

## **How Army Families Fare in Love and War**

### Military Studies Deployment Impact On Home Front

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There's a decades-old bromide that makes clear what the U.S. military used to think of its conscripts' dragging around a spouse and kids from post to post: "If the Army had wanted you to have a family, it would have issued you one."

Today's all-volunteer military force can't afford to be so unfeeling. And so, as Operation Iraqi Freedom winds down, the Pentagon is pondering the performance of personnel who were far from the battlefield: the military family. How well spouses and children of soldiers weather the worries that come with a loved one's deployment influences how well soldiers fight and how many reenlist.

"Quite bluntly, the more smooth their domestic life is, the better soldiers they are," said Lt. Col. Ryan Yantis, an Army spokesman.

Just how anxiety over family issues affects performance and how the experiences of military families affect the ways soldiers view their careers are the subjects of several research projects.

Since January, the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research has been surveying 4,500 soldiers from Fort Bragg, N.C., who are deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq. The soldiers, most from combat units, filled out 13-page questionnaires before shipping out, and they will be surveyed several times after returning. Spouses also will participate.

"Soldiers do very unique things in combat," said Col. Charles Hoge, department of psychiatry chief at the institute. "To what degree do those . . . affect them and to what degree do they affect family members are some of the questions we're asking."

Supported by an \$8 million Pentagon grant, Purdue University's Military Family Research Institute studies the link between military quality of life and "job performance outcomes." The institute soon will begin gathering data for two studies: one on the experience of families during the frequent moves that define service life, and another measuring the commitment to the military shown by service members and their spouses. This week, it will launch a Web site inviting military families to contribute to an online deployment diary.

"It's a way for [them] . . . to get directly to us about what they think we should be paying special attention to," said Shelley M. MacDermid, co-director of the Purdue institute.

The health of the military family as a topic of research coalesced in the early 1980s, said Bruce Bell of the U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences in Alexandria. Studies showed that a spouse's satisfaction with military life directly affected retention.

The military didn't want to lose well-trained soldiers, so researchers set about trying to untangle the complicated mix of experiences and emotions that culminates in a decision about reenlistment. One of their findings: If both spouses like the Army, the soldier is likely to stay in. If both spouses dislike the Army, the soldier is likely to get out. And if only one likes it, it's better for the Army that it be the spouse.

"That shows a rationale for why, in addition to being nice to people, it's in the Army's best interest that it work with the spouses to try to make military life bearable and even happy," Bell said.

Much of the early studies were done by the U.S. Army Research Institute. The office traces its origins to World War I, when the Army needed a way to quickly administer intelligence tests to hundreds of recruits at a time. Today, the institute functions like an industrial psychology outfit, developing training techniques to boost soldier performance.

The large deployments during Desert Shield and Desert Storm gave social scientists a wealth of data. Some of it was troubling. The Air Force noticed an uptick in the number of airmen sent home to deal with family problems.

Army researchers learned that service in Desert Storm caused "marital satisfaction" rates to drop slightly. Seven months after the conflict, 76 percent of couples described themselves as satisfied or very satisfied compared with 81 percent prior to the start of Desert Storm. (An apparent spike in divorces also was noted, though Bell said further study revealed that many of those couples already had been experiencing problems and simply couldn't get divorced while one spouse was deployed.)

Papers with titles such as "Stressor, Stress Mediators and Emotional Well-Being Among Spouses of Soldiers Deployed to the Persian Gulf" and "The Redistribution of Responsibilities and Power in Army Families Following Operation Desert Shield/Storm Reunions" were presented at conferences and published in journals. They are among some 10,000 studies related to military quality-of-life issues lining the shelves at the Military Family Resource Center in Arlington.

The surveys, focus groups and regular monitoring of military family morale have led to changes. The Army's most visible family-support element -- a volunteer committee of spouses now known as the Family Readiness Group -- grew out of Walter Reed's examination of a Fort Bragg battalion deployed on a 1982 peacekeeping mission to the Sinai.

The Army now involves each unit's rear detachment -- the soldiers who remain in the United States to keep an eye on things when their comrades are shipped to the front -- in a family support role. They're in a position to know what's going on with the deployed soldiers and can update family members with accurate information. (Even these good intentions can have what one Army Research Institute report called "unexpected consequences." Some deployed GIs didn't appreciate a male soldier phoning their wives at home, even if the reasons were innocent.)

Even with such programs, the Army has room for improvement. While the percentage of spouses who are satisfied with the Army "as a way of life" has stayed relatively constant since 1987,

dissatisfaction with the "support and concern" shown to spouses and families by Army leaders is at its highest level in 16 years, surveys show.

The post-Cold War move from a "forward-stationed" military to one with U.S.-based units undergoing more frequent deployments could be particularly difficult for families, said University of Maryland sociologist Mady W. Segal. And, she said, it underscores the importance of figuring out the problems that families are likely to face.

Ripe for study from the latest conflict, said Bell, is the frequent communication by e-mail and phone that was a feature of the invasion of Iraq. "What is the impact of having the closer contact?" he said. "Has it really allowed the family to be closer to the soldier? Is that a good or bad situation?"

Segal said she's curious about the special concerns of military women who left behind their children while deployed recently in Iraq.

Although the two studies that Purdue's MacDermid is leading have been planned for months and don't include questions specific to Operation Iraqi Freedom, she said that slicing the data in different ways should reveal how the deployment affected families.

She knows the questions she'd like answered. "Which families are going to do the best over the challenge of a deployment or a move?" MacDermid wondered. "And how can we tell in advance who those families are going to be and make sure that the families who can use some help can get it?"