



UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

119259

FEDERAL PERSONNEL AND
COMPENSATION DIVISION

B-208585

AUGUST 18, 1982

The Honorable John O. Marsh, Jr.
The Secretary of the Army



119259

Attention: The Inspector General
DAIG-AI

Dear Mr. Secretary:

Subject: Army's Initiatives to Improve the Skill
Qualification Test Program May Not Achieve
Promised Changes (GAO/FPCD-82-69)

We are concerned that the Army's initiatives to implement our recommendations 1/ concerning the skill qualification test (SQT) program may fall short of achieving promised changes. Our concerns are based on

- discussions and observations at Army schools and field sites which indicated that they continue to develop new SQT components, as well as give and score existing tests, and
- the Army's request to reprogram funds to the SQT program without justifying that the funds could be used to redesign and change the program.

OBJECTIVE, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

Our objective was to determine whether the Army was changing the SQT program as it agreed to do in June 1982. We obtained information on the current status of development and administration of SQTs during visits to Army schools and field sites. We made these visits between March and June 1982 at Forts Knox,

1/ "The Army Needs to Modify Its Systems For Measuring Individual Soldier Proficiency" (FPCD-82-28, Mar. 30, 1982).

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Eustis, Bragg, and Lee, in accordance with our current "Standard for Audit of Governmental Organizations, Programs, Activities, and Functions."

We also evaluated the Army's support for its request to reprogram funds to the SQT program. During May 1982, we examined the documentation at the Army Training Support Center, Fort Eustis, Virginia, and discussed the reprogramming with officials at the center.

NEED FOR MORE RESPONSIVE ARMY ACTION

On March 30, 1982, we reported to you that the SQT program as designed and implemented was not meeting the Army's needs for measuring individual training effectiveness and individual soldier proficiency in critical job tasks. (See enclosure.) We made a number of recommendations for developing a less complex, less costly, and more effective system. In a March 4, 1982, response to the draft report, the Army agreed with the need to modify the SQT program in a manner closely parallel to the report's recommendations. Then, on June 4, 1982, in response to our final report, the Army stated it was making changes to the SQT program because it recognized that the growth and administration of the system to measure soldiers' proficiency and training needs have begun to diminish the program's effectiveness.

Despite these assurances, in recent visits to Army schools and field sites, we documented (1) that the Army schools continue to develop new SQTs and that the field sites continue to administer SQTs, as in the past, (2) that the schools have not received specific direction for the needed changes, and (3) that SQT development efforts are not being changed.

GAO'S BASIS FOR QUESTIONING REPROGRAMMING REQUEST

Our concern about the Army's willingness to make the agreed-to changes to the SQT program was heightened by its recent request for authorization to reprogram funds. In May 1982, the Army asked the Congress for authority to reprogram approximately \$9.3 million to restore fiscal year 1982 SQT program funds which had been deleted by the Congress. The Defense Subcommittee, House Committee on appropriations, asked us to examine the Army's support for request.

Army's support for request very limited

Out of the \$9.3 million requested to be reprogrammed, we question the Army's support for \$8.6 million--\$3.7 million for Army schools, \$2.6 million for contracts, and \$2.3 million for administering its present SQT program through fiscal year 1982.

The Army is proposing that the \$3.7 million be used for schools to continue developing new SQT components and to score and administer existing tests through September 30, 1982. However, the Army based this \$3.7 million on 175 percent of the school funds needed to finish revising old SQTs, not on average monthly expenditures through April 1982. During the first 7 months of 1982, the schools spent about \$574,000 per month. Using this monthly figure for the remaining 5 months of the fiscal year shows that the Army needs only \$2.8 million. The Army Training Center's May 17, 1982, summary paper, which was prepared as support for the reprogramming request, showed that at the end of April the Army still had \$1 million remaining from the \$9 million previously appropriated for fiscal year 1982. Consequently, the funds needed for the school for the remainder of the fiscal year would be closer to \$1.8 million (\$2.8 million minus \$1 million) rather than the \$3.7 million.

In its efforts to justify the \$2.6 million for contracts, the Army could not tell us (1) whether all contracts proposed were critical for developing a new testing methodology, (2) how much of its redesigned development would be affected by delaying some contracts, and (3) how the costs for all anticipated contracts were estimated. Therefore, we question whether the Army can effectively use this money during the remainder of fiscal year 1982 because it has not yet started to convert to a less complex and less costly SQT program.

