



- Menu**
- News**
- [Obituaries](#)
- Opinion**
- Sports**
- Life&Leisure**
- Business**
- Photos**
- Shopping**
- Classifieds**
- [Jobs](#)
- [Homes](#)
- [Cars](#)
- [Merchandise](#)
- [Legal Notices](#)

## News

### Targeting teens for troops

By [BILL HENDRICK](#)  
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ATLANTA — Sprawled beneath an olive-green camouflage net snapping like a bullwhip in cold, blustery winds, Senae Hobson, a petite 17-year-old, shivers in a T-shirt behind a .50-caliber machine gun, hardly able to straddle the huge weapon.

Smiling timidly, she listens as a burly veteran sergeant named Ray McCommons, 35, — warmly clad in an Army field jacket — tells her how to operate the gun. Nearby, other teenagers, baby-faced boys mostly, nervously await their turn, many flexing their bravado in sleeveless shirts.

"This is cool," whispers Hobson, who'll graduate in May, then head straight to basic combat training at Fort Jackson, S.C. "It's been my goal to be a soldier."

In fact, she's already one, having signed on the dotted line with her mother's permission just after turning 17 last September. Like hundreds of other Georgia youngsters in the National Guard's ramped-up Recruit Sustainment Program, she's already legally committed herself to at least six years in the military. Though she won't go to basic until after she graduates, she's already collecting pay for the monthly meetings she's required to attend until then.

And the pay is far better than most 17-year-olds could earn flipping burgers.

Seen 35 years ago as a safe haven from Vietnam's triple canopy jungles, the Guard — struggling to keep its ranks from thinning — has been forced to become highly creative. Which is why steps have been taken nationally to energize the long-dormant Recruit Sustainment Program, commonly called RSP. Georgia's Army National Guard has about 700 enlistees in its RSP. Only a few states have been as successful as Georgia, where the RSP has become a top recruiting tool.

Nationally, the Guard is 10,000 soldiers short of its authorized strength of 350,000. The Georgia Guard, in part due to the RSP, surpassed its recruiting goals by more than 100, raising the force total to 9,117, and expects that to rise to 9,350 this year.

"It's working very well," says Staff Sgt. Jeff Simmons, a recruiter who talked and joked to 22 kids attending their first meeting last month at Dobbins Air Reserve Base.

The meetings seem more like club gatherings, with sergeants and officers acting more like caring teachers. The youngsters are called "Mr." or "Miss" or "private," not the derisive terms of "meathead" or "scumbag" almost all veterans are highly

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familiar with.

At a recent "drill" at a Guard armory, the atmosphere was laid-back. Youngsters were shown all sorts of weapons, which some seemed reluctant to touch. They gawked in awe at Humvees and crusty — but friendly — soldiers their parents' age.

In the RSP, friendliness is stressed.

Getting the word out

Every day, squads of recruiters in impressively crisp uniforms cozy up to kids as young as 14 and 15 at schools, malls, pizza joints, bowling alleys and other teen hangouts, letting them know about the program, which allows anyone 17 or older to join and be paid monthly before they do a single push-up or hear a grizzled drill sergeant yell "double time."

The Georgia Guard has about 80 recruiters who operate out of 77 locations, targeting every high school in the state. No surprise, success has been greatest in schools where pupils come from middle and lower socioeconomic groups. The sergeants first get permission, then stalk campus grounds and school halls and make presentations, looking mostly for kids who are not headed to college and those who want to go but doubt they'll be able to afford it.

"I'm not sure she's ready, and when I see the news, I worry," says Hobson's mother, Orisa Abraham. "But it's her chance, and maybe the only way she could go to college."

Rutha Nations, 17, a high school junior who works at a pancake house, enlisted Nov. 14. She'll be headed in May to basic training at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri, then back to the same base next summer for military police school.

"I've never been to Missouri," Nations says. "I plan to go to college as soon as I can. I'm trying to do something with my life, and this is the only way."

Her mother, Carolyn Moulder, works as a "utility person" making breads and desserts. Moulder, 47, wants her daughter to get a better start in life.

"I'm proud of her, proud that she's not staying here getting in trouble, and can have a real career."

A powerful incentive

Money is the biggest incentive. A new private with no training can draw at least \$159 per monthly meeting, and \$597 for 15 days of summer camp. Promotions are doled out after basic, when monthly pay increases. A junior going to basic before senior year could easily earn \$2,400 while training, then go back to school in the fall and earn higher pay for monthly drills, plus still more the next summer in AIT (advanced individual training). Unless mobilized, the youths can earn a hefty nest egg, then go to college or trade school on the Guard's dime.

