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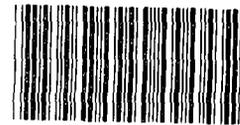
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Actions Needed To Improve Military Chain Of Command And Inspectors General Grievance Procedures

Surveys have shown that many members of the U.S. military services do not have confidence that grievance procedures available to them are effective in resolving their problems. GAO's assessment of the two principal grievance systems available to service members--the chain of command and Inspectors General--reveals shortcomings and weaknesses.

The services believe that resolution of service members' grievances is an important command responsibility which should be accomplished at the lowest possible level in the chain of command. Each service, however, has adopted different procedures.

Recognizing the services' varying missions and organizations, GAO is not proposing a single, standardized grievance system. Each service should develop and implement its own procedures which contain the components considered necessary for a responsive and workable grievance system.



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UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

FEDERAL PERSONNEL AND
COMPENSATION DIVISION

B-157371

The Honorable Harold Brown
The Secretary of Defense

Dear Mr. Secretary:

This report identifies actions we believe can be taken by the Department of Defense and the services to improve the processing of service members' grievances through the chain of command and Inspectors General channels and to enhance service members knowledge and confidence in the grievance procedures. While we did not obtain written comments on the matters discussed in this report, we did discuss military grievance procedures with headquarters representatives at the Department of Defense, Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps, and obtained informal comment on the report from the services, except for the Army which declined to comment.

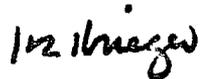
This report contains recommendations to you on pages 19 and 20. As you know, section 236 of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 requires the head of a Federal agency to submit a written statement on action taken on our recommendations to the House Committee on Government Operations and the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs not later than 60 days after the date of the report and to the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations with the agency's first request for appropriations made more than 60 days after the date of the report.

We are sending copies of this report to the Director, Office of Management and Budget; the Chairmen, House and Senate Committees on Appropriations and Armed Services; the Chairmen, House Committee on Government Operations and Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs; and the Secretaries of the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force.

B-157371

We wish to acknowledge the courtesy and cooperation extended by your staff to our representatives during the study.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "H. L. Krieger".

H. L. Krieger
Director

GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
REPORT TO THE SECRETARY
OF DEFENSE

ACTIONS NEEDED TO IMPROVE
MILITARY CHAIN OF COMMAND
AND INSPECTORS GENERAL
GRIEVANCE PROCEDURES

ARMY AGC 00020
AF AGC 00055
NAVY AGC 00001
MC AGC 00098

D I G E S T

Responsive grievance procedures can help improve the quality of American military life, increase productivity, morale, and confidence in military leaders.

However, GAO's assessment of the two principal grievance systems available to service members--chain of command and Inspectors General--is that they fall short of meeting criteria considered necessary for a workable grievance system.

Personnel experts generally agree that a grievance system should

- employ logical steps to resolve issues at the lowest organizational level,
- provide time limits for action at each step of the process, and
- provide for appeal to an independent third-party.

A grievance system also should

- lend itself to evaluation by requiring documentation of grievance cases and collection of data on performance, and
- be understood and viewed with confidence by users.

The services believe that resolution of service members' problems and grievances is a command responsibility and should be accomplished at the lowest possible level in the chain of command. GAO agrees. The four services, however, have adopted different grievance procedures which range from reliance on the chain

FPCD-79-23

of command in the Navy and Marine Corps to equal promotion of both the chain of command and Inspectors General procedures by the Army and Air Force.

GAO's comparison of the services' grievance procedures showed these weaknesses and inconsistencies:

- The Army and Air Force permit service members to initiate grievances with the Inspectors General without first attempting resolution through the chain of command and to petition one or more offices in the Inspectors General hierarchy at any time. Thus, in some cases, the chain of command is precluded from resolving grievances at a low level without outside intervention. Since Inspectors General usually direct grievances back to the chain of command for resolution, unnecessary involvement of the Inspectors General, particularly when more than one level has been petitioned, can result in duplication of effort, delays in grievance resolution and supervisors precluded from fulfilling a basic command responsibility--maintaining the welfare of their troops.
- Rather than functioning as a forum for appealing grievances after the service member has been unsuccessful with the chain of command, the Army and Air Force Inspectors General function as an alternate and, frequently, duplicate grievance channel which can be petitioned at any time.
- The Navy and Marine Corps do not provide service members the degree of access to Inspectors General as do the Army and Air Force. As a result grievances can be buried in an ineffective command chain or service members feel compelled to go outside the services to government or congressional officials.
- The independence of the services' Inspectors General in grievance matters is questionable since they are responsible to and evaluated by the commanders on whose staffs they serve.

- The services have not established time limits for each phase of the grievance process, including appeal, to promote expeditious grievance resolution.
- The services have not established adequate procedures for collecting and evaluating data on grievances. Data on grievances are either nonexistent, incomplete, or inaccurate. As a result, the services cannot judge the efficiency and effectiveness of servicewide grievance processing.
- GAO's attitude survey in 1977 showed that many of the enlisted service members queried lacked knowledge of and confidence in the services' grievance procedures. The services need better documented and publicized procedures, specifying the roles and responsibilities of the chain of command and Inspectors General in grievance resolution. Reports of grievance system success also need to be publicized.

