

**STRATEGY
RESEARCH
PROJECT**

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**PARENTAL LEAVE OF ABSENCE:
TIME FOR THE NEXT STEP**

BY

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ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: Linda D. Christ, LTC, U.S. Army

TITLE: Parental Leave of Absence: Time for the Next Step

FORMAT: USAWC Strategy Research Project

DATE: March 1998

PAGES: 40

CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

Changes are needed in the Army's family policy to help retain quality soldiers during these times of high OPTEMPO and constrained training budgets. The option of a one-year, unpaid leave of absence would benefit the Army, its soldiers and their families. First, the Army would benefit because it would retain more trained, experienced, career soldiers who might otherwise leave the service. Better retention would ease the requirement to recruit and train additional soldiers. A one-year leave of absence would help maintain unit readiness because a deployable replacement could be programmed from the USAR to fill the unit vacancy. Filling the unit vacancy from the Army Reserve would assist in the "cultural integration" of the Active and Reserve Components while at the same time providing additional training for a Reserve Component soldier—a step toward Secretary of Defense Cohen's goal of a "seamless Total Force." Giving parents the option to stay home with their newborns for the first year would help soldiers balance career and family responsibilities, resulting in increased job satisfaction and, therefore, increased retention.

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PARENTAL LEAVE OF ABSENCE: TIME FOR THE NEXT STEP

The number one readiness issue [is] PEOPLE...Increasing PERSTEMPO adversely affects morale, retention, and readiness!

—LTG Thomas N. Burnette¹

One of the most significant challenges the Army will face of the next century is maintaining a qualified force, ready to deploy at a moment's notice. Since the Gulf War, units that have spent extensive time deployed have enjoyed very high rates of reenlistment. However, senior leaders fear that long family separations caused by repeated deployments may drive our most talented soldiers out of the Army, as during the Vietnam era. Since the drawdown began in 1989, the Army has faced a growing challenge keeping its units manned, trained, and ready.

Today's "typical soldier" is not the same as he or she was 20 or even 10 years ago—more soldiers are married, have children, are female, and are married to other soldiers than ever before. This means that the Army will have a more difficult time maintaining unit readiness as more and more soldiers are faced with family choices which pit career needs against family needs.

At the same time, challenges today and through the 21st Century require the leaner Army to attract high quality soldiers, to retain them for a full career to maximize the service's training investment, and to fully integrate the Reserve Components into a "seamless force." This study will outline the need for a change in Army family policy. First, this study will examine current perspectives and tomorrow's challenges, then outline the advantages for the Army and individual soldiers. Finally, this study will propose specific program criteria for granting soldiers the option of a one-year unpaid leave of absence for the care of newborn children and compare them to program criteria in other services and armies. Recognizing and addressing the family needs of

today's soldier will assist the Army in maintaining a highly-trained experienced total force capable of deploying worldwide when national interests demand it.

PERSPECTIVE

OPTEMPO/PERSTEMPO

Today's Army is different in many ways from the Army of the 1970s or 80s. First of all, it is busier than ever. As the nation enacts its revised National Security Strategy of global engagement, the Army must respond with continued deployments to "shape the international environment" and "respond to the full spectrum of crises."² Between 1986 and 1997, this strategy has led to increased participation in peacekeeping, humanitarian, and similar operations, resulting in a 16-fold increase in deployments, the highest Army operations tempo (OPTEMPO) since the Vietnam War.³ In addition to the over 100,000 soldiers normally stationed overseas, in 1997 an average of 33,152 active component soldiers were deployed away from home station each day.