We concur with the view expressed by the Chairman, Defense Subcommittee, at the June 23, 1982, hearings that the money the Army already spent during fiscal year 1982 represents "business as usual" and not an honest attempt to reform SQT. We continue to believe that more positive action is necessary to demonstrate that SQTs are being redesigned to a less complex and less costly program that will effectively meet the Army's needs.

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We will continue to monitor the Army in achieving its promised changes, and we hope to see more progress.

We are sending copies of this report to the Secretary of Defense; the Director, Office of Management and Budget; the Chairmen, House and Senate Committees on Appropriations and

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Armed Services; and the Chairmen, House Committee on Government Operations and the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs.

Sincerely yours,


Clifford I. Gould
Director

Enclosure

GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
REPORT TO THE SECRETARY
OF THE ARMY

THE ARMY NEEDS TO MODIFY ITS
SYSTEM FOR MEASURING INDIVIDUAL
SOLDIER PROFICIENCY

D I G E S T

Presently, the Skill Qualification Test program is the Army's only diagnostic tool for measuring individual training effectiveness and individual soldier proficiency in critical job tasks. Its ability to meet the Army's needs, however, is questionable.

Both the Army and the Congress have a vital need for accurate information on individual soldier skills. The importance of such information prompted the General Accounting Office (GAO) to do this study of the Army's Skill Qualification Test program. A March 31, 1981, report by GAO which found that soldiers were not being trained in all critical job tasks added impetus. GAO provides alternatives that meet the Army's proficiency information needs at a much lower cost.

NEEDS OF THE ARMY NOT MET BY SKILL
QUALIFICATION TEST PROGRAM

Unit commanders and trainers are not getting the necessary information to assess accurately either skill proficiency or individual training needs. Five major obstacles prevent this program from meeting the Army's needs:

- Test results do not accurately indicate a soldier's ability to perform critical job tasks because only a selected number of tasks is tested. (See p. 6.)
- Skill Qualification Testing is regarded as a once-a-year event, rather than as the culmination of a year-round training program. (See p. 8.)
- Promotion decisions based on Skill Qualification Test results create inequities among soldiers. (See p. 9.)

- Test results are not routinely used to measure soldier proficiency or training needs at the unit level. (See p. 10.)
- The Skill Qualification Test program handicaps rather than improves professional skill development because training is provided primarily for those few tasks tested. (See p. 10.)

QUESTIONABLE COST EFFECTIVENESS OF
SKILL QUALIFICATION TEST

Considering the Army's information needs on soldier proficiency and individual training, the Skill Qualification Test concept appears logical--i.e., train a soldier to specified standards (Soldiers Manual) and then test against those standards to determine proficiency. However, in practice, the program has become a "paper nightmare." Each year, thousands of people are required to develop, print, distribute, and score the hundreds of tests at an annual cost of more than \$25 million. (See p. 12.)

The Army must have a system that measures soldier proficiency and identifies training needs, but that system should be less complex, more responsive to the needs of individual trainers, and less costly to develop and administer than the current testing program. Moreover, it should take into account any time and resource constraints. (See p. 15.)

Consequently, the GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Army develop and implement, beginning in fiscal year 1983, a more effective system for measuring individual soldier proficiency and training needs. This system should incorporate separate programs for (1) assessing individual training needs and (2) measuring individual proficiency for use in promotion decisions. More specifically:

- The program for assessing individual training needs should be tied directly to the Soldiers Manuals (which list critical job tasks) and used as a training tool.

- Soldiers Manuals where feasible should include tests which unit level trainers can use as often as necessary to evaluate individual proficiency in any number of tasks.
- Individual training assessments should remain at the unit level and serve as a diagnostic aid to improving training.
- Unit trainers should be held accountable for using tests contained in Soldiers Manuals.
- Tests of individual proficiency for use in promotion decisions should apply only to those soldiers eligible for or already within the noncommissioned-officer ranks. These tests should comprise both a written exam of randomly selected Soldiers Manual tasks and a hands-on test of common soldier tasks. These tests should be offered during a limited period each year, and only those soldiers eligible for promotion should be required to take them. Specific test questions should not be announced in advance.

AGENCY COMMENTS

At a February 1982, meeting the Army provided comments on the draft report. In its March 1982 written response (appendix I) the Army generally agreed with GAO's findings, stating that the growing administrative workloads associated with conducting the program in units has led the Army to the same solutions advocated in the draft report. The Army also agreed with the need to modify the Skill Qualification Test Program in a manner closely parallel to the recommendations in this report. GAO has made appropriate changes throughout the report to address the Army's comments. (See p. 20.)