Recognizing that the services have varying missions and organizations, GAO is not proposing a single, standardized grievance system, but rather that each service develop and implement a system which contains the necessary components of a workable grievance system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense direct the services to adopt a grievance system comprised of the chain of command and Inspectors General channels. Particular emphasis should be placed on:

- Using and strengthening the chain of command as the primary source for initial problem resolution, preferably starting with the immediate supervisor and progressing, if necessary, to the commander with final decision authority.

- Using the Inspectors General only as an independent third-party review of disputed grievance decisions or chain of command inaction; the Inspectors General would serve as the vehicle for taking grievance appeals to higher command levels when needed. If the Inspectors General cannot be made independent of command control in grievance matters, then another means such as an impartial adjudicator will be needed. Adjudicators must be sufficiently insulated from the control of either party so that their decisions will be credible.
- Establishing time limits for each stage of processing grievances and appeals.
- Developing and evaluating grievance data on formal cases processed and their outcomes, and periodically assessing organizational performance in grievance handling and resources expended.
- Conducting attitude surveys periodically to measure service members' understanding and perceptions of the grievance system's effectiveness.
- Increasing service members' awareness of and confidence in the grievance system through well-documented and publicized procedures and reports of grievance system success.

AGENCY COMMENTS

GAO did not obtain formal agency comments. However, the report was discussed with Department of Defense and service representatives (except Army who declined to comment). These representatives generally agreed with the report and the merits of most of the recommendations. They all disagreed however, with GAO's recommendation that if Inspectors General continue to be used in the grievance process that they be made independent of command control. Service representatives believed that the Inspectors General need not be made independent in order to provide fair and equitable treatment in responding to grievances. The issue of the independence of

Inspectors General is not new. During congressional hearings in 1977, concern was expressed that since most Inspectors General are directly responsible and evaluated by the commanders on whose staff they serve, their objectivity and credibility might be compromised. GAO believes that perception of independence is a very important aspect of a third party in resolving grievances, and that currently the Inspectors General are not generally viewed as independent.

Some service representatives also questioned the benefits to be achieved by developing and evaluating grievance data on formal cases processed and their outcomes. GAO believes that collecting and tracking grievance data is important in order to identify the systemic causes of grievances and to hold parties involved in grievance resolution accountable for expeditious and conscientious action in responding to service members' grievances.

C o n t e n t s

	<u>Page</u>
DIGEST	i
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
2 CHAIN OF COMMAND AND IG GRIEVANCE PROCEDURES	6
Chain of command	6
IG	7
3 ASSESSMENT OF CHAIN OF COMMAND AND IG GRIEVANCE PROCEDURES	9
Procedures to promote efficient and effective grievance resolution	9
Independent third-party appeal process	12
Time limits for processing grievances	13
Grievance data collection and evaluation system	15
User knowledge and confidence in grievance system	15
4 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	18
Conclusions	18
Recommendations	19
Agency Comments	20
5 SCOPE OF REVIEW	22

