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TA sub units - outstations

1. Introduction.

I am writing this letter to you in my personal capacity, as a former Commanding Officer of a TA regiment (the Royal Wessex Yeomanry, 2003 – 2004).

Manning of the TA as a whole has been on a downward spiral for many years. We must find a way of halting this decline, which will require a number of measures. Concentrating all our resources in the largest conurbations may have its attractions, but as long as it is considered desirable to maintain a broader geographical TA presence covering our more rural counties, a key measure would be to establish a number of new platoon/ troop sized outstations or satellite detachments.

RWxY's Devon squadron originally had its SHQ and two troops in Barnstaple, a troop in Tiverton and a troop in Totnes (the latter subsequently moved to Paignton). Tiverton was disbanded during the 1990s, which accordingly reduced the squadron's ability to recruit. Nevertheless, the premises cost saving was only relatively small, because the TA centre in Tiverton was retained for the Army Cadet Force.

Theory suggests that a town of a given population is only able, on a long term basis, to sustain a TA presence of up to 0.5% of its population. This limit is reinforced in the 21st Century, by relatively (historically) low unemployment and a significant increase over the last 20 years in the number of ways open to people to spend their leisure time. Establishing outstations in smaller towns allows advantage to be taken of untapped populations.

2. Arguments FOR outstations.

a. Recruitment. Given that (by-and-large) the average person is not prepared to travel more than 10 or 12 miles to a training centre, at least in the critical early stages of his TA career, outstations allow additional geographic areas to be tapped for recruitment. Distances between TA centres in rural areas are often very large indeed, meaning many rural people of the type needed are denied the opportunity to volunteer.

In addition, there are sizeable towns with no existing TA presence at all (for example, Cheltenham, with a population of over 100,000), which should be tapped. Towns also exist with a population which might be particularly attractive from which to recruit (such as Warminster, with a large experienced ex military population, which could be exploited in the way Bovington has been for the ex regulars who form the core of the specialist armour replacement capability).

b. Military visibility and community engagement. Outstations extend the visible military presence over a wider geographic area at a time when the public are becoming increasingly disconnected from their defence forces.

c. Leadership opportunity. Outstations provide a substantial leadership opportunity and challenge for subalterns and SNCOs of a kind otherwise unavailable.

d. Critical mass. It is true that running a platoon or troop outstation requires additional effort on the part of those in responsibility to gather a critical mass of soldiers for training, but in most cases this means a better turnout than otherwise (for the unit as a whole) because of the responsibility placed on individual junior commanders, the higher visibility of failure and because of the team spirit engendered by a small unit.

e. Domestic resilience and homeland security. Having TA soldiers recruited from a broader geography could potentially speed up reaction to domestic resilience and homeland security incidents because of the increased possibility (through the greater geographic spread) of outstations being located near the scene of an incident. Local knowledge could also thereby be enhanced.

3. Arguments AGAINST outstations.

a. Cost. Clearly the provision of additional small TA centres around the UK would be expected to add to costs. **However** there are, for example, a number of cadet centres, and some of these could be made to accommodate a TA platoon or troop, in addition to their existing cadet incumbents (and incidentally probably to the benefit of those cadet contingents through exposure to operational troops). The additional premises cost could therefore be modest.

Storage of weapons, vehicles and other equipment would need considering on a case by case basis. **However**, at a cadet centre there may be an existing armoury for cadet weapons and other storage/ parking, which could be enhanced, or weapons etc could be brought in as needed for training periods.

There is also the issue of whether additional permanent staff would be needed. **However**, an outstation could train on a different evening than its SHQ/ Coy HQ if it is essential that a permanent staff and/or command presence be provided.

In addition there is a strong case for a more innovative approach to TA training establishments. We should ask whether we need to tie down property 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, or whether arrangements could be made with, for example, schools/ colleges and businesses to time-share premises (acknowledging that considerable thought would be needed in terms of weapons and other storage). Incidentally such arrangements could also be useful in terms of recruitment and community engagement.

b. Training efficiency. An acknowledged risk of outstations is that training standards are heavily dependent upon a small number of commanders and trained instructors. **However**, the reality is that training evenings are less critical to training standards than weekends and longer training periods, when in any event the full sub unit is normally gathered together. What is important on training evenings is that such training as is provided is sufficiently interesting and fun to attract members in – and that is the responsibility of leadership at sub unit level.

4. Conclusion.

The establishment of a number of platoon/ troop sized outstations is a valid way in which to increase TA numbers and to maintain and foster critical mass. Commanding officers should be actively encouraged, where their regiments/ battalions are and have been consistently under strength, to consider and cost them. Where cadet centres are to be the recommended medium, of course, the county cadet force commanding officer must be involved in discussions at a very early point, as must the RFCA.

From Lord de Mauley TD