And there is no end in sight. As the OPTEMPO increases in a smaller Army, the personnel tempo (PERSTEMPO), or amount of time each individual soldier spends deployed away from home station, increases as well. In 1996 Army PERSTEMPO reached the highest peacetime level in history, averaging 159 soldier-days per year across the operating force.⁴

This 69 percent increase in unit deployments since 1991, concurrent with a 24 percent decrease in end strength over the same period, has increased senior leaders' concern that the dramatically rising Army PERSTEMPO adversely affects morale, retention, and readiness.⁵ Secretary of Defense William Cohen acknowledged this very danger in his 1997 Annual Report to the President and Congress:

As participation in contingency operations becomes standard, units and personnel are increasingly deployed for extended periods on a recurring basis. These deployments have numerous effects on readiness...Extended deployments adversely affect morale and quality of life for the deployed personnel. This can affect both mission performance and retention rates.”⁶

Maintaining a force in which every soldier is available for worldwide assignment at all times is therefore more important than ever. The Army must ensure that time away from home station is shared fairly by all soldiers, that all do their part. At the same time, soldiers must be able to care for their families. Increased time away from home station has become an important concern of all soldiers, but most of all to Army men and women with young children.

Today's Soldier

Also, the people in the Army are changing. Men's and women's family and work expectations have become increasingly similar in the second half of the 20th century. Many women, like men, now marry, have children and also have careers. The fact that more military women are embarking upon a career with raising a family reflects a set of changing perceptions of family and work roles within the society as a whole. Abolishment of the draft and the creation of the All-Volunteer Force opened more opportunities for women in the Army. As a result, women make up a larger percentage of the Army today than ever before—14.6 percent.⁷

<i>Percentage of Women in the Army</i>								
1948-1972	1973	1980	1983	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
1-1.9%	2.6%	8.9%	9.8%	12.6%	12.9	13.3	14.2	14.6
Women's Army Corps Established	Aviation Training	Career Fields Opened	Direct Combat Probability Coding Established	Combat Aviation Opened	Risk Rule Rescinded	Increased Opportunities		

FIGURE 1 PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN IN THE ARMY⁸

The bottom line is that more soldiers than ever are marrying and having families—and more soldiers are marrying each other. Today, 63 percent of soldiers are married,⁹ compared to 54 percent in 1986,¹⁰ and 56 percent in the general population.¹¹ Of married soldiers, 13,500 (8.5 percent of the Army) are dual-Army couples, and 3.9 percent of soldiers are single parents.¹²

<i>Percentage of Married Soldiers 1996</i>			
	Male	Female	Total
Officer	80%	58%	77%
Enlisted	63%	47%	61%
Total	77%	61%	63%

FIGURE 2 PERCENTAGE OF MARRIED SOLDIERS (30 SEPTEMBER 1996)¹³

<i>Dual Army Marriages 1996</i>			
	Male	Female	Total
Officer	4.7%	43.3%	8.5%
Enlisted	5.1%	35.4%	8.5%
Total	5.0%	36.8%	8.5%

FIGURE 3 DUAL ARMY MARRIAGES (30 SEPTEMBER 1996)¹⁴

<i>Soldiers with Children</i>	
Average Number of Children: 1.9 per Soldier	
Officer	52.3%
Warrant Officer	74.3%
Enlisted Soldier	47.9%

FIGURE 4 SOLDIERS WITH CHILDREN (30 SEPTEMBER 1996)¹⁵

These trends indicate that more Army men and women are marrying and raising families, while serving in a smaller force that is deploying in peacetime at higher rates than ever before. The inescapable result is that soldiers spend more time separated from their families. Many of these soldiers are deciding to leave the service, choosing not to face repeated, long separations. Others are separated involuntarily because they cannot find suitable care for their children, as required in Army regulations. Army Command Policy (Army Regulation 600-20) requires all soldiers who have children under the age of 18 years and who are either single or part of a dual-service couple, to submit a written, working Family Care Plan. The plan identifies who will have temporary or long-term guardianship of their children should the parent be deployed or mobilized; it likewise provides the legal authorizations necessary to do so. Family Care Plans are an essential part of military readiness. Failure to submit a working plan within a reasonable time is grounds for involuntary separation.¹⁶

Army Chief of Staff General Dennis Reimer expressed his concern about the impact that increased deployments and family separations will have on Army readiness:

I'm getting very concerned about the negative impact of back-to-back deployments...My overriding long-term concern is that we will burn [the soldiers who are being frequently deployed] out. What I am most concerned about is losing those high-quality people with experience and outstanding records. I think we're putting a lot of demands on the middle-grade officers, senior non-commissioned officers and the middle-grade NCOs, and those are the ones we've really got to be careful on. So we've got the dipstick in there to make sure we're not losing too many of those."¹⁷

