F rom 1973 until about two years ago, we, in the National Guard paid the price in our personnel strengths for our failure during the decade of the "60s to pay any attention to recruiting. We got out of the habit of recruiting because the Selective Service did all our recruiting for us by motivating bright and qualified young people to stream through our doors seeking enlistment.

The National Guard has gone a long way toward solving that problem. It is one of the success stories of the Total Force Policy. Now, however, having manned our force with volunteers with men and women who want to be in our units, we face another problem too many of us haven’t tended in an even longer time: employer support. This growing problem recently has bobbed to the surface in several ways. Two of them appeared in recent issues of this magazine.

One was highlighted in the October and February issues in connection with the description of the training offered by the 1st Battalion, 108th Armor, 48th Infantry Brigade (Mechanized), Georgia Army Guard, in preparation for a Battalion training through the National Training Center at Fort Irwin. Another was the speech at our Association’s Convention in Indianapolis by Dick Ellis, executive director of the National Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR).

It is ironic that the very progress in solving our recruiting problem (in large part, in most states) creates this new worry of employer support. It is our very success that tends to aggravate this. Here’s why, and Georgia’s 48th Brigade case is a good example.

The impending solution to our readiness problems through maintenance of required personnel strengths and through procurement and issue of adequate stocks of equipment has made our units more combat ready. Since we are more combat ready, and are increasingly perceived so by the regular establishment and by civilian officials at the Pentagon, we are getting increasingly important missions. With these roles and missions come greater attention to combat readiness and greater pressure from the active Air Force and Army that we train more. When we train more, we run into employer and job-conflict problems.

Take the Georgia case. That tank battalion’s rotation through the National Training Center required three-day drill weekend (MUTA-62a) for six week. That requires employer support. It also required a three-week annual training, something that is becoming more common in other spheres. Since federal reemployment laws only require an employer to give two weeks of military leave, that also required employer support. But the kicker is this: Since the 1-108th is a six-week round-out unit, it will be expected to rotate through the National Training Center every three years. So even though the Georgiatankers managed to pull off all this extra training in protection, that doesn’t mean they no longer need it. There is a repeat performance required in 1986. It may be more difficult to get employer support and more willing cooperation for this additional training so soon after the first go-round.

In general, there are several approaches to this problem, some easier than others. For example, in my state of Georgia, we invited a large group of Guard tankers to the ceremony at Fort Bragg last summer when we rolled out our new M1 tanks. We thought it vital to demonstrate to these employers the importance of what we are doing, the high-priority nature of our tank battalion’s mission and that we are pursuing them of the mechanic of the additional training that is being required of those tankers to train combat ready on this new, sophisticated piece of equipment.

Similarly, in Georgia when the scope of the training of the 1-108th had become so obvious, employers who didn’t immediately agree to let their employees off for the additional training received letters from the battalion and brigade commanders and in some cases from the active duty and National Guard, urging support of the training. Only one employer out of 550 men in the battalion absolutely refused to train them on the third week of AT.

However, as mentioned above, for this high-priority unit, it doesn’t end here. Actually, it just begins here. Major General Joseph W. Griffin, 48th Infantry Brigade commander, is of the opinion that if we allow the Guard to do this type of training, we should also allow it to do the 1-108th’s rotation and now adjunct general of Georgia, put it all together. Now, this job-conflict problem “is getting down to the troop level.”

There are many leaders in the active Army and Air Force who believe Guard units should train more. However, we must caution against making National Guard training too burdensome that we defeat the very purpose of the Guard to begin with. If additional training is mandated, and it may be, then we have to both educate employers to this fact as well as make sure our Guard units are protected. If three-week ATs are to become common, then the law guarantees reemployment rights. But such training must cover a three-week period, not the current two.

If a three-day drill weekend is to become common, we must both convince employers this is essential to national defense and protect our Guard tankers from retaliation by those minority of employers who don’t or won’t understand.

Our regular colleagues in the active Army and Air Force sometimes don’t understand how we in the Guard can hope to be combat ready with only 39 days of training a year. Even we must admit this is a big challenge. However, requiring much more than this number of days is a big problem. Furthermore, we should be asking an address on the national level. We must not relegate it to units like the 1-108th in Georgia and the 32nd Armor in North Carolina to solve locally without the necessary national support.