GUARD HAS STAKE IN SAVING COMMISARIES

I would be ironic, and quite unfortunate, if just as the National Guard has gained an NGUS General Conference resolution, because if the Guard is to be a full partner in the Total Force, which it is, then we in the Guard deserve some measure of all the privileges and benefits afforded to any member of the military service.

This year-round commissary shopping privilege was included in FY87 Defense Authorization Act. It provides 14 days of shopping any time during the year based on annual training days. We were quite satisfied with this benefit because, as a practical matter, about one day in every month of commissary shopping is all the benefit that can be used by most Guardsmen and their spouses.

This commissary shopping privilege is one of the best troop benefits the Guard has achieved in decades. When fully or efficiently used, it can result in grocery savings for Guard families of 25 percent. Many Guard spouses have been pleasantly surprised at what the commissary does for their grocery budgets. But on the flip side, when supermarkets may, from time to time, offer better individual prices, it is possible that the commissary will be cheaper, and significantly so.

Given those savings, it perhaps is no surprise that the Food Marketing Institute (FMI), the national association that represents retail grocers, would like to get rid of commissaries. They are unwanted competition with a lower price, just like the PX used to be. Particularly in metropolitan areas where large supermarkets are prevalent, the FMI would like to capture that business. FMI has suggested several scenarios for wresting the commissary system away from the services. The principal one of these is called “privatization.” This would involve a private company operating the commissary. The theory is that the same savings would accrue to the military family as now do. However, it seems clear—particularly from a study years ago—that for such savings to continue to be made available, a federal subsidy would be required. Congress is unlikely to provide such a subsidy to privatize enterprise over a long period of years. Thus, privatization should be opposed.

Before privatization is likely to occur, a “test” probably will be undertaken. Indeed, the FY87 Defense Authorization Act mandated such a test, which has not been launched to date. May be this year. The military personal shouldn’t oppose this test. The test at the Yuma Proving Ground, Arizona, was unsuccessful for the private company that took it up broke trying to prove the same level of service and the same prices as the federally operated commissaries now give.

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This is a false argument. Incomparably shopping is a part of total military compensation. If military families have developed a lifestyle where where large supermarkets are prevalent, the FMI would like to capture that business. FMI has suggested several scenarios for wresting the commissary system away from the services. The principal one of these is called “privatization.” This would involve a private company operating the commissary. The theory is that the same savings would accrue to the military family as now do. However, it seems clear—particularly from a study years ago—that for such savings to continue to be made available, a federal subsidy would be required. Congress is unlikely to provide such a subsidy to privatize enterprise over a long period of years. Thus, privatization should be opposed.

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