

Military attracts more youths

Recruitment rises with inflation

Story: KATHY PARRISH
Photos: DAVID FRANK

It made Kim Thiele angry when a military recruiter called her a couple years ago.

"You're not going to get me, buster," the Oakland Township woman recalls thinking.

But last month, Ms. Thiele waited in line to talk to an Air Force recruiter about her future. And the Oakland University senior liked what she heard.

"They provide an attractive package," explained the 22-year-old economics major, who would have no trouble getting a job but wants to work overseas.

"I've been knocking on the doors of private industry. And here is somebody saying 'Sure, we'll send you abroad with a good salary, further your education and give you experience."

"I'm seriously considering it."

Like Ms. Thiele, who was anti-military and never expected to see the inside of a recruiting station, many Vietnam-era youth are checking into the Armed Services.

More high school students are taking military aptitude tests to see if they have skills recruiters want. At Rochester High last fall the number of students taking the yearly Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) jumped from 40 to 90.

AT OAKLAND University, protesters and lack of student interest kept recruiters away from campus in the early 1970s. Now military personnel have full dockets when they interview there.

But most significant are the increasing number of youth signing contracts.

In the tri-county area and most of Michigan, Armed Services offices are processing many more people than they were a year ago.

Comparing Oct. 1978 - Feb. 1979 with Oct. 1979 - Feb. 1980, quarterly figures show the Air Force (reservations and active duty) up 197 from 848 to 1,045 in southeast Michigan; Army contracts up 855 from 639 to 1,431 for the tri-county area; Navy contracts up 370 from 1,683 to 2,058 in Michigan; and Marine contracts up 50 from 648 to 708 in the tri-county area.

"People are finally looking at the military more objectively," Lt. Dick Goulet, Enlisted Programs Officer for the U.S. Navy.

"Hey, this is a job, an employment opportunity," he added. "It's a chance for growth."

There are many reasons for new interest in the military, which has been having trouble recruiting since the GI Bill ended in 1976.

"You talk to a 100 different kids and you get a 100 different reasons for going," said U.S. Army Recruiter Bobby L. Jones, whose north Oakland County territory includes Rochester.

Although they grew up with the Vietnam War, young army recruits echoed Kim Thiele's feelings.

"I wasn't proud of the war," said the

young woman, who says her attitude toward the military was "negative."

"But I don't feel the circumstances were the fault of military people. They were more the fault of elected people."

MOST MILITARY officials trace the increase in recruits to the economy — high unemployment, rising cost of college education and interest in skill training.

"They think most kids go into the service out of self-interest. And they pitch to it, offering cash bonuses, matching funds for education and even a new two-year Army plan for a quick out."

"Try to convince a kid to give years of his life to his country when he has no reason to do it," says Lt. Goulet.

"Many of the things we have now are enticements — and should be."

"We're the biggest school in the world," said Thomas D. Rigle, station commander for the U.S. Army Recruiting Station in Pontiac.

"There's still the old myth about the guy in the foxhole. But education is what we're pushing now."

Sgt. Mike Doty said technical training has always been pushed in the U.S. Air Force, which has as its theme "Air Force Jobs, Air Force Experience."

"Finally, the unemployment rate is starting to interact with that."

Terril Ray's upcoming Navy stint will allow to continue her education. She had to drop out of Spring Arbor College for financial reasons.

FOR PENNY WESTON of Battle Creek, finances are also a reason for joining up. Her husband is laid off and she needs the steady Army income to help care for their three children.

Many women, who are sought after by the military, go in to get skills they wouldn't acquire in civilian life.

The fighting in Afghanistan and the issue of American hostages in Iran have definitely sparked patriotic feelings. "Old-fashioned patriotism has cropped up again. And it's had an impact on young people," said Major John B. Champagne, commanding officer, U.S. Marine Corps Recruiting Station.

"They're thinking more about some of their responsibilities."

Actually, patriotism isn't mentioned much by recruiters. Only the Marines stress "intangibles" like self-reliance and pride.

"You have to be careful with flag-waving. Kids don't buy it," said one Naval officer. "A bunch of Navy guys on the corner waving flags just wouldn't sell."

But the possibility of a draft is making kids think more about the Armed Services.

"They want to be prepared in case the selective service comes back," explained Ron Kevern, Oakland University's Director of Career Advising and Placement.

There is concern among kids that the draft would wipe out all benefits designed to attract them to the volunteer Army.

"THEY'RE OVERREACTING to the registration," said Lt. Goulet. "We tell them there's a big difference between registration and draft, but it weighs on the minds of kids."

