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Interview: Military Recruitment on the Southside of Chicago

By Avis Yarbrough

I wanted to talk to a military recruitment officer from Chicago's southside about how Iraq and military recruitment are perceived in the community. Public Affairs officer for Navy Recruitment, James Antonucci agreed to answer my questions.

How many people actually, per day, come in to enlist on the Chicago's southside?

James-What you call the Chicago's southside is actually a large geographic area, with its own miniature little towns. There is Hyde Park, Cottage Groove, the Pulaski area, and others. But on the southside of Chicago there are about 21 to 22 military recruiters. There are about 41 recruiting stations. In a city with a population of over 100,000 thousand, there is usually a recruitment station, and usually with only one military naval recruiter per office. Each recruiter is advised to have, at least, one face to face interview with a potential recruit per day.

Is there a typical or type of potential recruit that the navy recruitment officer is looking for?

James-

When we are talking about typical recruits there are four tiers. First tier are persons between the ages of 17-21, male and female. They have a high school education; they are someone with good moral character, and in good physical condition. Secondary tier, are people who are 26 years old and up. Third tier, the potential recruit is 34 years old. Lastly, recruits who are 40 years old, and they are only allowed to join the reserves. The other recruits will be on active duty and could be sent to Iraq.

What are their reasons for enlisting?

James-

The main reason, like with any other job, is money. Secondary reasons are education, insurance benefits, and tuition assistance, military technical program. Insurance and health benefits are usually a draw for 40-year-old recruits. Third, is travel

When I was doing some research online, I came across some articles about military recruitment officers in Chicago's southside public schools and the criticism surrounding it? Are you aware of their criticism?

James- What is the criticism?

That military recruitment officers are targeting minority and disadvantage young men and women, who will more likely join the military for practical purposes, unaware(or aware but ignoring the possibility) that they could be sent to Iraq and be killed.

James-First, I can't speak for other branches of the military, but lets look at the minority population in the United States. Take African Americans in the United States; 20% of the population in the United States are African American, and only 18% percent are in the military, that is a gap that the Navy is trying to improve. We do have diversity recruiting and a cross section of targeting recruiting programs, hoping to include more minorities in Naval officer programs, and pilot programs which lacks a diverse population.

Second, as with any organization, the Navy looks for a market. For example, kids in Lakeforest probably have a lot more opportunities, and are on the fast track to college with a mother and a father who will likely pay for it. Suppose that kids on the southside of Chicago do not have the same opportunities and are unable to afford college, much less Junior college. Joining the Navy can give them those opportunities through VA benefits, career training for white and blue-collar jobs, and insurance benefits. The military will give these kids a chance that they might not otherwise have. So, the majority happened to be African-American, but this is not to say that economic disadvantage youth are only black. Take for example, West Virginia who has a disadvantage population also, that are white, and military recruiters seeks out potential recruits there also.

Third, No one is making anyone join the military, there is no draft, it is their choice.

How do you think that military recruitment personal is perceived on Chicago's southside?

James-I can only speak for the Navy, but the Navy usually don't get the anti-war protests that other branches of the military does. We don't have as many ground forces in Iraq or not as many. The majority of our people are on a ship offshore, we are more supportive then direct. It is the Navy military recruiter's job is to get the appropriate numbers and reach their required goal.

What are the appropriate numbers?

James-

A Navy military recruiter has to have a face to face sit down interview with one person each day, and each recruiter must sign up one person to join each month.

That seems low?

James-Again I am only talking about the Navy, but the Navy is downsizing and because of new technology, our ships are getting smaller. We do not need as many people as we used to. As a result, Navy personal are getting a better quality of life on our ships and more space.

How long have you been in the Navy?

James- I retired after 30 years. I now work as contractor for Naval Public Affairs.

Where did you grow up? Did you grow up in Chicago?

James- No, in San Diego

Do you want to tell me why you joined the military?

James- I joined for economic reasons in 1975. I was twenty-one, married with a child on the way, and I did not have a decent job. United States was just getting out of Vietnam and it was hard to get into the military. They were downsizing at the time, so they were not accepting just everyone who wanted to join. It took me actually six months before they accepted me.

If I wanted to join the military, what would a Navy recruitment officer say or do to get me to join?

James-The Navy recruitment officer job is to find out what you need and want. Are you interested in a higher level of education? Do you want college assistance? Are you interested in military benefits? Once the Navy recruitment officer has determined what you need and desire, his or her job is to show you how the military can help you accomplish your goals and would benefit you.

Navy recruitment centers has a sales concept, but unlike other business we are not simply driven by money. When a person wants a job the first thing they seek out is the salary, money. Secondary, maybe are benefits, but this is usually for jobs that have salaries of \$50,000 or 60,000 dollars. But lets look at the person who is seeking a job at their local K-mart, and who will not be making that kind of money, but just want some kind of income. They will, more than likely, not get the kinds of benefits offered to them as say a person interviewing for a \$50,000 or 60,000 thousand dollar job.

What about them? When a person joins the military, from day one, they will earn benefits and money until retirement, assuming that they stay in until retirement..

The Navy, and the military, in general, are now competing with corporate America for the kind of people we wish to see join the military. We need doctors and lawyers, and the military now finds itself fighting corporate America for these types of people.

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