CALIFORNIA NATIONAL GUARD

To Better Respond to State Emergencies and Disasters, It Can Improve Its Aviation Maintenance and Its Processes of Preparing for and Assessing State Missions

Audit Highlights . . .

The California National Guard (Guard) can improve its aviation maintenance and its process to prepare for and assess state missions:

- ☑ *The Army Guard's ability to perform state missions may be compromised by a shortage of qualified aircraft mechanics and delays in receiving helicopter parts.*
- ☑ *The Army Guard does not ensure that personnel readiness reports exclude ineligible troops; however, because the Office of Emergency Services typically does not request full troop strength, the Army Guard's personnel readiness has no bearing on its ability to assist the State.*
- ☑ *The Guard needs to make certain that personnel in its Joint Operations Center who coordinate the Guard's state mission response receive requisite training.*
- ☑ *The Guard does not annually review and update its various emergency plans nor ensure that it implements recommendations from past mission assessments.*

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California National Guard's response as of August 2002

The Joint Legislative Audit Committee requested that the Bureau of State Audits review the California National Guard's (Guard) readiness to respond to a natural disaster, civil disturbance, armed conflict, or other emergency. However, many of the Unit Status Report (USR) records on federal readiness are not available, being classified by the U.S. Army. Similarly, the U.S. Air Force has determined that all its Status of Resources and Training System readiness data are classified. Consequently, we are unable to report on the Army Guard's or Air Guard's overall readiness ratings for their personnel, equipment on hand, equipment condition, and training. Therefore, we focused much of our audit on the missions the Guard performs at the State's request. We especially considered the three Army Guard units most frequently called up and how the percentages of grounded helicopters might affect their ability to assist in state emergencies. We also looked at how personnel readiness, as reported in the USRs, might affect use of the Army Guard for federal wartime duty.

Finding #1: A lack of staff formally trained in helicopter maintenance and delays in receiving helicopter parts may contribute to low numbers of operational aircraft.

U.S. Army regulations instruct the Army Guard commanders to attain aircraft readiness goals by effectively managing maintenance and part supplies. However, data reported in the monthly Bridge Commanders' Statements do not identify reasons for delays in the helicopters receiving either maintenance or parts—specifically, whether delays are caused by personnel levels or some other factor. In their USRs submitted between January 2000 and July 2001, two of the three units we studied reported shortages of qualified aircraft mechanics. Our review of the units' manning reports—which identify all the

units' personnel and their assigned duties and formal training—showed that 50 percent of two units' maintenance staff were not formally trained in maintenance of UH-60 helicopters. It seems reasonable to conclude that the low numbers of operational aircraft are influenced by a lack of trained aircraft mechanics.

Generally, the U.S. Army trains the Guard's aircraft maintenance mechanics but cannot accommodate all new Guard recruits in the training courses. Therefore, the Army Guard must recruit aircraft mechanics with maintenance training on other types of helicopters and provide transition training to do maintenance on its UH-60s or CH-47s. However, these mechanics may not be able to work without supervision or sign off on major maintenance items. Further, because of increased time spent training and supervising personnel without formal training, the Army Guard's qualified staff may have fewer hours to spend meeting maintenance demands.

In addition, the Army Guard indicated that a lack of replacement parts is a barrier to keeping its helicopters operational. The Army Guard attributes this to the U.S. Army's choice to not use its resources for the requisite amount of aircraft replacement parts. As a result, there are simply not enough parts in inventory to meet demand.

To help improve its percentage of operational aircraft, the Guard should improve its data tracking and collection to determine why helicopters are not operational, then take appropriate steps to correct the identified deficiencies. In addition, the Guard should reassess the feasibility of distance learning opportunities for its maintenance personnel, including those previously coordinated with the U.S. Army, until the U.S. Army makes more training slots available for new recruits.

Guard Action: Partial corrective action taken.

The Guard reports that it has taken certain actions such as forming an aviation readiness council; having its aviation directorate closely monitor monthly aircraft readiness reports to allocate resources to non-operational aircraft; and implementing a program for quick assessment of aircraft readiness, focusing on non-mission capable aircraft, their available date, and critical problems. In addition, the Guard told us that the U.S. Army is improving the availability of aircraft parts to help improve the Guard's readiness. With regard to distance learning, the Guard noted that the

necessary hardware is already available in various Guard locations and it will pursue the acquisition of distance courses when the National Guard Bureau develops them.

Finding #2: The Army Guard's use of full-time maintenance personnel to fight wildfires delays helicopter maintenance.

