Family Support and Services in the Army's Active Component During Early Stages of Operation Desert Shield

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January 1991

United States Army
Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences
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# Abstract

This report summarizes an exploratory investigation of family services and programs supporting the families of soldiers deployed in connection with Operation Desert Shield. The report provides information on the status of such services and programs for the Active Component approximately 2 months after deployment. The findings of the report are based on reviews conducted by an interagency task force at four Army posts. The task force identified the following major issues related to family needs: (1) uncertainty associated with lack of information concerning the deployment; (2) inadequate financial resources; (3) difficulties concerning child care; and (4) lack of timely and reliable communication both within the Army and the deployed husbands. Resources available to families of deployed soldiers included formal and volunteer Army and community agencies, as well as relatives and friends of the families. On-post services were often provided through Family Assistance Centers. Rear detachment commands and Family Support Groups played an important role in some installations. Although we cannot generalize these findings, the results reported here will provide a direction for a follow-up of this exploratory investigation.

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<Note: The table and the form information are not relevant to the abstract and are not included in the natural text.>
The Army Family Research Program (AFRP) is a 5-year integrated research program that supports the Chief of Staff of the Army (CSA) White Paper on the Army Family and The Army Family Action Plans (1984-1990) by developing databases, models, program evaluation technologies, and policy options that help the Army to retain quality soldiers, improve soldier and unit readiness, and increase family adaptation to Army life. This report contains information collected by an interagency task force whose mission was to investigate and report on the status of support for families of soldiers deployed in Operation Desert Shield. The findings in this report relate to the Active Component of the Army.
FAMILY SUPPORT AND SERVICES IN THE ARMY'S ACTIVE COMPONENT DURING EARLY STAGES OF OPERATION DESERT SHIELD

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Requirement:

To conduct an exploratory investigation concerning the extent to which family services and programs were supporting the families of soldiers deployed to Operation Desert Shield approximately two months after deployment. This report deals with the identification of family issues in the Active Component (AC).

Procedure:

Members of an interagency task force interviewed family service providers, family members, and rear detachment commanders (using structured interview guides) at four posts that had deployed AC troops. Interviewers reported their findings in memoranda, fact sheets, and interview summaries. We used these documents to collect the information summarized in this report. We do not know to what extent the interviewees were typical of service providers at these installations, nor do we know to what extent the installations were typical of those that had deployed troops to Saudi Arab' a.

Findings:

The task members identified four major issues related to family needs. These issues were (1) uncertainty associated with lack of information concerning the deployment; (2) inadequate financial resources; (3) difficulties concerning child care; and (4) lack of timely and reliable communication with both the Army and the deployed husbands. The researchers found there were a number of resources available to families of deployed soldiers. Some of these resources were formal Army or community agencies and programs. Others were volunteer in nature, and still others comprised relatives and friends of the family members. On-post services were often provided through Family Assistance Centers (FACs). Rear detachment commands--although implemented differently in different locations--were important to family support, as were Family Support Groups (FSGs), which also varied in degree of activity and organization. In general, local communities were
extremely supportive of families. The very high degree of support provided by family service providers and active FSG volunteers made burnout a potential outcome for these people.

Utilization of Findings:

Although we cannot generalize these findings, the results will provide direction for any followup of this exploratory investigation.
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FAMILY SUPPORT AND SERVICES IN THE ARMY'S ACTIVE COMPONENT 
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Introduction

The Army provides programs and agencies that support Army families in times of need. Although these resources are available at all times, many families find this assistance of particular value during periods of deployment.

With the occurrence of Operation Desert Shield, the Army wanted to determine the extent to which family services and programs were supporting the families of deployed soldiers. Accordingly, the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel (DCSPER) tasked the Community and Family Support Center (CFSC) to create an inter-agency Task Force to investigate and report on the status of Army support for families in both the Active Component (AC) and the Reserve Component (RC). The Task Force comprised personnel from the U.S. Army Research Institute (ARI), the Walter Reed Institute for Research (WRAIR), the U.S. Army Personnel Integration Command (USAPIC), and the U.S. Army Chaplain Support Center. The purpose of the Task Force was to conduct an exploratory investigation that identified family issues of concern in Operation Desert Shield.

Method

Representatives of the CFSC and the Task Force selected units from five posts. The posts represented varied deployment experience, whereas units represented combat, combat service, and combat service support types. The RC units represented rural and urban areas in several different areas of the United States. The researchers conducted both group and individual interviews with some 120 service providers, 12 garrison/reserve leaders, 25 rear detachment commanders, 16 family support coordinators, and 38 family support groups.