ABBREVIATIONS

GAO	General Accounting Office
IG	Inspectors General

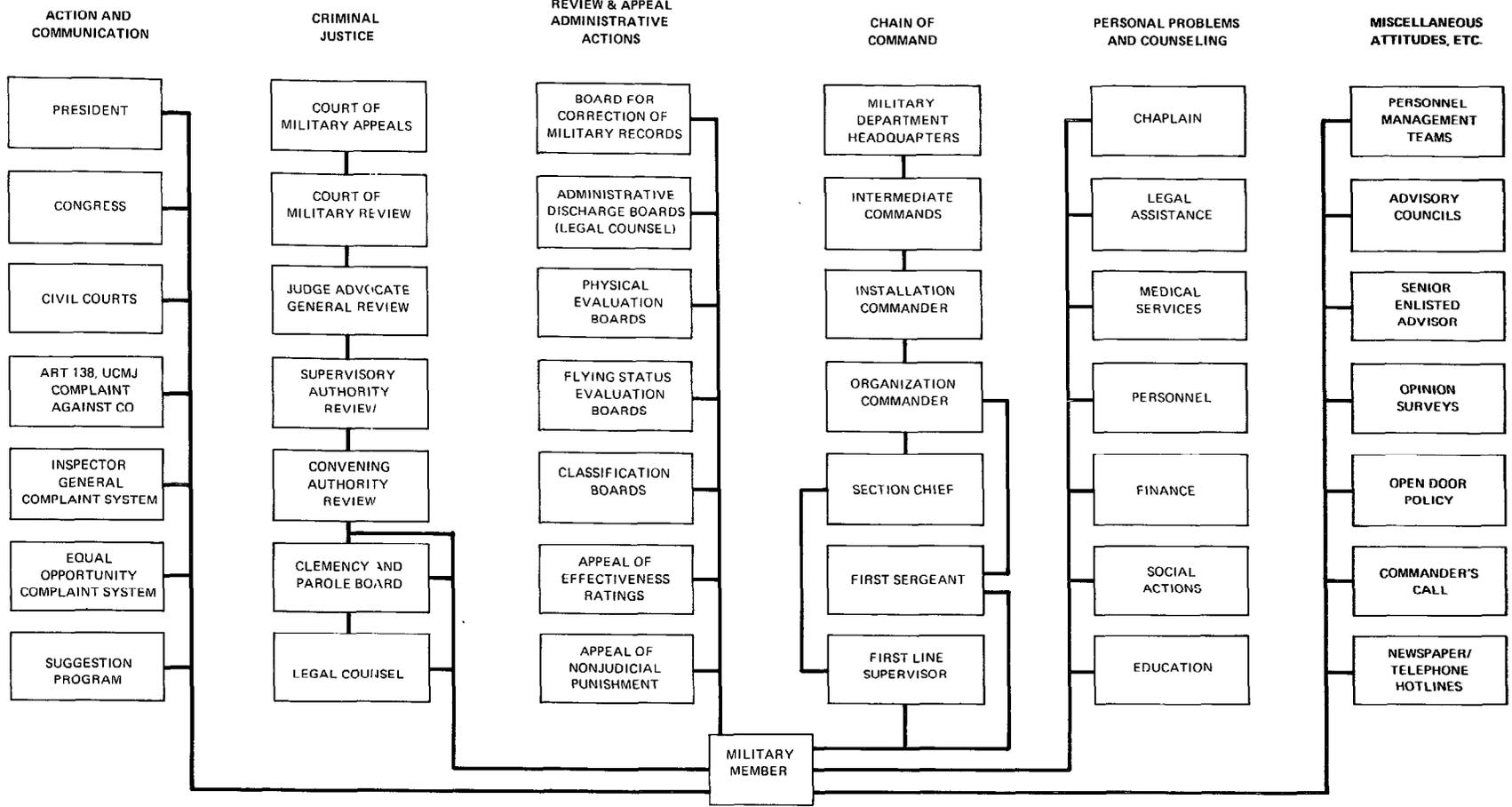
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the military services, the terms "grievance" and "complaint" are used interchangeably to broadly refer to any problem or dissatisfaction a service member may have. Compared to civilian employment, military service involves a much more extensive range of personnel matters. These matters include not only work related aspects of military service but also aspects associated with community life such as housing, transportation, medical care, security, religious programs, recreational facilities, and education.

Many grievance channels exist through which service members may seek assistance or redress of grievances. These channels have evolved through statute, administrative directive, and custom. They include chaplains, senior enlisted advisors, the chain of command, the Inspectors General (IG), administrative review and appeal boards, the military justice system, the Civil Courts, members of Congress, and the President. A schematic of these channels is shown in the following chart.

INDIVIDUAL MILITARY COMPLAINT CHANNELS



Members of Congress and military officials have been increasingly concerned about the adequacy of grievance systems available to military personnel since responsive, well-functioning grievance procedures can aid in increasing productivity, morale, and confidence in military leaders. Service members' dissatisfaction with military life and grievance system perception surveys have indicated uncertainty or negative attitudes about grievance procedures. With the implementation of the All-Volunteer Force, major changes have occurred to make military service more appealing. The military services have recognized that the attitudes and the quality of incoming personnel have changed and the emphasis on human rights and equality has intensified.

In July 1977, the Subcommittee on Military Personnel, House Committee on Armed Services initiated a series of hearings on grievance systems available to service members. On August 5, 1977, the Chairman, House Committee on Armed Services requested that we conduct a questionnaire survey of enlisted service members' perceptions on the adequacy of existing grievance procedures. The survey was not intended to be a representative sampling, enabling projections to the entire enlisted forces, but rather to identify and surface problems and perceptions of service members regarding existing grievance procedures.

We interviewed at random 710 enlisted personnel in the 4 services at 18 installations--205-Army, 240-Air Force, 157-Navy, and 108-Marine Corps, and reported the survey results to the Chairman by letter dated October 7, 1977, (B-157371).

Our survey showed that uncertainty or negative attitudes about grievance procedures existed among many of the service members queried. For example:

- Twenty-six percent of the respondents believed that they had not received adequate explanation of their services' grievance procedures.
- About 46 percent of the respondents were unsure or believed that they could not get fair grievance representation from the chain of command. A greater percentage (55 percent) expressed the same feeling about their IGs.
- Uncertainty about or definite fears of reprisal were expressed by 47 percent of the respondents if they

complained to the chain of command and by 55 percent, if they used the IGs.

--Only 42 percent of the respondents believed that they could get quick action from the chain of command on a grievance and only 38 percent expressed this view about IGs.

Earlier attitude surveys by the Army in 1975 and by the Air Force in 1973 and 1975 revealed similar negative perceptions by the service members regarding grievance procedures in those two services. The Army survey queried why service members write letters seeking help from high government officials rather than using the chain of command or the local IG. About 37 percent of the officer and enlisted respondents indicated that they lacked confidence in the chain of command and local IG. About 23 percent of the officer and 34 percent of the enlisted respondents believed quicker action could be obtained from high government officials.

The Air Force survey in 1973 disclosed a widespread lack of knowledge of the IG grievance procedures as well as distrust and fear of reprisal if they were used. A 1975 followup survey showed that despite efforts to publicize the IG procedures and what it could do, knowledge and confidence in the IG procedures increased only slightly.