For those youngsters who have no desire to go to college, recruiters explain that the Guard offers training in more than 200 fields. The Georgia Guard also promises to pay full tuition to any state college or technical school. And the tuition spigot can be turned on as soon as a youngster finishes basic training.

Hobson, for example, figures to earn \$5,000 this summer attending 16 weeks of basic and AIT, then go to college, with her tuition paid by the Guard.

"I could be mobilized, but probably not, so I'm planning for college," she says.

Many go to basic training after their junior year, then AIT after graduation.

"When you tell a kid he can come off the block and make money, they are like, 'What?' " says recruiter Simmons. "They can earn a lot more than they could in a regular teen job. Most are in the hunt for college money."

Eager audience

At schools in lower-income areas, youths are "much more receptive to signing up," Simmons says.

Even in schools where BMWs fill parking lots, however, there are always kids looking for excitement. And at every school, lots of teens with little interest in the military take ROTC to avoid other classes such as shop and home economics — but high school officials hand over their names and numbers to recruiters.

What's more, it's easier for recruits to sell a Guard contract to a 17-year-old high school junior for whom graduation seems an eternity away.

That's a big plus for the RSP, which signs teens up to two years before they are in a position to be mobilized. "Our regimen [RSP] is the only program that includes pay, required attendance and a specified set of tasks and standards for all recruits to meet prior to shipping for basic or AIT," says Lt. Col. Peter VanAmburgh, head of state recruiting.

Chief Warrant Officer Carl Jackson, a 33-year-old recruiter, says the truth is never glossed over.

"These kids are putting a lot on the line to come in the military with a wartime environment," he says. "My in-brief is, 'You're all gonna have to deploy. It's not a question of if, but when.' We tell the parents that, too."

Learning the drill

At the recent drill at Dobbins, which lets the Georgia Guard use its facilities, dozens of youngsters wore sweat shirts and running gear to practice close-order drill and saluting and learn in the chow line what it's like to hurry up and wait. In a nearby heated classroom, Simmons showed slides designating military ranks, rules and procedures. After every question, he'd ask, "Everybody trackin'?" Some recruits shouted "Yes, sir," a major no-no that traditionally makes veteran sergeants growl, "Don't call me sir — I work for a living."

But Simmons just smiled, reminding them to say "hoo-ah" for yes.

He lectured them on ranks, military etiquette, the importance of staying in shape and keeping their grades up, referring them often to pages in loose-leaf notebooks titled "Battlebook." At times, kids' eyes glazed over as he lapsed unconsciously into military acronyms.

For example, they'll be going to BCT (basic combat training), then AIT (remember? advanced individual training), depending on their MOS (military occupational skills). They'll learn how to shoot and do push-ups properly in PT (physical training) after arriving at the MEPS (military entrance processing station). They'll also learn how to hurriedly don NBC (nuclear, biological, chemical) suits in their DCUs (desert combat uniform) to be prepared for the GWOT (global war on terrorism).

They're less familiar with acronyms like KIA (killed in action), WIA (wounded in action) and POW (prisoner of war).

And some say the Guard is digging too deep by going after high schoolers.

'Very concerned'

"It's sadly unfortunate," says Leslie Cagan, head of New York-based United for Peace, a coalition of about 1,000 peace groups. "We're very concerned about these programs designed to lure in young people. . . . The bottom line is, it's really an economic draft."

Not surprisingly, other anti-war groups as well as scholars contend the military is taking advantage of young people by stressing the travel and financial incentives instead of dangers.

Many adults, however, think that for lots of the kids, joining the military is a good option.

Derrick Manning, principal of North Clayton High in College Park, Ga., says sergeants are regularly welcomed to visit groups and individuals. "We have a noticeable number who go into the military," he says.

Youths in the RSP contend they know exactly what they're doing.

"I know because I've looked into it," says Tyler Lawver, 17, who'll spend all summer training and expects to be called up by late fall. "If I don't go to Iraq, I will go to college."

Bradley Rowell, 18, went to basic training last summer and is headed to infantry school after graduation. He wants to go to college but might make the Army a career. Andrew Prater, 18, says he volunteered for the bonus offered to recruits who sign up for combat jobs. Daniel Lewis, 19, joined to get a better job than he now has at Red Lobster.

Hobson, the girl at the .50-caliber, says she's not worried about danger.

"It's not that safe anywhere, even on the streets of Atlanta," she says. "If I'm going to be a corporate lawyer, this is the way to get there."

*Bill Hendrick writes for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.*

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