

MILCON/VA Member Day Testimony Rep. Richard Hudson

Chairman Wasserman Schultz, Ranking Member Carter, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to be here today to discuss the dramatic Military Construction needs at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. My name is Richard Hudson and I have the distinct privilege of representing North Carolina's eighth congressional district.

As many of you know, Fort Bragg is a very special and unique place. Fondly referred to as the "Epicenter of the Universe", it is not only home to the Airborne and Special Operations Forces, but it is also our nation's largest military installation in terms of personnel. Fort Bragg is the home of the 82nd Airborne Division, the nation's Immediate Response Force, the XVIII Airborne Corps, the United States Army Special Operations Command (USASOC), and the Joint Special Operations Command. If you can think of any major military operation in the last century, there is a good chance that a unit or command from Fort Bragg was involved.

Each of these commands and their subordinate units are specially designed to meet the most unique challenges that we as a nation have, and will ever face. Simply put, they are the tip of the spear. When the President calls 9-1-1, the phone rings at Fort Bragg.

Since the founding of the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) in 1987, the United States has increasingly relied on Special Operations Forces (SOF) to accomplish its objectives worldwide. SOF personnel are deployed in over 100 nations around the globe and are constantly looked to as the first option to protect US interests. This increased demand has led to a need for more personnel and resources to better train, man, and equip SOF personnel.

Thankfully, this Subcommittee and the Appropriations Committee as a whole has recognized the importance of Special Operations. Having done so, Fort Bragg has been rewarded with significant funding to support the special operations community. However, this has come at a cost - a cost that has not yet been fully realized by senior leaders in the Pentagon or Members of Congress.

The cost that I speak of has come at the expense of conventional forces at Fort Bragg, and most notably, the 82nd Airborne Division.

To be clear, the 82nd Airborne Division is not a normal division. As part of the XVIII Airborne Corps, the 82nd is our nation's Immediate Response Force (IRF). This means that in a moment's notice and under any circumstance they can be called upon to mobilize and deploy into combat. They have a standing requirement to be ready and able to deploy and be "wheels up" in a mere 18 hours.

Fort Bragg, NC is the only Joint Strategic Deployment Platform that provides our nation the ability to respond in hours versus days, weeks or months. Enabling the US Military to seize the initiative and win the first battle of the next war. It is also an extremely successful deterrent. If our enemies know how rapidly we can deploy these elite soldiers, they will think twice before engaging in hostile actions toward us.

Recently, we saw this capability in action for the first time since 1989 in response to Iranian aggression. On New Year's Eve, when most of us were getting ready to celebrate with friends and family, a call went out to the paratroopers of the 82nd. Get back to post and get ready to leave. 18 hours later, they were headed to the Middle East. An hour after the first plane was launched, protest activity stopped outside the US Embassy in Iraq. They knew we were on our way.

Unfortunately, having not been used in thirty years, we as a nation have forgotten what it takes to maintain this capability. Since the deployment at the beginning of the year, I have engaged with leaders at Fort Bragg to see how they managed to accomplish this feat. To put it bluntly, we got through by the skin of our teeth, thanks to the sheer will and determination of every soldier to force us through despite existing challenges.

If war broke out tomorrow with a near peer adversary, it is unclear if we would be able to replicate this feat. If we are not able to replicate this rapid, large scale deployment that means our men and women in uniform would be headed into combat to face an enemy that is more prepared and better positioned.

This capability requires an investment in facilities, resources, and effort. These investments purchase time and options for the National Command Authority. Time is impossible to buy in a crisis – you have to invest now. To put it bluntly, the facilities at Fort Bragg have not received the investment required to maintain this capability. Special Operators and Paratroopers expect to be outnumbered and under-resourced in combat but they shouldn't have to face these challenges here. Investing in Fort Bragg buys time and options for the National Command Authority and eliminates options for our enemies. Fort Bragg is at a critical juncture. Our primary and alternate airfields, rail systems, roads, training areas, maintenance facilities and infrastructure are in desperate need.

As one senior leader put it to me “We stand ready to do the impossible. We can't buy time in a crisis but if we invest here and now we can get some of that valuable time back.”

Since 2010, Fort Bragg has only received one MILCON project for conventional forces. The control lights on Pope Army Airfield used to deploy this force are from 1938. There is no fire station or emergency response capability around the airfield to respond if there is an emergency during mobilization. Soldiers are scattered across post to gather critical items such as ammunition, body armor, rations, and critical supplies when they should be in containment getting briefed on the mission.

In the most recent deployment, some soldiers were not initially briefed until mid-flight because they were faced with a logistical nightmare to secure their necessary equipment. If these soldiers had been jumping into combat instead of landing in friendly territory, we would have jeopardized the safety of each one of those soldiers and put their lives on the line because we failed them at home.

I understand that the Military Construction process is long and arduous. There are competing priorities among every installation and across the country. All of these are competing for the limited resources we have available. If we had an entire MILCON/VA bill dedicated to Fort Bragg it would still not be enough to address every issue that exists.

I am not asking for that. I am asking that you do not accept the list that is presented to you by the Pentagon blindly, and I am asking for you to include the top two projects at Fort Bragg that would have a direct and immediate impact on readiness. For too long we have asked these soldiers to do more with less. If we do not resource them appropriately now we will not be able to win the next fight.

With this in mind, I urge the committee to fund priorities related to the Immediate Response Force and Pope Army Airfield to the fullest extent possible. Currently, there is not sufficient emergency support infrastructure around the airfield to deal with possible fires or mishaps during a deployment. If something goes wrong, we are at great risk of losing tremendous amounts of equipment. Imagine the chaos that would consume the airfield as paratroopers trapped on a plane burned alive because we could not get the proper firefighting resources to them.

There is also not sufficient infrastructure surrounding the airfield to facilitate the timely collection of personnel and equipment in preparation for a deployment. Stores of vital equipment and supplies need to be able to be pre-positioned in order to cut down on wasted logistical time while soldiers can plan for the mission ahead in a quarantined environment free from distraction. Allowing our troops to plan, prepare and execute the mission most effectively and safely should be our top priority.

I understand that we do not have unlimited resources to provide our men and women in uniform. Additionally, I do not envy any member of this committee who is faced with making these tough decisions. However, I implore you to see what is at stake here. We need these investments to be able to respond to the next global crisis. We need these resources to make sure our troops are prepared. We need these resources to save the life of the soldier from your district who volunteers to become a paratrooper.

Again, I'd like to thank Chairwoman Wasserman Shultz and Ranking Member Carter for allowing me to testify today and I stand ready to answer any questions you may have.