Because of the importance of the chain of command and IG grievance procedures and the problems disclosed by the various attitude surveys, we further studied how the services have structured and used these two grievance procedures to determine whether and what improvements were needed. Since grievances deal with attitudes, emotions, personal judgments, and other factors that are difficult to measure, determining how well a particular grievance procedure works is necessarily subjective.

Despite problems in determining the effectiveness of a particular grievance procedure, some aspects of it can be reviewed and assessed by comparing it to the essential elements of a workable grievance system. Designing a workable system, however, is not an exact science, and depends on the types of personnel covered, the work environment, and the organization's mission. To some extent, the flexibility of grievance procedures is crucial to their success. There are, however, several elements of a workable grievance system

which personnel experts generally agree are necessary. 1/
A workable grievance system should

- employ logical processing steps to foster resolution at the lowest organizational level,
- provide time limits for action at each step of the process, and
- provide for appeal to an independent third-party.

In addition, we believe it is essential that a grievance system should lend itself to evaluation by requiring documentation of formal grievance cases and collection of system performance data. Further, we believe that the success of any grievance procedure depends on a high degree of knowledge and confidence by not only its users, but also the parties responsible for grievance resolution.

1/See GAO report, "Grievance Systems Should Provide All Federal Employees An Equal Opportunity For Redress," FPCD-77-67, June 13, 1978.

CHAPTER 2

CHAIN OF COMMAND AND IG GRIEVANCE PROCEDURES

The services generally share the philosophy that resolution of service members' grievances is an important command responsibility and should be accomplished at the lowest possible level in the chain of command. The services, however, have implemented differing grievance procedures which range from reliance on the chain of command in the Navy and Marine Corps to promotion of both the chain of command and IG procedures in the Army and Air Force, with emphasis on the IG procedures.

CHAIN OF COMMAND

The chain of command consists of the pyramiding operational levels and reporting lines within each of the services. Military commanders at all levels are responsible for mission accomplishment and the welfare of their people. The chain of command is designed to (1) help the military accomplish its mission by providing a vehicle for the rapid transmission of orders and requirements and (2) ensure that the requirements are met and the orders followed. At the same time, the chain of command also provides the service member with the means to surface a problem and have the problem transmitted to a level where it can be resolved. The chain of command may address any service member problem or grievance. However, on matters where a statutory or administrative appeal process is applicable or decision authority does not rest with a service member's command chain, such as discharge appeals or criminal matters, the supervisor or commander can only assist the service member in obtaining timely problem resolution from the appropriate decision authority.

The chain of command (or request mast procedure as it is referred to in the Navy and Marine Corps) functions ideally when the service member can communicate a grievance to his immediate supervisor and obtain satisfactory and timely resolution or assistance. If this does not occur, the service member may progress up the chain to the next level supervisor or higher level commanders.

The effectiveness of the chain of command in dealing with grievances depend to a large extent on commissioned and non-commissioned officers within the chain. For the chain of command to be effective in responding to and resolving

grievances, responsible officers must be knowledgeable of the many administrative and special service groups which can assist in resolving service members' grievances. Close coordination and followup with these service groups by the chain of command is essential. By maintaining receptiveness and sensitivity to their personnel, officers in the chain of command have the opportunity to resolve grievances in an effective and timely manner and to enhance the service member's confidence in their leadership.

IG

The IGs' basic mission is to make inspections, inquiries, investigations, and evaluations of mission performance, operational readiness, personnel discipline and morale, economy and efficiency of operations, and alleged improprieties. The involvement of the IGs in grievances stems from their responsibility to assess the status of personnel morale and welfare. IGs of the services schedule time during inspections so that personnel can air grievances in confidence and action can be initiated to resolve their concerns. In addition to IG involvement during periodic inspections, the Army and Air Force IGs have established IG grievance procedures which are available as an alternative to the chain of command. Under the Army and Air Force IG grievance procedures, service members are not required to first seek grievance resolution through the chain of command, although they are encouraged to do so. Also, grievances can be taken to any IG level at any time. As with the chain of command, the nature of the complaint or request will not disqualify the Army or Air Force IGs from involvement in the problem unless another formal statutory or administrative procedures channel exists.

Military officials in the Army and Air Force believe that the IG grievance procedures offer service members a necessary alternative to the chain of command for redress of grievances and problems. Military personnel may submit grievances to Army or Air Force IGs by personal appearance, letter, or phone call. A grievance that cannot be resolved locally or is not resolved to the service member's satisfaction can be submitted to higher levels within the IG hierarchy.

The Navy and Marine Corps IG have not established separate IG procedures because of their commitment to the chain of command as the means for service members to seek redress of grievances. They said supervisory enlisted personnel and officers are required to respond to all grievances, thus, keeping the grievance with the chain of command where

it can be resolved effectively. The Marine Corps IG and inspectors do become involved in hearing grievances to some extent, however, as part of their chain of command responsibilities.

The structures of the services' IG organizations are similar in some aspects but different in others. The IGs at the department level are general officers who are detailed to the position for specified tours. The Army, Air Force, and Navy IGs are responsible to the Chiefs of Staff and Service secretaries. The Marine Corps IG is responsible to the Commandant of the Marine Corps and the Secretary of the Navy.

