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NEWS

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STATEMENT OF
THE HONORABLE HERBERT H. BATEMAN (R-VA)
CHAIRMAN, SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY READINESS

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATIONAL SECURITY

aboard the USS Constellation (CV-64)

San Diego, California

March 6, 1998

I would like to welcome everyone here today to the first of a series of field hearings that the Subcommittee on Military Readiness will hold this year. It is a distinct pleasure for me to hold this hearing on the USS Constellation which is one of the United States most visible symbols of our military capabilities. Conducting a readiness hearing here on the "Connie" is significant in that readiness can be seen, heard, and felt first hand here. It is also significant that many of the military services' operational bases are nearby. I believe that it is important to get out in the field and hear from individuals at all levels who are charged with making readiness work. I also believe that it is important that all levels of military personnel have the opportunity to view the process by which Congress, and the House National Security Committee, exercises its oversight responsibilities which are mandated by the Constitution of the United States. We are here today, not so much as to ask questions, but rather, to listen to our witnesses give their own personal perspectives on current readiness in their units.

There are several reasons why it is important for the members of the committee to travel to the field to hear about readiness. As many will remember, three years ago while the Pentagon leadership was claiming that U.S. forces were more ready than they had ever been, the committee found indications of a serious readiness problem in the military services. At that time, the committee determined the services were in the early stages of a long-term systemic readiness problem that was not confined to any one quarter of a fiscal year.

In an effort to understand the reasons why we are faced with readiness problems today, it may be useful to look back a few years. The Army, which conducted 10 "operational events" outside of normal training and alliance commitments during the 31 year period of 1960-1991, has conducted 26 "operational events" in the seven years since 1991. The Marine Corps, which undertook some 15 "contingency operations" between 1982 to 1989, has conducted 62 since the fall of the Berlin Wall. For the first time, the Air Force is experiencing long term deployments.

All of these additional deployments and contingencies have come at a time when we have reduced from 18 to 10 Army Divisions, nearly half of the number of Navy ships, and from 24 to 19 Air Force fighter wings. Overall, the military personnel downsizing has taken us from approximately 2.2 million active duty service members to the budget request level for fiscal year 1999 of 1.4 million active duty soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines. Just doing the math tells the story.

Some of the indicators that initially led us to an awareness readiness problems were that all of the F-15E and two-thirds of the F-15C air crews based in Europe needed waivers from training requirements, two of the six Army contingency corps units, the most ready in the force, reported significantly reduced readiness ratings, and 28 Navy and Marine Corps tactical aviation squadrons had to ground more than half of their aircraft during September 1994. Although dismissed by the Pentagon as anecdotal, the committee believed that these indicators were indeed warning signs that could not be ignored.

In an attempt to measure the Administration's success these past two years in addressing obvious readiness shortfalls, the committee staff conducted a comprehensive readiness review during the Fall of 1996. In addition, I, and many other Members of Congress, have been meeting with many members of the military services and visiting several military installations during the past year.

The results of the study and the meetings indicate that readiness is not improving, and may be in a decline. In this context, it is essential that the Readiness Subcommittee continue to test the Pentagon claims that the U.S. military is "as ready as we have ever been;"¹ and "U.S. military forces remain the best equipped, best trained and most capable of any in the world."²

One of the possible reasons there is such a disparity in the reported readiness by our military leaders, and a more accurate, real-world assessment of readiness, may be founded in the way we currently measure readiness.

The systems currently in place to measure readiness do not take into account many of the indicators that would give a more accurate, real world readiness picture. Some of these indicators may be the amount of time individuals are away from home; the stresses of working harder and longer and doing more with less; the quantity and quality of military training and other measurements that are not currently used to assess readiness. Because of these concerns, the National Defense Authorization Act for 1998 includes a provision that will improve the methods by which we measure real readiness. The subcommittee is in the process of reviewing these mandated changes and will further review these concerns at a hearing later this month.

Readiness is a perishable commodity — by the time you find out it is broken, it is already too late. I believe this hearing today will be one of the most important hearings the subcommittee will have this year. It is important that members of the Subcommittee hear what is really going on from a cross section of our military service members who are "in the know" on these issues. Our aim today is to hear from those that have to deal with the day-to-day challenges with keeping readiness at an acceptable level.

We are very fortunate to have three panels of individuals representing the four military services and all levels of command and supervision. The first panel is composed of commanders from major operational commands to give us their views from the big picture point of view. The second panel will have commanders of individual operational units consisting of commanders that have just returned from a deployment, commanders that are getting ready to deploy, and other commanders that have been supporting these same deployments recently. Our third panel will consist of senior non-commissioned officers from units represented on the second panel. I am convinced that the views of senior NCOs, which many consider the backbone of any operational unit, are essential to an accurate assessment of readiness at the working level. I look forward to their unique perspective on these important issues.