High-Tech Army—High-Tech Society

Finally, the Army of the "Information Age" has become increasingly more technically oriented. The kinds of skills that are needed today require lengthy and expensive training and

years of experience to perfect. For example, Army helicopter pilots attend a 32-week Initial Entry Rotary Wing Course at a cost of \$200,544 per student.¹⁸ Later, each pilot transitions to a more sophisticated aircraft, such as the Apache (12 weeks, \$241,115), Blackhawk (6 ½ weeks, \$76,901), or Kiowa Warrior (11 weeks, \$188,438). After initial training, these new pilots need many flying hours to hone their skills and become proficient. While the Army continues to invest in high-tech training, civilian industry provides a constant lure to trained soldiers tired of repeated, lengthy family separations. To make matters worse, the currently healthy economy, the smaller pool of qualified applicants, and the competition with other services for qualified individuals make finding replacements for skilled soldiers who leave the service more difficult and costly than ever. To recruit one soldier, sailor, airman, or marine today costs the Department of Defense more than \$7,000—to say nothing of the costs of basic training, advanced individual training, and other schooling.¹⁹

CHALLENGES FOR THE NEXT CENTURY

One of the most significant strategic challenges the Army faces in the next century will be the maintenance of a qualified force of trained, experienced soldiers and leaders. As MG Leon J. LaPorte, the Assistant Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans, put it:

The readiness challenges [are to] attract and retain quality people, recruit and retain shortage MOSs, manage PERSTEMPO, [and] reduce the number of personnel in non-deployable status.”²⁰

The Army must accomplish all this despite a smaller recruiting and training budget, increased competition from industry for higher quality people, higher training costs, more deployments, and a higher percentage of soldiers with families. Last year’s recruiting statistics offer proof that the Army is struggling to meet its annual need for 80,000 recruits a year. Despite

downsizing, the Army last year had to reduce its goals by 7,000 recruits and lower standards in order to meet its recruiting objective. Up to 10% of recruits admitted were high school dropouts, twice the previous year's rate.²¹ The message is clear: the Army must do more to retain the quality people it has. It is becoming increasingly difficult and costly to replace them.

Retain the Family

A perceptive observer once said "you recruit the individual, but you retain the family." This statement acknowledges the fact that once an individual is on board, decisions to reenlist or leave the Army are based on two essential factors: job satisfaction and quality of life. With so many soldiers now married, family attitudes count even more heavily in career decisions for a larger segment of the Army. Because quality of life is so important to soldiers in making that crucial decision to remain in the Army, improvements in this area can effectively encourage highly qualified and technically proficient soldiers to reenlist, despite tempting offers from civilian industry.

One way to approach this challenge is to develop new policies realistically addressing the new set of conditions in today's Army—policies that will provide soldiers more flexibility and choice in taking care of their family responsibilities despite the heavy deployment schedule which will continue into the foreseeable future. One option worthy of consideration is a one-year leave of absence for new parents. Properly designed, such a program could provide many advantages for both the Army and for soldier-parents of newborn children.

Gulf War Provides Focus

The Gulf War was the first major conflict to surface childcare issues in the demographically-changed Army. According to the Washington Post, the Gulf War left children

from 16,300 single parents and 1,200 military couples without the “the single parent who usually cares for them or without both parents.”²² These numbers so alarmed the American public that Congress established a bipartisan commission to determine the “effect policies on assignment of servicewomen have upon military families, children, and the larger American society.”²³

The Commission made several recommendations to the Department of Defense, most of which have not been adopted. Among other policies, the Commission recommended that one parent of a dual-service couple be involuntarily separated from the service; that single parents be precluded from deployment; that single parents with children up to two years of age be assigned to nondeployable positions or be discharged, with the opportunity to re-enter the Service without loss of rank or position when their children reached a certain age.²⁴ While these recommendations were meant to correct the “Gulf Orphan” problem, implementing them would have clearly hampered the Army’s ability to maintain sufficient deployable, trained soldiers. The policies would also have been unfair to soldiers without children and would have negatively impacted peacetime careers. For example, reassigning soldiers with family responsibilities to nondeploying units would give them an advantage over single soldiers, many of whom already feel “disadvantaged” by the Army’s system of taking care of families—more pay for having dependents, family housing, and other benefits.