The Army and Air Force have a significantly larger number of IG personnel and are more widely dispersed than the Navy and Marine Corps IG personnel. The following is an estimate of the number of full-time IG personnel in the services.

	<u>Officers</u>	<u>Enlisted</u>	<u>Civilian</u>	<u>Total</u>
Army	650	374	80	<u>a/</u> 1,104
Air Force	867	436	162	<u>b/</u> 1,465
Navy	53	9	41	<u>c/</u> 103
Marine Corps	16	5	4	<u>d/</u> 25

a/Authorized as of August 1977.

b/Authorized as of July 1977.

c/Assigned as of March 1978.

d/Authorized for the headquarters IG office only as of June 1977.

The above table includes all IG personnel in the services, of which only a small percentage deal solely with processing grievances.

CHAPTER 3

ASSESSMENT OF CHAIN OF COMMAND AND IG GRIEVANCE PROCEDURES

The four services use the chain of command and IGs to varying degrees in resolving service member grievances. We compared how these two grievance procedures were being used in the services with the key elements of a workable grievance system and found shortcomings which we believe negatively impacts on the effectiveness of the grievance procedures in responding to and reacting to grievances in the military service. We found that resolution of grievances through the chain of command and IGs were hindered by the lack of

- established procedures to promote grievance resolution at the lowest organizational level in the Army and Air Force,
- access to an independent third-party appeal process in the services,
- time limits for each stage of grievance processing in the services,
- adequate grievance data collection and performance evaluation in each service, and
- service members' knowledge and confidence in the grievance procedures.

We believe action by the services to integrate the existing chain of command and IG procedures into a comprehensive grievance system which is free of the above shortcomings would provide an improved framework for more efficient and effective handling of service members' grievances.

PROCEDURES TO PROMOTE EFFICIENT AND EFFECTIVE GRIEVANCE RESOLUTION

Grievance procedures should be composed of logical steps beginning with the immediate supervisor and progressing up the organizational chain. Immediate supervisors are more likely to have firsthand knowledge of problems which may lead to grievances, and can be more timely and effective in grievance resolution. The services advocate grievance resolution at the lowest possible level in the organizational

chain of command and service members most often perceive elements of the chain of command as the means to be used for grievance resolution. Our 1977 survey of enlisted service members disclosed that 390 respondents in our sample of 710, had at one time or another filed a grievance. When asked which grievance procedures they used to seek resolution, most respondents said they used either the chain of command, the local commander, or the senior enlisted advisor. The following table provides these results by service:

Percent of Responses Showing
Procedure Used in Grievance Resolution

<u>Procedure</u>	<u>Army</u>	<u>Navy</u>	<u>Air Force</u>	<u>Marine Corps</u>
	------(percent)-----			
Chain of Command	36	43	33	40
Local Commander	23	18	21	16
Enlisted Advisor	20	26	16	27
Inspector General	9	0	14	5
Other	12	13	16	12

Our review at selected installations disclosed that the Navy and Marine Corps have implemented procedures which require service members to initiate grievances with the immediate supervisor, and if necessary, provide for escalating the problem through successive levels of the organizational command chain. The Army and Air Force, however, promote two separate grievance procedures--the chain of command and the IGs. We found that these two procedures overlap and sometimes result in inappropriate IG involvement in handling grievances which should have been resolved through the chain of command. Consequently, duplication of effort occurs, the potential for delays in grievance resolution becomes more likely, and supervisors and commanders are precluded from fulfilling a basic command responsibility--maintaining the welfare of their troops.

The Army and Air Force IG grievance procedures are promoted to military service personnel as an alternative to the chain of command. Army and Air Force regulations do not require service members to first attempt grievance resolution through the command chain. Regulations provide that a service member may file a complaint with an IG at any time and at any level. Army and Air Force IG told us that service members sometimes come to them with minor or personal problems, without first seeking assistance from supervisors and commanders. They also stated that there are instances where service members contact more than one IG office and, in some

cases, congressional officials as well with their grievances simultaneously. IG officials said that most of the cases they handle can be resolved within the chain of command, and usually are referred back to command officials for resolution.

We reviewed IG case files at five Army and two Air Force IG offices in an attempt to determine how frequently service members contact the IG (1) without first going through the chain of command, (2) with matters that should have been resolved within the chain of command, and (3) at several levels within the IG structure. Case files, however, did not always provide such information, and as a result, we were unable to develop comprehensive statistics. We did, however, identify cases in which inappropriate or unnecessary IG involvement appeared to have occurred. The following are some case examples:

- Service member asked if the Army green T-shirt is authorized for wear. (Army Reserve Unit)
- Service member complained that hospital personnel call patients "chow hounds." (Air Force Hospital)
- Service member wanted to protest results of a basketball game. (Air Force Installation)
- Service member complained that an office building was too cold to work in. (Army Installation)
- Service member wanted an apology from a hospital physician for the rude treatment received. (Air Force Hospital)
- Service member complained he was not receiving quarters allowance. (Army Division)
- Service member complained he was released from his job because of a low performance rating. (Air Force Installation)
- Service member requested information on how to apply for a compassionate reassignment. (Army Division)
- Service member was dissatisfied with duty assignment. Problem was resolved at the unit level without IG followup. (Air Force Installation)
- Service member thought bus transportation should be provided to his duty post. IG staff encouraged the

complainant to see the unit sergeant when voicing a similar problem in the future. (Army Installation Headquarters)