The Guard's practice of using its full-time helicopter maintenance staff as crew to drop water on California wildfires delays maintenance and contributes to the lack of operational helicopters. For example, in 2000, the Army Guard flew its helicopters on 13 separate fire-fighting missions between July 26 and September 5 and dropped at least 2.4 million gallons of water. We analyzed the Guard's pay records, and found that full-time maintenance facility staff from two units contributed about 65 percent of their unit's total man-days during the 2000 fire season.

The Guard should determine how frequently it uses its full-time flight facility personnel in fire-fighting missions and set a standard that will not negatively affect the Army Guard's ability to meet helicopter maintenance demands.

Guard Action: Partial corrective action taken.

The Guard did not address our recommendation that it should set a standard for using full-time flight facility personnel in fire-fighting missions. Instead the Guard believes that its aviation commanders and its Emergency Operations Center work toward maintaining a balance of full- and part-time aircrew members during state emergencies to accommodate everyone and to assure safe missions. The Guard noted that this is an ongoing process that it will closely monitor.

Finding #3: Weaknesses in the Army Guard's process for reporting personnel could result in overstated personnel readiness.

Contrasted with the aviation capability for state missions, the Army Guard's personnel readiness affects only the federal need for troops. In a quarterly USR, each Army Guard unit reports its personnel status by comparing available strength levels, or staffing, against wartime requirements. However, the Army Guard lacks an effective process to ensure that a unit includes only

eligible soldiers in its strength levels. For example, the three Army Guard units we reviewed erroneously included at least 21 soldiers in their combined USRs. Therefore, these units may have overstated their personnel strength levels, or P-levels, making it appear as though they are more ready for war or other federal duties than they are.

To validate the accuracy of USR data, we expected the Army Guard's headquarters would have a process that includes at least a comparison of soldiers pending discharge and inactive soldiers to those reported in the units' USRs and a review of soldiers listed in the "nonvalidate pay report" it receives from the National Guard Bureau (NGB)—a report that identifies part-time soldiers who have not received pay for 90 consecutive days. Because the personnel office maintains such data, it could use these records to ensure that units accurately compute their P-levels. However, the personnel office does not validate the accuracy of USR personnel data for all units, so the Army Guard's headquarters cannot ensure that units are preparing their P-levels accurately.

According to the director of the personnel office, headquarters does not instruct the units, such as those in the 40th Infantry Division (40th ID) to work with the personnel office during the USR process. Consequently, the Army Guard's headquarters is relying solely on the 40th ID to accurately compute its P-levels. The 40th ID represents 52 percent of the total units the Army Guard reports to the U.S. Army and 74 percent of the Army Guard's personnel.

To strengthen its process for personnel reporting in the USR, the Army Guard should do the following:

- Instruct the 40th ID and the personnel office to work together during the USR process to ensure that units in the 40th ID report accurate personnel data.
- Train appropriate staff on how to complete the USR.
- Strengthen its USR validation procedures to ensure that units adhere to U.S. Army regulations when they report USR data.

Guard Action: Corrective action taken.

The Guard stated that is has, on two separate occasions, instructed both the 40th ID and 49th CSC, that the personnel office would validate key personnel data. In addition, in April and July 2002, the Guard trained its field command personnel on the proper procedures for completing the USR—emphasizing the problems and submission standards for non-deployable personnel. The Guard also reported that during its April and July 2002 USR data collection and preparation, it reviewed the accuracy of personnel data using seven different personnel reports.

Finding #4: Flaws in the personnel office's database prevent the Guard from detecting all discharged soldiers units report on their USRs.

Even if the personnel office performed a more thorough review, its database contains flaws that prevent it from detecting all discharged soldiers on the USR. In our attempt to calculate the average time it takes the personnel office to process discharges, the Guard gave us two lists that we found to contain inaccurate data. First, the personnel office gave us a list of soldiers from our selected units processed for discharge in 2001. However, the Guard later informed us that six soldiers on the list were still active members of the Army Guard. Because of the errors we identified, we requested and the personnel office sent us another list. However, again we found incorrect information for some soldiers on the list, such as the Guard's officers and warrant officers. Until it corrects serious database deficiencies, the personnel office will not be able to detect all discharges that units report on their USRs.

The Army Guard should correct deficiencies in its discharge database and continually update this database to make sure that it reflects soldiers who have actually been discharged.

Guard Action: Corrective action taken.

The Guard told us that it is no longer using a secondary personnel database, which contained errors to generate its reports. It claims that the primary personnel database at its headquarters is free from deficiencies and inaccuracies and it uses this database to generate reports showing discharged soldiers.

Finding #5: Weaknesses in the Joint Operations Center's procedures may limit its ability to provide the most effective state mission response.

