



Major General William E. Ingram (Ret.), President, NGAUS

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

IT'S A CUT IN MILITARY COMPENSATION

With the 1983 session of Congress history and the lawmakers just back into session for 1984, Guardsmen should know that we are braced for a stiff battle on two fronts to turn back attempts to cut our military compensation.

Yes, we got that four percent raise in basic pay effective the first of the year. However, the new area for attack is basic allowance for quarters, or BAQ. Two threats surfaced toward the end of 1983.

First, in marking up the fiscal year 1984 Defense Appropriations Act, the Senate Appropriations Committee questioned why Guardsmen get BAQ at all. This came on the heels of the Congress' decision to cease paying a variable housing allowance (VHA) to Guardsmen on the housing portion of their annual training pay.

Second, and nearly as ominous, we learned of an impending decision by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) to begin disallowing the income tax deduction for interest and property taxes paid by military personnel to the extent that such payments are matched by BAQ. The genesis of this ruling was the IRS decision in early 1983 to disallow such deductions for clergymen who receive housing allowances from their parishes. Both these potential BAQ policies are a direct threat to the military compensation system as we know it in the military.

Although these two proposals affect somewhat different constituencies, both would have a major impact on Guardsmen in particular and all military personnel in general. Most Guardsmen receive BAQ as a part of their annual training check (BAQ is not paid on drill weekend pay). As such a married Guardsman may receive a very substantial amount as part of his AT pay, based on one-half a month's BAQ depending on marital status and dependents. For a major, for example, this could be \$226 for an AT period.

The proposal to eliminate BAQ first surfaced in the Department of Defense staff. The basic idea was to question whether such a housing allowance should be paid because a Guardsman presumably already has a house or other living arrangements that have little or nothing to do with his or her membership in the Guard. Further, in AT status, Guardsmen are usually provided quarters for the period of training.

Such arguments are beside the point at best. In many cases, they may be downright wrong. In the first place, we in the Guard strive to be as well trained and as combat ready as the regulars. Our pay is based on active duty pay scales: four days pay a month and 15-days pay at annual training for 15 days served.

Further, in many cases, it simply is not true that a Guardsman's living arrangements aren't affected by his membership in the Guard. For many Guardsmen, that monthly drill check makes a payment for something—be it a new car, part of the house payment or something else. It is a part of the family budget in many cases. In only rare instances is it discretionary spending money.

Further yet, while at annual training, many Guardsmen must take military leave without pay. That means there is no money coming in from their civilian employers. The result is that for this two-week period, they are entirely dependent on their U.S. government check. In some cases, that check may be more than they make in the civilian world. But in far more cases, it is much less. Are the reformers who propose eliminating BAQ suggesting that these Guardsmen take a major pay cut?

A pay cut is exactly what would occur, too, if the IRS is permitted to implement its proposal to begin taxing interest and property taxes on homes owned by military personnel who re-

ceive BAQ. The argument goes that since BAQ is not taxable, that if received, the benefit of home ownership then should be taxed. All that might be true except that it's fairly obvious to us that this isn't what Congress intended.

Congress has made numerous specific decisions about military compensation in recent years. One decision was to raise pay and allowances so that soldiers' and airmen's pay would be comparable to that paid in the private sector. Some success has been achieved in that area.

However, in so doing, the IRS apparently is suggesting that Congress didn't know it was raising BAQ faster, in some cases, than basic pay. There is a good reason why Congress acted as it did, however.

That is because retirement benefits, an area of federal spending under attack in a different forum, are based on basic pay. By limiting the raises in basic pay, Congress simultaneously limits the rise in retirement benefits.

Whether or not that is a valid idea, the fact remains that Congress knew exactly what it was doing. It knew when it raised BAQ that it was raising the non-taxable portion of a military person's total compensation package. It wasn't accidental.

The attack on BAQ for Guardsmen affects primarily those in weekend drill status—particularly those married Guardsmen with more than the minimum number of dependents who draw full BAQ.

The assault on the tax deductibility of interest and property taxes will affect primarily those military personnel on active duty who own a home—AGR and tour personnel in the case of the Guard.

Both these proposals are serious. Both, however, can be won by the Guard and the other military services if we are united and if we persevere. They can be won because both amount to the same thing: a cut in military pay for Guardsmen.

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1984

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February 1984

NATIONAL GUARD

Official publication of the National Guard Association of the United States

February 1984 Volume XXXVIII, Number 2



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COVER: A Sheridan M-551 of post-Korean War vintage is disguised with plastic devices to make it appear that it is a Soviet T-72 tank or is it the real thing? Only those who rotate through the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California, know for sure. Story on page 20 of the 1st Battalion, 108th Armor, 48th Infantry Brigade (Mech), Georgia Army National Guard at the NTC. Photo, Pamela A. Kane. Design, Johnson Design Group.

NATIONAL GUARD, February 1984. The NATIONAL GUARD Magazine (ISSN 0163-3945) is published monthly, by the National Guard Association of the United States, with editorial and advertising offices at One Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20001. Telephone (202) 789-0031. Second class postage paid at Washington, D.C., and at additional mailing offices. Copyright 1984 by the National Guard Association of the U.S. All rights reserved. All members of the NGAUS receive NATIONAL GUARD. Nonmember subscriptions: \$4 per year domestic; \$5 per year foreign. Bulk rate for 100 or more copies of one issue to the same address: 25¢ each. Single copies 50¢. The Editor welcomes original articles bearing on national defense, with emphasis on application to or implications for the National Guard. Manuscripts and artwork must be accompanied by return postage; no responsibility is assumed for safe handling. Opinions expressed by authors do not necessarily represent official NGAUS positions or policy. Likewise, publication of advertising cannot be deemed an endorsement thereof by this Association or its members.