Mike Hill, a Rochester Adams senior who is in the delayed enlistment program, joined the Army after the hostages were taken. "Right now I have no choice," said the Avon Township resident. "If they bring the draft back, I'll be in and get my benefits out."

A host of other factors affect recruiting. People reportedly join more during an election year when "people are looking at the federal government," one recruiter advised.

There are also travel benefits and the opportunity to grow up a little before committing to lifelong jobs. "I wasn't sure what I wanted to do after high school," explained Ann R. Smith, 18, The Rochester High grad just finished psychiatric specialist training.

For some students, the military life looks like a route to some very specific goals.

AVON TOWNSHIP resident George Zamka, 17, is deciding whether he will go to Annapolis or West Point after graduating this June from Rochester Adams High.

He wants a leadership position and sees the military as the "most demanding profession I can think of."

Robin Taylor, 18, feels the military "teaches you a lot of self-respect." She intends to enter an ROTC program in college, with hopes of eventually becoming a U.S. Senator.

"You either need to be a war hero or lawyer to run for office," says the Rochester teen.

Even weather plays a part in recruiting. Lack of snow has led some northern Michigan youth to look to new jobs in the service. Too much snow can drive young people south to military bases in sunny San Diego, Orlando or Texas.

But along with the attractive military offerings, the Armed Forces are selling themselves better. And they admit it. "We've got to face it. We're salespeople," said one officer. Younger officers with potential are being assigned to recruiting. The Navy recently started giving promotions and other

benefits to recruiters as incentive. And young Navy recruits are put to work bringing in friends, with the promise of promotion before they even ship out.

"THEY HAVE the most important mission in the Army," says Captain Peter Root of his Army recruiters. "If they don't recruit, we won't have an Army."

But while admittedly under pressure to recruit more, military personnel insist they are not "arm bending" or tricking kids. They insist the product sells itself today.

And twisting arms just doesn't pay off.

"You push a kid and you're going to lose him," said Chief Dale Dunlop, public affairs officer for the U.S. Navy.

"Kids today are bright. The more pressure, the more they're going to rebel. It's better to take them by the hand and lead them."

Dunlop personally feels many young people look to the military life for its discipline.

"It's subtle, but they look at you as someone who has the respect and authority," explained the father of three. "I think kids today are looking for discipline." Local recruiters stress the ethics of recruiting, especially when dealing with in young people. They say it upsets them when school districts treat them with "grudging compliance" out of fear or dislike.

With the increasingly technical military, they are under orders to take in more high school grads and cut down on the number of drop-outs.

Major Champagne has written a letter Gov. William Milliken asking to address the State Board of Education on the subject of access of recruiters to high schools. His concern is that the age group the services draw from is steadily declining, but military quotas are not.

"We're denied access to the very group we need to address," says Champagne.

"I think it's naive if they think we're going to coerce kids out of school," explained Champagne, who said he worked until 10 p.m. one night recently talking a recruit into finishing high school.

"School boards want to protect their young people. But they are denying kids an opportunity," he added.



Army recruiter Bobby Jones: "You talk to a hundred different kids and you get a hundred different reasons for going (into the military)."

"And maybe that's the reason for the hue and cry in Congress for the return of the draft."

Navy classifier Mike Neubecker urges kids to sign up right away in order to get a particular job opening. But he doesn't push hard.

"I am a careerman. What happens when I go on a ship and see people I recruited and lied to. Paybacks are hell," the 27-year-old said firmly.

Staff Sgt. Mark Gentile won't recruit "just for numbers."

"I'M SELFISH," said the 30-year-old public affairs officer. "Someday I may be depending on that person to look out for me."

Area military personnel are pleased that more youth see the Armed Services as "an opportunity, not just a last resort."

But despite all the benefits, they admit joining the service is a harder decision for a young person to make today.

"They're a lot smarter," said Chief Dunlop. "They can see and reason. This puts it right on the line for them."

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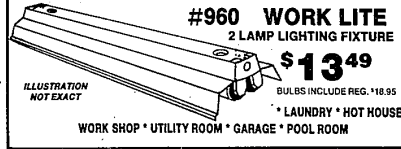
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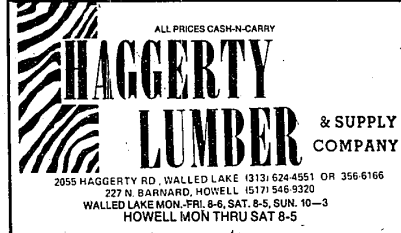
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