The interviews generally lasted from about 45 minutes to up to two hours. Interviewers took notes (usually employing interview guides developed by ARI) and reported their findings in various memoranda, fact sheets, and interview summaries. The authors of this report used these materials to collect the information included here. This report contains findings based on the information collected at the four posts that had deployed AC troops. As we encountered few male spouses, this report is limited to information collected on female spouses.

Since Army points-of-contact (POCs) handled arrangements for interviews, we do not know to what extent our respondents were typical of service providers at those installations. In some cases, we visited only one of several Family Assistance Centers
(FACs) at the post. Hence we cannot generalize our results to all Army installations or even to those we visited. Also, our results are based on information collected relatively soon (within seven weeks or less) after deployment had occurred. Thus, we do not know to what extent our findings are valid for later stages of the deployment cycle.

Findings

Family Needs

The Task Force identified four major issues related to family needs. Most interviewees mentioned these needs, although not all families experienced the same pattern. The principal needs involved: (1) information concerning the deployment itself, (2) financial resources; (3) child care, and (4) timely and reliable communication with both the Army and the deployed husbands.

Uncertainty. Uncertainty about the length of deployment and the potential danger the soldier would be exposed to caused considerable emotional stress. This uncertainty also led to practical problems such as whether or not to leave the installation and return to one's home community where parents resided. Another source of uncertainty which led to high levels of stress was saying goodbye to the soldier more than once. The emotional turmoil caused by repeated farewells was great and caused families to react negatively to what they perceived as indifference on the part of the Army.

Our impression was that definite information concerning the length of deployment (even if deployment would be as long as a year), was preferable to not knowing. In mid-October, there seemed to be little the Rear Detachment Commanders or family service providers could do to alleviate concerns about this issue. Family Support Groups (FSGs) and other support (e.g., community support groups) were helpful in reducing some of the tension engendered by all problems, including this one.

Finances. Family service providers reported widespread financial problems, especially among families of junior enlisted personnel. These problems covered a range of situations: loss of the allowance for rations, inability of the spouse to budget, increased expenses for child care and overseas packages, etc. Some deployed husbands had held second jobs, and this source of extra income was no longer available. Because deployment had caused a recession in the vicinity of some Army posts, we found wives who had lost jobs because of the local economic downturn.

Army Emergency Relief (AER) and the Red Cross service providers were able to provide loans in some cases of financial need. The AER and Red Cross service providers mentioned to
interviewers that some spouses did not understand why they would be expected to pay back the money loaned to them. These unrealistic expectations caused distress for the spouses wanting money.

**Child care.** Child care became much more of a problem after husbands were deployed, as spouses had depended on their husbands for child care while they ran errands or volunteered their time in community activities. Another need reported by FSG leaders and family service providers was for "respite" care—i.e., for child care so that the mother could get away occasionally from the overwhelming responsibility of being a sole parent.

Neighbors, relatives, and FSG friends helped in providing occasional care. For daytime child care, Army posts may provide direct child care through Child Development Centers. Family Assistance Centers (FACs) may also have referrals for obtaining such care.

**Communication and information flow.** Spouses and service providers mentioned the importance of communication. This issue involved (1) mail and telephone contact with the deployed spouse, and (2) the flow of information from the Army to the families.

In most cases, mail was slow in both directions, and spouses could not understand why it should take three weeks or more for letters to be delivered. Some spouses numbered letters so that they could determine the amount of time that was required for delivery. However, a few spouses reported that mail was slow at first but had become more regular. Some FAX procedures seemed to be even slower than letters. When telephone calls were feasible, they were expensive. Spouses with husbands in rear locations were sometimes able to communicate with them quite regularly. In general, though, there were innumerable complaints about the difficulties of communicating with deployed soldiers.

Another problem area of communication was from the Army to the families. Spouses found that regular briefings (with multiple sessions to accommodate the schedules of families) were helpful in disseminating accurate information. It was our impression that such sessions helped alleviate the worries of spouses as well as to quash rumors. Rumors constituted some of the more upsetting events for Army families. Hence, an important function of RDCs and FSGs was rumor control.