In addition, individual members of Congress sought on their own to bring about policy changes to solve the “Gulf Orphan” problem. One of the most favorable outcomes for both military mothers and their newborns occurred in August 1991, when Congress directed that the Defense Department defer military mothers from assignments necessitating separation from their infants until four months after the birth of a child.²⁵

Other proposed legislation, although well intentioned, did not pass. Congresswoman Barbara Boxer of California offered legislation to prevent both of a child's parents from being sent to a war zone. Her Military Orphans Prevention Act would have given DOD discretion to exempt one parent, at the request of the military couple, from serving in a combat zone. However, such a policy could create severe career implications for single parents, particularly women, because, as the National Women's Law Center pointed out, "decisions regarding enlistment, training, and promotions rest on the individual's ability to perform during wartime."²⁶ Although there are more male single parents in the Army, a larger percentage of women are single parents. Therefore, in addition to making women's fight to succeed in the military even harder, such a provision would have been a nightmare for the readiness and availability rates in units where women serve in great numbers, such as combat service support units.

ARMY LEAVE OF ABSENCE PROGRAM

With all these forces at play, the time has come for the Army to update its family policy to ease the stress of increased OPTEMPO to help retain more families. The Army needs a program that will allow career officer and enlisted parents the option of taking a one-year unpaid leave of absence upon the birth or adoption of a newborn child. To fill the gap and promote the Total Army concept, the USAR would provide an active duty replacement for the soldier. At the end of the leave of absence, the soldier-parents would be allowed to return to uniform with no loss of seniority.

A one-year leave of absence would provide benefits for both the Army and the individual soldier. The major advantages of such a program for the Army are increased readiness, retention of quality soldiers, and improved USAR training and integration. The major advantages for

parents are flexibility and choice. The soldier would benefit from the opportunity to care for his or her family without the constant worry of family separation. Through this option, the Army can help parents achieve balance between their Army careers and their family responsibilities. This greater flexibility could well mean the difference between retaining a quality soldier, or having to recruit and train his or her replacement.

ARMY ADVANTAGES

Unit Readiness

Of all the advantages of a leave of absence program the most important is improved military readiness. A one-year parental leave of absence would be of sufficient duration to enable the Army to provide a replacement from the Army Reserve, something not possible today. The Reserve Component replacement would maintain unit readiness, while the Active Component/Reserve Component integration would likewise produce a better-trained Reservist with more active-Army experience.

Subsequent to Operation Desert Storm, policy was initiated to prevent the deployment of women who have recently given birth until four months after the child's birth.²⁷ However, none of the services has a policy today which requires the replacement of women in deployable units. Under current policy, these soldiers are replaced only when their units are actually required to deploy, forcing units to deploy with a last-minute replacement who has not trained with the unit. At best, this make-do policy is risky; at worst, it severely detracts from readiness.

Seamless Total Force

Assignment of a Reserve Component volunteer to a one-year active tour to replace a soldier on parental leave would solve this problem. The replacement could be programmed

immediately upon approval of the application for parental leave. Besides creating a "win-win" situation for all concerned, this solution fits well into Secretary of Defense William Cohen's goal for Reserve and Active Component integration. In a September 1997 letter to senior Defense Department leaders, Secretary Cohen emphasized the military's increasing reliance on the Reserve Components since the end of the Cold War. He asked senior defense leaders to work together to achieve a "seamless Total Force" in order to

create an environment that eliminates all residual barriers—structural and cultural—for effective integration within our Total Force. ...Our goal, as we move into the 21st century, must be a seamless Total Force that provides the National Command Authorities the flexibility and interoperability necessary for the full range of military operations. ...We must continue to work towards the principles of Total Force and achieve full integration of the Reserve and Active components.²⁸

There is considerable enthusiasm for using Reserve Component soldiers and officers to replace those on extended leave of absence. Brigadier General Gary C. Wattnem, USAR, Commander, 3d Corps Support Command (CONUS), noted RC support for such a policy:

There are soldiers out there in the Reserve Components that have both the time and the talent for just this kind of mission. In fact, we do this already to support the Active Component. If we use the proper channels--through the USARC and FORSCOM--[PERSCOM] can put out the job-specific mission, so that we can get to the talent in the [Troop Program Units] TPU's as well. It would benefit both Components.²⁹

Recently, the Office of the Chief, Army Reserve, announced that it is exploring a similar concept. Called Reserve Associate Support Program (RASP), the program would place Army Reserve soldiers in active Army units facing shortages in specific skill areas. Following two years of active duty, the Reserve soldier would return fully trained to his or her unit, benefitting both components.³⁰

SOLDIER ADVANTAGES

A Soldier-Mother's Story

Consider the case of a new soldier-mother who would be the most likely parent to take advantage of parental leave. After six weeks postpartum convalescent leave, the mother must find suitable daily childcare with hours compatible with her military duties, including early morning physical fitness training formations and similar obligations. Most institutional caregivers will not accept children under the age of 10 weeks, which complicates her task.

In addition, the Surgeon General and other health care specialists are encouraging mothers to breastfeed their babies for the health and wellbeing of both mother and child.³¹ The American Academy of Pediatrics recently published a report strongly recommending that mothers begin breastfeeding within one hour of the baby's birth and continue 8 to 12 times a day for 12 months—quite a challenge for any mother, working or not.³² Scheduling time to nurse while fully engaged in an Army career is as difficult to maintain over time as it is critical to the health of the newborn. The soldier-mother's constant worry is that she might be required to go on temporary duty or field duty, or deploy.

She faces other challenges as well. The new soldier-mother must learn to care for her child, most often without the support of close family and relatives because of geographical separation. The new mother must also meet military weight and fitness standards once her pregnancy is over. She must be able to pass the Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) and meet Army Screening Table Weight standards within 135 days after termination of pregnancy.³³ Current Army policy stipulates that a soldier is nondeployable during pregnancy and for four months following the birth of her baby. This means that by her child's fifth month, she must have

lost any excess weight gained in pregnancy and returned to normal fitness standards. In addition to her daytime caregiver, she must also have made arrangements for full-time childcare, in the event she has to deploy.

Career or Family?

The one-year leave of absence to care for a newborn child would ease many of the challenges the new mother faces while providing advantages to the Army as well. The leave of absence would protect a mother's Army career by allowing her uninterrupted time to recover from pregnancy and care for and nurture the newborn without the worry of deployments. It would resolve the issue of finding suitable care for a newborn child. In addition, this program would encourage senior, highly trained and experienced soldiers to stay in the service, rather than force them to sacrifice their careers to raise a family properly.

The highly publicized case of Lieutenant Emma Cuevas, the Army Black Hawk helicopter pilot who sued to get more time off work to breast-feed her infant daughter, is a case in point. Some soldiers are demonstrating a willingness to give up an entire career to spend the first formative months or years with their child.³⁴ When the Army has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to train a pilot—in addition to training received at the Military Academy at West Point or through ROTC—service leaders expect and deserve a reasonable return on investment. Lieutenant Cuevas ended up leaving the Army. Had she had the option of a one-year leave of absence, perhaps her situation might have turned out differently, to the advantage of both the Army and the officer.

PROGRAM OUTLINE

Proposed Eligibility Criteria

A parental leave program must be carefully designed to ensure that it serves the needs of the Army as well as its soldiers. A pilot program might be designed based on the following criteria.

The leave of absence option should be offered only to soldiers on a second or subsequent enlistment—an indication of the soldier-parent's long-term commitment to a career in the service. First-term soldiers attrit at a high rate—last year approximately 37 percent of soldiers did not complete their first enlistment. Moreover, during the first term, the Army has not yet made a sizeable training investment in the soldier beyond Basic and Advanced Individual Training.