As part of Plans, Operations, and Security located at the Guard's state headquarters, the operations center manages the Guard's state missions. The operations center provides in-house staff training on its operating procedures and a brief overview of the Response Information Management System, an Internet-based system used by local and state agencies to manage the State's response to disasters and emergencies. However, the operations center does not track who has attended its in-house training or require its staff to complete other disaster preparedness training. Further, the operations center's premission monitoring of potential and ongoing disasters, which allows the Guard to anticipate the general requirements of potential state missions, is not included in its Standard Operating Procedures manual (SOP manual). Because the operations center cannot ensure that all appropriate personnel have received training or are aware of standard premission activities, staff may work less efficiently and be less prepared to act during emergencies.

The Guard should do the following:

- Develop a system to continually identify requisite training for its operations center staff.
- Ensure that staff receive the requisite training in military support to civil authorities, thereby improving staff response to state missions.
- Establish and maintain a system to track the training activities that operations center staff attend.
- Include premission activities in the operations center's SOP manual.

Guard Action: Corrective action taken.

The Guard reported that Plans and Operations has developed a training chart, which is used to identify and track requisite training for staff. In addition, the director of Plans and Operations is producing a monthly newsletter to help keep staff abreast of current operations, including available training. Finally, the Guard noted that it added premission activities to its SOP manual in March 2002.

Finding #6: The Guard lacks a process to annually review and update its emergency plans.

The Guard's emergency plans guide its response to disasters such as fires, floods, and earthquakes. Although the NGB requires the Guard to review and update these plans annually by September 30, the Guard does not have a process to ensure that this takes place. In fact, the Guard revised only 3 of its 13 plans in calendar year 2001. The director of Plans, Operations, and Security points to high staff turnover and vacancies as reasons for the delays. Without ensuring the revisions are completed, however, the Guard cannot guarantee that its plans contain up-to-date and effective responses to disasters.

The Guard should develop and implement a system to review and update its state emergency plans annually, as the NGB requires. In addition, the Guard should review all its state emergency plans by June 30, 2002.

Guard Action: Corrective action taken.

The Guard reported that it has developed a system showing the month and year it reviews and/or updates a plan and when it forwards the plan to the NGB. Moreover, the Guard told us that it reviewed all its state emergency plans and made any necessary changes as of July 2002. Further, the Guard states that it prepared and published a multi-hazard plan including annexes addressing specific hazards comparable to the plans used by the Governor's Office of Emergency Services.

Finding #7: The Guard does not have a process to implement recommendations from assessment reports.

We reviewed After Action Reports (AARs) relating to various types of large-scale state emergencies, such as the 1992 Los Angeles riots, the 1994 Northridge earthquake, and various flood and wildfire seasons. After completing each mission, the operations center performed a formal assessment of the Guard's performance and typically identified problems and made recommendations on how the Guard could improve its state mission response. Specifically, the AARs for three missions between 1996 and 1998 indicate that at the start of each mission, the Guard should work with the Office of Emergency Services to negotiate an exit strategy that includes clearly defined criteria for extracting the Guard from a mission. NGB regulations require

the Guard to terminate its military support to civil authorities as soon as possible after civil authorities can handle the emergency. Without establishing an exit strategy at the start of each mission, the Guard's crews could remain active longer than necessary, performing tasks that other entities could be doing.

Also, in three AARs submitted between 1993 and 1997, we identified a recurring problem with the Guard's ability to easily track and update the status of critical equipment. However, the Guard did not implement corrective action until early 2001, nearly eight years after it first identified the problem, when the operations center developed a list of the equipment used in state missions and began tracking that equipment's availability through monthly reports other Guard directorates prepared.

Because the Guard has no formal process to address previous problems encountered during its missions, it cannot promptly implement corrective action on AAR recommendations. The Guard acknowledges it lacks an adequate system to benefit from the previous missions' lessons. It is currently conducting a study, expected to be ready by June 2002, to identify better tracking systems for all its actions and activities, including this area.

The Guard should update the operations center's SOP manual to ensure that staff establish an exit strategy at the start of each mission. In addition, the Guard should establish a process to track and implement corrective action as appropriate on AAR recommendations, ensuring quick action to correct previous mistakes. Finally, the Guard should make sure that it completes its study by June 2002 so that it can identify better tracking systems for all of its actions and activities.

Guard Action: Partial corrective action taken.

The Guard commented that it updated its SOP manual to include establishing an exit strategy at the start of each mission. The Guard stated that it plans to carry out its exit strategies by coordinating with the Office of Emergency Services and monitoring daily situation reports during state emergencies. The Guard stated that it also updated its SOP manual to require tracking of AAR recommendations. Finally, the Guard reported that it completed its management study in June 2002, and is in the process of procuring a computerized tracking system. The Guard expects the system to be in place October 1, 2002, and fully integrated during 2003.