

Poor economy good for U.S. military

Pentagon completes strongest recruiting year in 4 years

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The Associated Press

FORT RILEY, Kan. — Sgt. Ryan Nyhus spent 14 months patrolling the deadly streets of Baghdad, where five members of his platoon were shot and one died. As bad as that was, he would rather go back there than take his chances in this brutal job market.

Nyhus re-enlisted last Wednesday, and in so doing joined the growing ranks of those choosing to stay in the U.S. military because of the bleak economy.

“In the Army, you’re always guaranteed a steady paycheck and a job,” said the 21-year-old Nyhus. “Deploying’s something that’s going to happen. That’s a fact of life in the Army — a fact of life in the infantry.”

In 2008, as the stock market cratered and the housing market collapsed, more young members of the Army, Air Force and Navy decided to re-up. While several factors might explain the rise in re-enlistments, including a decline

in violence in Iraq, Pentagon officials acknowledge that bad news for the economy is usually good news for the military.

In fact, the Pentagon just completed its strongest recruiting year in four years.

“We do benefit when things look less positive in civil society,” said David Chu, undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness. “What difficult economic times give us, I think, is an opening to make our case to people who we might not otherwise have.”

The retention rate of early-career soldiers in the Army has risen steadily over the past four years and now stands 20 percentage points higher than it was in fiscal 2004. As for the Navy and the Air Force, early- and mid-career sailors and airmen re-enlisted at a higher rate in October than during the same period in 2007. The Marine Corps was not immediately able to provide comparative figures on re-enlistments.

Alex Stewart joined the Army two years ago, when the factory where he worked as a welder started laying off. He was sent to Afghanistan with the 82nd Airborne Division, which

suffered 87 deaths last year, the highest total suffered by the 20,000-member unit since the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan began.

When his hitch was up in earlier this year, the 32-year-old from Grand Rapids, Mich., didn’t hesitate to re-up for five more years.

“I want a stable life for my wife in a very shaky economy,” Stewart said. “There were no other options.”

Stewart’s new assignment will take him to Germany, where he will serve as a truck driver, though it is always possible he could be sent back into combat.

“I figure if I do another five or 10 years in the Army,” he said, “the economy will turn around and I can get a truck-driving job.”

Roughly 208,000 men and women left the military in 2007. Some were rank-and-file warriors, while others worked in specialized fields such as satellite communications or computer networking. Only about 30 percent of enlisted soldiers hold a bachelor’s degree.

The job market is still fairly good for veterans with technical skills, especially those coveted by defense contractors, said Carl Savino, a retired Army major.