

Reservist Families Cope With Bills, Chores, Lonely Homes -- as Well as Worry

By *LUCIANA LOPEZ*
Capital News Service
Friday, April 25, 2003

WASHINGTON - Victoria Lengsfeld was at a Honda dealership having her car serviced when the funerals of two soldiers killed in Iraq came on the television.

Lengsfeld thought of the soldiers' families and began crying.

"I couldn't even watch it, I had to get up and walk away," she said.

Lengsfeld knows what it's like to say goodbye to a family member called off to war. Since March 18, her husband, Martin, has been stationed at Aberdeen Proving Ground, waiting for the call that could send him to Iraq any day.

Across Maryland, the families of reservists are coping with the holes left behind by suddenly absent loved ones, reworking reduced budgets, taking over unexpected household duties and struggling with single parenting.

Because active-duty military pay is often lower than civilian salaries, families of activated reservists sometimes find their household budgets slashed, said Shelley M. MacDermid, the co-director of the Military Family Research Institute.

"It's mostly because military pay ranges are narrower than in the civilian world," MacDermid said. Military salaries "top out sooner."

The Moreira family of Burke, Va., has felt budget cuts keenly. Since seeing wife and mother Susan off to Fort Dix, N.J., on Jan. 24, Cesar Moreira, his 12-year-old daughter and 20-year-old son have been dealing with the financial fallout.

"She's a contractor, so she makes less money, much less money as a staff sergeant," Moreira said.

Moreira -- who was himself a soldier during the first Gulf War -- now balances the family books with less money flowing in to their Northern Virginia home.

Susan Moreira, originally detached to Fort Meade and later sent abroad, has since been transferred to Fort Gordon, Ga. There, she was told that she will have to find a place to live off base -- a mixed blessing for the cash-strapped Moreiras.

"The good news is she's out of harm's way," Cesar Moreira said. But the bad news is that the family will now have to pay for two households, two sets of bills, on an already-diminished income.

Another concern is taking over the household chores performed by the now-gone partner, said Jack Gordon, the spokesman for the 99th Regional Support Command of the Army Reserve. The 99th covers Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia and Washington, D.C.

"All the daily routines have to go on, and those all comprise little challenges, little earthquakes," Gordon said.

Imagine that a husband "not only went to work every day and brought home the bacon, he took the kids to little league, picked up the shopping list on the way home, mowed the lawn," he said.

"It's springtime now, there's yard work to be done," Gordon noted. "And all these little things, these little things add up."

Some of the biggest worries include the children. With one parent off to war, the parent left behind is both mother and father, said Barbara Wilson, the 99th's family program director.

Reservists' families include everything from a traditional nuclear family to "single-parent households where the parent is whisked away and now the guardianship takes over," Wilson said. "We try to encourage the reserve families to prepare for this, but how can you really prepare?"

For Lengsfeld, the pressures have been twofold: Besides their five children, the couple also own their own business, a contracting company for custom woodwork, in Dale City, Va. With Martin Lengsfeld gone, Victoria has assumed the roles of both single parent and business head.

A natural-born organizer and a self-described "social butterfly," Lengsfeld has apportioned her life carefully to handle the solo responsibilities.

"My stress level is higher," she admitted, "but it's manageable."

She has traded in her morning runs for client calls, getting up at 5:30 and giving up mental downtime. Yet, with the help of community support groups, she has kept the family on an even keel.

Still, like the day at the Honda dealership, she knows that things occasionally get to her.

"It comes out in little spurts," she said.

But that does not stop her pride in her husband or the military he serves.

"I love the military," she said. "I don't have any regrets."

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Top of Page

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