**Resources for Family Support**

A number of resources existed for the families of deployed soldiers, some of which were Army or community agencies and programs. Other resources were volunteer in nature, located either at the Army installation or in the local communities. Relatives were often a support resource, especially if they if
They lived within a few hundred miles. Sometimes family members asked me to stay with the families of deployed soldiers.

**On-post services.** The posts experienced some drop in demand for services that involved face-to-face contact with soldiers (e.g., the drug and alcohol abuse programs). However, this was more than compensated for by demands to update and generate documents which became very relevant in the deployment situation (e.g., wills, powers of attorney, allotments, and other pay records). At one post, the Office of The Judge Advocate General responded to this increased workload by extending hours and obtaining volunteer help. However, this office reported that with the volume of work and scheduling difficulties resulted in their being unable to meet all of the needs.

Some posts attempted to meet the demands for services by consolidating family and related services into a 24-hour Family Assistance Center (FAC) operation which continued for as long as the demand continued. The services which were co-located in this fashion included: chaplain services, Army Emergency Relief (AER), food lockers, and pay and allotment functions. The physical arrangements and operations of the FACs varied from place to place. At some locations, this operation took place in a single building. In other places, different elements of the post (e.g., the Corps and Divisions) ran the separate operations. Having the family services located in a single place seemed to be the preferred arrangement. In one place where it did not exist, spouses recommended that the one-stop concept be implemented.

Even though the peak demand seemed to have abated by the time of our visit, most posts still offered 24-hour informational services through staff posted at their FACs. The main disadvantage to providing 24-hour service was noticeable staff burnout and the need to augment the staff with previously untrained personnel.

**Rear Detachment.** A rear detachment is the military group left behind to perform essential functions such as finance and accounting, mail clearing, and the like. Among these functions is family support.

The rear detachment concept was implemented differently in various locations. At one post, we found Rear Detachment commanders (RDCs) at the company level. (NCOs served as RDCs for the companies, a lieutenant for the battalion, etc.) At another installation, a major with a staff of nine people performed this rear detachment function at the division level.

An RDC is generally in regular communication with the deployed detachment. Some RDCs spoke daily with their battalion commanders in Saudi Arabia. One battalion commander's wife, for example, was in daily contact with the RDC. She obtained
Information for the Family Support Group and passed along to the

any family support problems the FSG had been unable to

solve. We believe this kind of contact and communication flow

as vital to relieving stress and helping to control rumors.

Family Support Group leaders. There was variation in the

ay in which the FSGs operated. We felt many key leaders were

lose to burnout. These women had their own concerns about their

ployed husbands and their children's adjustment to changed

ircumstances. Yet they found themselves with the equivalent of

ull-time jobs in supporting the other wives in the unit. In

ome cases, it was difficult to obtain assistance from the other

ives. ("The other ladies won't help us." "If we don't do it,

won't get done.") And some of the FSG group volunteers felt

fairly "used" when spouses for whom they were responsible

pected them to provide such services as transportation to the

cery store and medical appointments. Some posts make an

ort to help families to help themselves by providing training

uch as driving instruction and "powder puff" auto mechanics

lasses.

Community support. The local communities have generally

en extremely supportive. At one post, the Directorate of

ublic and Community Affairs (DPCA) (Marketing) handled

ontributions. In other instances, community organizations

vided direct support to families--e.g., support groups in the

hools for children of deployees or the provision of

ansportation by members of a church. A number of service

iders commented on the contrast between the substantial

upport by communities for the Saudi Arabia deployment and the

ack of community support during the Vietnam era.

Discussion

Members of the Task Force noted the many hours family

vice providers, rear detachment command personnel, and FSG

olunteers had been spending in their attempts to help Army

ilies. The level of effort among these people was extremely

igh, and burnout appeared to be a potential outcome.

In spite of the high level of effort, not all families were

atisfied with the support they received. We believe that this

isatisfaction sometimes occurred because of the spouses' un

realistic expectations. Some spouses believed that money from

he AER should be a gift and not a loan because their husbands

ad contributed to the fund. A few spouses apparently believed

hat the Army should provide services such as transportation

(e.g., to the grocery store) that the deployed spouse had

viously supplied.
Service providers believed the portion of the Army population that most needed help comprised wives of junior enlisted personnel. Because of their youth and inexperience (and, sometimes, because they were foreign-born), these spouses tended to have multiple problems and the fewest resources--both financial and personal--with which to cope.

As noted above, we cannot generalize the findings we have reported here. However, we expect these results will be useful in providing direction for a follow-up of this investigation.