Although a case may be made for restricting a “maternity” leave of absence to women, such a program could and should apply to either parent. Both the Army and society have changed since 1974 when former Director of the Women's Army Corps, BG Mildred C. Baily, stated:

No matter what you say about equal opportunity, you cannot deal with the situation of an expectant father and an expectant mother in the same way. Mothers have a role in child rearing that is different from fathers and we have to think about the effect this has on mission readiness and our ability to be available for worldwide assignment.³⁵

Indeed, there are obvious physical and cultural differences between men and women that are recognized and accommodated by Army regulations. For example, women can be separated for pregnancy, can wear earrings, use umbrellas, and have different standards of physical fitness. These regulations—and the obvious fact that only women have babies—could provide a reasonable precedent to support a “women only” program. However, in today's world—and today's Army—offering a “special benefit” to women would appear to unfairly advantage them

over male soldiers. This would be tough to sell to Army policymakers who want to keep the playing field as level as feasible.

So why shouldn't the program apply equally to men? Some would argue that because the number of men deploying is greater, their impact on the Army is greater. Therefore, supporting such a program equally might not be feasible. However, the intent of the program is to improve readiness and to provide more choice for all soldiers with children so that they will choose to stay in the Army. The issue is to balance not just today's needs, but tomorrow's as well. If taking one year off at no pay to care for a child is what a soldier is willing to do, then the Army should support it.

Men today participate more in the upbringing of their children than ever before. In this overwhelmingly male Army, the largest number single parents are men. In addition, a leave of absence taken by the soldier-father in a dual-military couple would allow parents the option of selecting which parent's career to support and which to place on hold. Dual-military couples already make that choice when working out joint domicile assignments. The soldier-mother would therefore have an equal opportunity to focus on her career, confident that her newborn child would be cared for by a loving parent who is not subject to military deployment or field duty. Availability of quality childcare is a current national issue. Parents are justifiably concerned about leaving their children in the care of strangers. The soldier-father should be afforded the same opportunity to care for his infant.

Approval of a request for extended leave of absence should be based on the needs of the Army. Short-term needs for a critical specialty must be balanced against long-term needs for the soldier's particular expertise. For example, immediate needs for those in critically short

specialties requiring long training times, such as language specialties, should be balanced against the continuing need for that specialty next year and the year after. A pilot program should target the career fields with the biggest long-term retention challenges and the highest training costs.

Balancing short- and long-term needs also means that soldiers who are candidates for separation (including retirement-eligible personnel) should not be eligible, since they could not be counted on to return to duty after their leave was concluded. Army leaders must study personnel trends to determine which categories of soldiers with an active duty service obligation, other than a reenlistment contract, would qualify. Policy decisions involving those who owe the Army time for training, tuition assistance, promotion, or other reasons must be carefully studied and weighed before the policy is finalized.

Current Time on Station requirements for PCS should apply. Upon return to active duty, soldiers would be considered for assignment consistent with the needs of the Army and reassigned through the regular assignment process. This would ensure continued focus on the changing needs of the Army.

Limits should be placed on the number of times a soldier could make use of the program in a career—at least until the Army has had time to study the effects of a one-year absence. Allowing unlimited use of extended leaves of absence would cause soldiers to miss out on training and experience, so skills would degrade. Further, parental leave could be perceived as a device to avoid “undesirable” unit assignments. After a trial period, the results of the program should be analyzed to determine if longer or repetitive leaves could be allowed.

Tracking and accounting for soldiers in this new category is critical to effective personnel management. Transferring program participants to the Standby Reserve for administrative and

accounting purposes would ensure that the soldier can fulfill the intent of the leave of absence, but remain subject to recall to active duty only in the most extreme national emergency—full mobilization.

Program Costs

Costs for a leave of absence program would be relatively low. The leave would be unpaid. The time would be considered "neutral;" it would not count for pay purposes, retirement, time in grade, or time in service. The soldier would leave, then return to where he or she had left off one year earlier. The soldier would be transferred to the Standby Reserve for accounting purposes and would therefore receive no medical benefits or other privileges not available to members of the Standby Reserve. Close coordination with the Army Personnel Command and the Total Army Personnel Command would be required to maintain accountability.