--Service member complained he was unhappy with assignment and that he was being improperly used in his line of work. Subsequent to filing the case with the IG, the complainant discussed the matter with his commanding officer and admitted he had acted prematurely. (Army Reserve Unit)

INDEPENDENT THIRD-PARTY APPEAL PROCESS

A workable grievance procedure should provide service members with access to an independent third-party appeal process if they are not satisfied with the organization's decision or if they believe the organization has not been responsive. This independent party can resolve factual disputes and compare the facts with the applicable laws and regulations to determine if a grievable offense has occurred and, if so, the proper redress. Such third-parties must be sufficiently insulated from the control of either the grievant or management. The need for an independent third-party grievance appeal process in the military services was indicated by our 1977 questionnaire results showing lack of satisfaction by some enlisted service members with the chain of command. About 30 percent of the 687 respondents rated the chain of command as "not too good" or "poor" in resolving grievances or complaints. Results by service showed that 35 percent in the Army, 32 percent in the Marine Corps, 27 percent in the Air Force, and 28 percent of the respondents to our questionnaire in the Navy rated the chain of command as "not too good" or "poor" in resolving grievances.

In reviewing the services' procedures, we found that the Army and Air Force provide service members with access to a third-party through their IG network. However, the independence of IGs is questionable and service members can contact one or more levels in the IG hierarchy at any time rather than initially acting through the chain of command. As a result, Army and Air Force IG systems function more as an alternate grievance channel rather than a structured independent third-party appeal process.

The Navy and Marine Corps do not provide service members the degree of access to the IG as do the Army and Air Force. Although service members may personally contact Navy and Marine Corps IGs during periodic command inspections or may write or telephone them, Navy and Marine Corps

IGs' involvement in the grievance process is minimal because of the Navy and Marine Corps emphasis on the chain of command.

The independence of the services' IGs in handling service members' grievances was raised in the 1977 congressional hearings on military grievance procedures. Members of the subcommittee expressed concern that since IGs are directly responsible to and evaluated by the commanders on whose staffs they serve, their objectivity and credibility might be compromised. The possibility of removing the IGs from command control rather than establishing new independent complaint offices outside the IG structure was discussed. Both congressional and military officials, however, were not in favor of establishing new complaint offices if the existing IG grievance channels could be modified to make them independent of command control.

The idea of removing the IGs from commander control to achieve greater independence is not new. Similar actions, for example, were taken in establishing the Air Force Audit Agency and the Air Force and Navy military defense counsel. If the Inspectors General can not be made independent of command control in grievance matters, than another means, such as an impartial adjudicator will be needed. IGs or adjudicators must be sufficiently insulated from the control of either party so that their decisions will be credible.

TIME LIMITS FOR PROCESSING GRIEVANCES

A workable grievance system should provide for a prompt response to the user. When reasonable time limits are established unilateral delays which detract from the system's credibility can be reduced. Additionally, the perception an individual has of a grievance system is influenced by the timeliness of the response received. Time limits assist management in increasing the awareness of and commitment to operating responsive systems.

The four services have generally not established time limits for the entire grievance processing cycle, including appeal. We could not fully assess the overall timeliness of grievance resolution in the services because of (1) the absence of servicewide performance data and (2) the prohibitive effort that would have been required to review a sufficient number of grievance cases, where such documentation would be available. The Marine Corps is the only service that has published a specific time limit for processing grievances through the chain of command. The Marine Corps procedures require the commanders, or persons

in charge, to meet with the service member not later than 72 hours after his initial request insofar as practicable. In processing the request through the chain of command, the procedures state that there should be no more than 24-hour delay at any echelon.

The Navy grievance procedures require that requests should be forwarded "promptly" through the chain of command to the appropriate level for decision, and that no person will fail to act on any request or appeal for which he is responsible. These procedures did not specify time limits. The time objectives practiced on such requests by the Navy organizations we visited varied. Some chain of command officials said cases were handled within 24 hours and other said within 72 hours.

Army and Air Force officials told us that there are no servicewide time limits for processing grievances initiated through the chain of command, nor is documentation of grievance processing required.

In the formally established IG systems of the Army and Air Force, only the Air Force procedures set forth a specific time limit of 7 workdays for responding to the service member. This limit, however, applies only to wing and base level IGs. No limits were established for grievances referred to higher level IGs. The Army IG system provides that IGs are to ensure that the complainant receives a prompt response.

In our 1977 survey, service members were asked if they believed their grievances would be handled quickly by various grievance procedures. With respect to the chain of command and IG grievance procedures the following responses were given:

	<u>Percent of response</u> <u>concerning quick action</u>		
	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>	<u>Not Sure</u>
<u>Chain of Command</u>			
Army	43	28	29
Air Force	40	28	32
Navy	40	27	33
Marine Corps	48	33	19
<u>Inspector General</u>			
Army	44	9	47
Air Force	49	12	39
Navy	9	13	78
Marine Corps	40	25	35

Based on our work and questionnaire results, we believe the timeliness of grievance handling can be improved. We also believe that by establishing and enforcing time limits for each phase of grievance handling, the services can improve processing performance and perceptions of the grievance procedures.

