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## Pay hike hits army reserve training

Mark Dodd | November 04, 2009

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**BUDGET cuts ordered by the Rudd government to offset defence pay hikes this year have slashed by up to a half the army reserve's training program.**

Army reserve officers have been warned total training days next year could be cut from as many as 48 to 24, which would severely reduce operational readiness and probably result in mass resignations from the ranks.

Allegations of deficient training in the reserves came to prominence on Monday with the release of two damning reports into the death last year of Michael Fussell in Afghanistan, killed in action, while serving with a reserve Commando Company.

Asked to respond to the allegations, Defence confirmed yesterday that a salary blowout this year had forced reductions in training days.

"The financial management of army reserve training salaries is now more sharply focused and reflective of a need for enhanced budget discipline in order to manage bids for the use of reserves," the Defence Department said.

"This discipline may lead to decisions to reduce training days."

The decision has been met with dismay by serving army reservists. One veteran officer with more than two decades of service in the reserves said he felt betrayed.

"Next year, the talk is we'll be limited to 24 training days for the whole year," he told The Australian. "We won't be able to operate -- our effectiveness will dwindle.

"The young blokes will drift off to sporting teams and other activities on Tuesday nights and we're just going to become non-effective.

"It's a real shame because morale, sense of purpose, sense of everything is rapidly being lost."

He said many of the men in his unit used their monthly reserve pay packets as a "mini-stimulus package".

"A lot of the guys use their payment because it come in a monthly tax-free allotment -- to buy new tyres, Christmas presents or money for holidays," he said.

The officer requested his name and rank be suppressed fearing disciplinary action for going public with his concerns.

Of the three services, the army has the biggest number of reservists with more than 15,000 soldiers, many deployed on operations to Afghanistan, Solomon Islands and East Timor.

As reported in the The Australian in May, army reserve numbers have fallen this year, casting doubt on Defence white paper plans to better integrate part-timers into the army's full-time ranks.

Total posted strength of the army reserve last June was 15,400 or 71 per cent of its authorised maximum strength.

A second army reservist, writing to this newspaper, said the latest cuts targeted uniformed soldiers but not defence bureaucrats.

"Most reserve units are parading 3-4 days a month and yet are supposed to supply soldiers to the Reserve Response Force and the High Readiness Reserves to support operations.

"It seems Army Reserve is being set up to fail and forced into downsizing its numbers through the

withdrawal of the ARTS, with defence knowing that people will walk away," the reservist said.

The Chief of the Defence Force, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, has pledged to make the reserve force even "more relevant".

"That means integrating them more into the whole of the ADF (Australian Defence Force). And we're doing that now," he said in May last year.

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