Because an Active Component soldier would be transferred from active status to the Standby Reserve, and an Army Reserve soldier of equivalent grade and specialty brought onto Active Duty, the military pay costs would be neutral. Each Army Reserve volunteer would also be authorized a Permanent Change of Station (PCS) move upon activation and one upon returning to Reserve status at the end of the tour of duty. The average cost of a CONUS-to-CONUS PCS move is \$9,135 for an officer and \$5,185 for an enlisted soldier.³⁶

Permanent Change of Station could be handled one of two ways for Active Component parents. These soldiers could be required to return to active duty at the same installation, and therefore not require a move. However, upon separation to the Standby Reserve, the soldier-parent could receive reassignment orders to their subsequent duty station. The soldier could

move at any time during the year to the next duty station. Either way, the costs would be the same as they would have been without the leave of absence.

Likely Participants

Since the proposed leave of absence is unpaid, soldiers most likely to take advantage of the program would be those with a military spouse. Soldiers married to another soldier would continue to be financially supported by and considered a "family member" of their military spouse. Based on their status as family members, they would continue to receive housing as well as medical, commissary, and other benefits entitled to civilian spouses. For this group, transition would consist of getting a new ID card, DEERS and TRICARE enrollment, and becoming a member of the Standby Reserve.

Soldiers with civilian spouses would be the next most likely to take advantage of such a program. If the soldier and civilian or military spouse have been geographically separated, the soldier could take advantage of the leave of absence to work with his or her assignment branch to obtain an assignment close to the spouse's location.

Junior-grade enlisted soldiers and junior noncommissioned officers who qualify (second or subsequent enlistment) would be least likely to be able to afford a year without pay. Single parents in particular could ill afford a year off, so they would be less likely to use such a program.

PRECEDENTS

Allies

Offering an extended leave of absence to enable military parents to care for newborn children is not a totally new idea. Several of our closest allies provide similar programs for military fathers and mothers. Spain, Canada, Britain, and the Czech Republic, for example, all

offer generous programs for soldier-parents of newborn children.³⁷ Within the Department of Defense and Department of Transportation, there are also two similar programs, the program offered to cadets at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, and the U.S. Coast Guard's Care for Newborn Children Program (CNC).

West Point

For many years the U.S. Military Academy at West Point has had a policy that supports unpaid leave of absence for pregnant cadets. The Military Academy recognizes that "the rigors of the Academic, Military, and Physical Programs in the cadet environment are incompatible with the demands of pregnancy or parenting."³⁸ The policy offers the choice of unqualified resignation or medical leave without pay for a period of up to one year, after which time "she will be reinstated to an appropriate Class."³⁹ Since the cadet may resume her training where she left off, such a policy safeguards the Army's investment in the individual while enabling the individual to realize her commitment to the Army as a future career. Although there is no "readiness issue" here, both the Army and the individual win.

U.S. Coast Guard

A model program can be found in the U.S. Coast Guard. In response to a Women in the Coast Guard Study Group recommendation, in 1994 the Coast Guard began allowing officer and enlisted parents to take an unpaid leave of absence for up to two years upon the birth or legal adoption of a newborn child. The leave must begin within 12 months of the birth of the child and may extend up to 24 months and applies to either parent. At the end of the absence, individuals may return to uniform with no loss of seniority. The Coast Guard Personnel Manual declares that

the Care for Newborn Children Program offers “flexibility and choice,” which are indeed its two major advantages.⁴⁰

The Care for Newborn Children Program is designed to consider both the needs of the service and the individual. While either parent or both may take advantage of the program, approval is based on the needs of the service and the individual’s service record. Coast Guard members in shortage specialties, for example, may be disapproved, along with those with an active duty service obligation. Coast Guard members on CNC leave are not replaced in their units, however.