GRIEVANCE DATA COLLECTION AND EVALUATION SYSTEM

Adequate data collection and evaluation can help management in monitoring the performance of a grievance system, and in ensuring responsiveness and credibility. Data collection and evaluation procedures provides management with the means to (1) assess the performance of personnel responsible for operating the grievance system, (2) assess the accomplishments of the grievance system in resolving grievances, (3) identify and resolve faulty organizational policies or procedures, and (4) evaluate grievance workload data and resource expenditures to ensure proper allocation of staffing and other resources for grievance processing.

We found that the services are not collecting or evaluating grievance system data. Grievance data collection is either nonexistent, incomplete, or inaccurate, and little use is made of data which is collected in evaluating system performance. As a result, the services can not comprehensively and objectively judge the efficiency and effectiveness of grievance processing through the chain of command and IG procedures.

There are no specific servicewide procedures requiring organizational command chains to collect essential grievance information for servicewide reporting and evaluation. We found that in the Navy and Marine Corps, forms are used to process grievances through the chain of command, and that case logs are kept by units in the Marine Corps. There are, however, no servicewide requirements for higher level reporting in the Navy and Marine Corps of grievance case statistics by organizational unit. For the Marine Corps, such reporting may be requested of subordinate units at the discretion of a higher level commander. We were told that there are no servicewide requirements in the Army and Air Force for documenting and reporting cases processed through the chain of command.

USER KNOWLEDGE AND CONFIDENCE IN GRIEVANCE SYSTEM

User knowledge and confidence in the grievance system are essential for its success. User knowledge is enhanced

by well-documented system procedures which are highly visible in organizational units and periodically explained to service members. Confidence in the system is enhanced by the knowledge of favorable involvement with the system either through personal experience or feedback on the experience of others. Positive perceptions of fairness and timeliness and use of the system without fear of reprisal develops user confidence.

We found that insufficient documentation specifying processing steps and responsibilities in grievance handling exists in the Army, with respect to the chain of command, and the Navy with respect to the IG procedures. Service officials interviewed at various installations stated that efforts are made to brief personnel on grievance procedures and to publicize them. However, little or no data is available within the services for assessing the success of these efforts as perceived by service members. The only personnel attitude surveys we found were one by the Army in 1975 concerning the IGs mission and two by the Air Force in 1973 and 1975 on its IG complaint system. These surveys as well as our own in 1977, showed (as discussed on page 3) that a significant lack of knowledge and confidence in grievance procedures existed in the services.

As cited earlier, about 26 percent of the respondents in our 1977 survey believed that they had not received an adequate explanation of their service's grievance procedures. The results by service were 19 percent in the Marine Corps, 21 percent in the Air Force, 28 percent in the Army, and 36 percent in the Navy. We also found significant degrees of uncertain or negative perceptions about the fairness, and consequences of filing a grievance through the chain of command and the IG as shown in the following table:

	<u>Fairness</u>		<u>Fear of reprisal</u>	
	<u>No</u>	<u>Not Sure</u>	<u>Yes</u>	<u>Not Sure</u>
	----- (percent) -----			
<u>Army</u>				
Chain of command	19	27	25	20
Inspector general	12	37	20	36
<u>Air Force</u>				
Chain of command	18	32	21	26
Inspector General	9	33	13	29
<u>Navy</u>				
Chain of command	15	28	26	18
Inspector General	7	78	12	60
<u>Marine Corps</u>				
Chain of command	19	24	39	14
Inspector General	22	35	22	39

These surveys highlight that further efforts to enhance service members' awareness and confidence in grievance procedures are needed. We believe that (1) changes suggested earlier in this chapter to bring the services' procedures more closely in line with attributes of a workable system, (2) well-documented grievance procedures specifying processing steps, time limits, case documentation requirements, and the responsibilities of grievants and persons involved in grievance resolutions, and (3) increased efforts to publicize grievance system procedures and accomplishments will help increase service members awareness and confidence.

We also believe that periodic personnel attitude surveys on the grievance procedures coordinated by the Office of the Secretary of Defense and performed by the services are essential to monitor service members understanding and perceptions of grievance procedures effectiveness.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSIONS

The adequacy of grievance procedures in the military services have been subjects of increasing concern by members of Congress and military officials. Surveys have revealed that uncertainty or negative attitudes about military grievance procedures exist among many service members queried. There is general agreement that responsive well-functioning grievance procedures can help enhance the quality of military life, productivity, morale, and confidence in military leaders.

By comparing elements of the primary military grievance procedures--the chain of command and the IGs--to those identified by personnel experts and us as essential in a workable grievance system, we found that shortcomings exist which negatively impact on the effectiveness of these procedures to resolve service member grievances.

