This would raise the monthly amount authorized for the Reserve Components to \$362, a net gain to the Army Reserve Soldier of \$65.

Obviously this is an improvement, but I recommend we look at making the Reserve Components' entitlements here the same as the Active Components' entitlements under the Chapter 30 MGIB, defining "proportionate" as 100% of the Active Duty rate.

And despite the benefits of the Total Force MGIB, there are several other concerns with the proposal.

The first involves Tier 3 of the Total Force MGIB. That tier disadvantages Soldiers who do not qualify for benefits under Tiers 1 and 2. Under the Total Force MGIB, certain Soldiers would qualify for benefits for only the duration of time spent on active duty; current rules allow those Soldiers benefits for 36 months.

Soldiers who would be affected include:

- Soldiers who are no longer eligible for Chapter 1606 because they left the Selective Reserve due to separation.
- Soldiers who transferred to the Individual Ready Reserve for more than a year, or multiple times.
- Soldiers who have not met the basic eligibility requirements for Chapter 1606.
- Prior active duty Soldiers who are ineligible for Chapter 30 or Chapter 1606.

The second concern involves the 24-“consecutive month” requirement. Under current mobilization policies, relatively few Army Reserve Soldiers meet the 24 consecutive month requirement to qualify for the active duty MGIB benefit. One way to improve this imbalance is to allow Reserve Component Soldiers to gain this eligibility after 24 “cumulative months” of service. However, the bigger issue is really the Active and Reserve Components parity in educational benefits. With parity, this will not be an issue.

Finally, I would say the importance of educational benefits to all of our Armed Forces cannot be overestimated, and I encourage all efforts to ensure they are as robust and effective as possible. Our Soldiers sacrifice every day, putting their lives on the line because they believe in a cause greater than themselves. As a Nation, in return for their outstanding service, we owe them the prospect of a better life that a college education provides.

Once again, I thank you for your support to our dedicated Soldiers who continue to perform magnificently in the most challenging of circumstances.

I now look forward to your questions.