<i>U.S. Coast Guard Care for Newborn Children Program Participants By Grade</i>			
Grade	Male	Female	Total
E3	0	1	1
E4	37	32	69
E5	33	37	70
E6	10	10	20
E7	0	1	1
O2	0	1	1
O3	2	14	16
O4	2	4	6
O5	0	1	1
Total	84	101	185

FIGURE 5 COAST GUARD PARTICIPANTS BY GRADE AND GENDER⁴¹

Although relatively new, the Coast Guard considers their program a success. In 1996, 48 of those scheduled to return to active duty actually did so, for an overall rate of return of 76 percent. As of March 1997, there were 149 participants in the program. Of the 77 who were

expected to return to duty, 52 actually did so, for an overall return rate of 68 percent. Coast Guard officials anticipate that the rate will stabilize between 60 and 70 percent.⁴²

The Commandant of the Coast Guard is currently considering expanding the CNC program. Changes under consideration would remove the restriction of the leave of absence to the care of only newborn children (up to 12 months old). Lifting this restriction would allow active career Coast Guard (over four years service) to take leaves of up to two years to care for a child, regardless of the child's age. For example, a parent could request a leave of absence to care for a child involved in an automobile accident and requiring extended, round-the-clock care.⁴³

<i>U.S. Coast Guard's Care for Newborn Children (CNC) Program Results 1996</i>				
	Program Participants	Expected to Return to Duty	Returned to Duty	Percent Returned
Men	50	20	18	90
Women	81	43	30	70
Total	131	63	48	76

FIGURE 6 CARE FOR NEWBORN CHILDREN PROGRAM RESULTS 1996

<i>U.S. Coast Guard's Care for Newborn Children (CNC) Program Results 1997</i>				
	Program Participants	Expected to Return to Duty	Returned to Duty	Percent Returned
Men	63	29	20	69
Women	86	48	32	67
Total	149	77	52	68

FIGURE 7 CARE FOR NEWBORN CHILDREN PROGRAM RESULTS 1997⁴⁴

Of the 185 Coast Guard members who have taken advantage of the CNC program, 45 percent were men and 54 percent were women, despite the fact that women represent only 9.3 percent of the US Coast Guard. Officers represented 12.9 percent of participants, with enlisted

members making up the other 87 percent. The 161 enlisted participants were equally divided between men and women (80/81). Only four of the 24 officer participants were male. Female officers made up 12.9 percent of the participants and were five times as likely as officers to take advantage of the program (20 of 24). These results are consistent with expectations based on the traditional role of women in child rearing in our society and can be expected to apply to a similar program within the Army.

<i>Analysis of US Coast Guard Participation in CNC Program 1997</i>						
	Men		Women		Total	
	Male Strength	% of USCG	Female Strength	% of USCG	Total Strength	% of USCG
Officers	6,401	92.0	560	8.0	6,961	20.5
CNC	4	2.1	20	10.8	24	12.9
Enlisted	24,375	90.3	2,607	9.7	26,982	79.5
CNC	80	43.2	81	43.8	161	87.0
Total	30,776	90.6	3,167	9.3	33,943	100
CNC	84	45.4	101	54.6	185	100

FIGURE 8 ANALYSIS OF U.S. COAST GUARD PARTICIPATION IN CNC PROGRAM 1997⁴⁵

THE NEXT STEP

Personnel readiness depends on maintaining units with sufficient soldiers with the proper skills, fully trained and ready to execute the mission. Attrition, on the other hand, is the Army's nemesis. Not only does it reduce service strength and increase personnel turbulence, but it also robs the service of its training investment in people who are hard to replace, especially when money is tight.

The Army's future depends on its ability to recruit, train, and retain quality people. Given increasing deployments and the large percentage of married soldiers, quality of life becomes a vital element in retaining quality personnel. Retention of quality soldiers, however, is dependent in large measure on sustained career satisfaction and, more importantly, soldier and family satisfaction with the military environment. Helping Army families balance their responsibilities to both family and country is important to this effort.

Today's political, economic, and demographic circumstances require the Army to do more to keep its trained, professional work force. These same pressures have already driven private industry—the Army's greatest competitor for personnel—to provide creative ways to assist parents with children to continue to work during and after pregnancy in order to keep training costs, workforce turbulence, and absenteeism down.

While civilian programs are not always compatible with the military's particular needs, one program that could be adapted by the Army is the Coast Guard's innovative unpaid leave of absence designed to assist parents during the first critical year of a baby's life. With some modifications, the Army can have a program of its own designed to retain experienced career service members and targeted to the most critical retention challenges. The costs of military training are rising. Unit readiness for the long term is at stake. Now is the time for the Army to take a bold, new step.

Words: 5,967

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