We agree with the services' basic philosophy that grievances should be resolved at the lowest possible level in the chain of command. We believe that involvement and participation by the chain of command in grievance matters is important and should be highlighted. Of the services, the Navy and Marine Corps procedures come closest to this philosophy. The Navy and Marine Corps, however, do not provide service members with the degree of access to the IGs that the Army and Air Force provide for appealing disputed decisions or chain of command inaction; thus grievances may be buried in an ineffective command chain or service members must go outside the services to congressional or other high level government officials.

The Army and Air Force through their IG network provide service members with ready access to an alternate procedure for grievance and problem resolution. Service members, however, are not required to initiate grievances through the chain of command and may petition one or more levels in the IG hierarchy at any time. Thus, in some cases the chain of command is precluded the opportunity of resolving grievances at a low level without outside intervention. This can be detrimental to harmonious working relations in a unit and can contribute to the erosion of service members confidence in their leaders. Since grievances received by an IG are usually directed back to the chain of command for resolution,

unnecessary involvement of the IG, particularly when multiple levels have been petitioned by the service member, results in inefficient use of staff resources.

We believe that the services need to develop a system in which grievances are initiated through the chain of command within established time limits and the services' IGs function as an independent third-party appeal channel for disputed decisions or chain of command inaction. To promote the credibility of the third-party appeal channel, we believe that the IGs involved in grievance resolution should be removed from local command control and should be readily accessible to the service member after he has attempted to use the chain of command. If IG independence can not be assured than another means such as an impartial adjudicator will be needed. IGs or adjudicators must be sufficiently insulated from the control of either party so that their decisions will be credible.

To ensure the efficient and effective handling of service members' grievances, grievance data needs to be collected and evaluated. This action would enable tracking of grievances through the entire process and serve as an important tool for holding parties involved in grievance resolution accountable for expeditious and conscientious attention to service members' grievances. Uniform, periodic surveys of service members' understanding and confidence in the grievance system should be an integral part of the evaluation procedures. We believe system understanding can be enhanced by well-documented and publicized grievance system procedures.

Recognizing that each of the services has varying missions and organizations, we are not proposing that the services necessarily implement a single standardized grievance system, but rather that each service develop and implement its own system which contains the elements considered necessary for a responsive and workable grievance system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend that the Secretary of Defense direct the services to adopt a grievance system comprised of the chain of command and IG channels. Particular emphasis should be placed on:

- Using the chain of command as the primary source for initial problem resolution, preferably starting with the immediate supervisor and progressing, if necessary, to the commander with final decision authority.

- Using the IGs only as an independent third-party review of disputed grievance decisions or chain of command inaction; the IGs would serve as the vehicle for taking grievance appeals to higher command levels when needed. If IGs can not be made independent of command control in grievance matters, than another means, such as an impartial adjudication will be needed.
- Establishing time limits for each stage of processing grievances and appeals.
- Developing and evaluating grievance data on formal cases processed and their outcomes and periodically assessing organizational performance in grievance handling and resources expended.
- Conducting attitude surveys periodically to measure service members' understanding and perceptions of the grievance systems' effectiveness.
- Increasing service members' awareness of and confidence in the grievance system through well-documented and publicized procedures and reports of grievance system success.

AGENCY COMMENTS

GAO did not obtain formal agency comments. However, the report was discussed with Department of Defense and service representatives (except Army who declined to comment). These representatives generally agreed with the report and the merits of most of the recommendations. They all disagreed however, with GAO's recommendation that if Inspectors General continue to be used in the grievance process that they be made independent of command control. Service representatives believed that the Inspectors General need not be made independent in order to provide fair and equitable treatment in responding to grievances. The issue of the independence of Inspectors General is not new. During Congressional hearings in 1977, concern was expressed that since most Inspectors General are directly responsible and evaluated by the commanders on who's staff they serve, their objectivity and credibility might be compromised. GAO believes that perception of independence is a very important aspect of a third party in resolving grievances, and that currently the Inspectors General are not generally viewed as independent.

Some service representatives also questioned the benefits to be achieved by developing and evaluating grievance data on formal cases processed and their outcomes. GAO believes that collecting and tracking grievance data is important in order to identify the systemic causes of grievances and to hold parties involved in grievance resolution accountable for expeditious and conscientious action in responding to service members' grievances.

CHAPTER 5

SCOPE OF REVIEW

We focused our work on grievances and complaints handled through the chain of command and the IGs in the Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps. We studied the services' regulations and policies applicable to grievance processing, reviewed grievance case files, and interviewed military personnel involved in resolving service members' grievances and problems. We evaluated attitude surveys results of the Army and Air Force on their IG procedures and included the results of our 1977 survey made of enlisted service members' perceptions of military grievance procedures.

We did work at the following locations:

- Fort Hood, Killeen, Texas;
- Fort Sam Houston, San Antonio, Texas;
- Randolph Air Force Base, San Antonio, Texas;
- Lackland Air Force Base, San Antonio, Texas;
- Pensacola Naval Air Station, Pensacola, Florida;
- Navy Surface Forces Pacific Fleet, San Diego, California;
- Marine Recruit Depot, San Diego, California;
- Camp Pendleton Marine Base, Oceanside, California;
- Department of Army, Washington, D.C.;
- Department of the Air Force, Washington, D.C.;
- Department of the Navy, Washington, D.C.; and
- Office of the Secretary of Defense, Washington, D.C.

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