CHAPTER 12

Military Families and the Armed Forces

A Two-Sided Affair?

RENÉ MOELKER AND IRENE VAN DER KLOET

This chapter focuses on theories concerning military families and family support arrangements. We will deal with the ways in which spouses cope with separation from their loved ones and with the organizational response to the needs of families. Coping and organizational response will be dealt with in more detail in sections on the genesis of family support groups, greedy institutions, family stress, social support networks, and marital reconciliation. The theories presented in the sections are illustrated with research findings and experiences of army wives.

INTRODUCTION

A Personal Experience

The telephone rings. Will it be him? I almost do not dare pick it up. I watch the clock: it is almost one a clock in the morning (my friend has the habit to call late, . . . or is it something common to all soldiers?). "Hello, honey." Yet, it is him. With difficulty I manage to control my emotion. My "Hello" back comes out with a broken voice. "It's good to hear your voice and to talk to you". The connection is perfect. It's like he's just across the street with our neighbors. We talk about how things went and next we say "goodbye". I feel uncomfortable. I liked talking to him and hearing that all is well, but at the same time this short conversation brings emotions to the surface that are disagreeable. I miss him so very much. (Schipper, 2000, p. 33)

RENÉ MOELKER • Royal Netherlands Military Academy, 4800 PA, Breda, The Netherlands
IRENE VAN DER KLOET • Royal Netherlands Military Academy, 4800 PA, Breda, The Netherlands
The Problem: The Burden of Deployments

This personal experience Marrit Schipper shares with us serves as an introduction to an evaluation study on the family support system of the Royal Netherlands Army and the experiences of spouses during deployments. She herself was at the same time a researcher and spouse to an officer who was on a peacekeeping mission in Bosnia. If anything, this personal account of emotions puts the finger right on the problem. Military families carry a heavy burden, especially when they endure a separation from the military spouse for 6 months.

In some countries it will perhaps take some time, but most armed forces and governments are aware of the problem and recognize it in their policies. In The Netherlands this recognition became official in 1993 when the army made "family support" an issue in their "mission statement." It literally says: "The Army guarantees fair and trustworthy care for its personnel and pays special attention to the needs of those whose duties take them abroad, and their families." In the most important policy document on Armed Forces by the Ministry of Defense (Defensienota, 2000) good intentions were formalized and translated into budgets:

Deplogments... implicate a major responsibility for the Ministry of Defense. The MoD is obligated to provide support to soldiers and their family before, during and after the deployment... The MoD will take additional measures to lighten the care for the family by the spouses in the absence of the deployed soldier and will make financial reservations for the amelioration of family support.

The magnitude of the problem is easy to see. The rate of rotations is 1:2, meaning that units that have completed a deployment of 6 months have 1 year to recuperate. During this period of recuperation the units are not available for deployment. However, there are many exercises to keep up military skills. A lengthy "mission oriented training" precedes every new deployment. During exercises and training the soldiers are in "the field" or in a training facility and are not available for their families. This means that the period away from home exceeds the 6-month deployment by, perhaps, 4 months or more. The number of deployments is such that the organization has trouble staffing the battalions that are sent on missions. In 1999, of a total of 70,000 personnel (including civilians) for the Armed Forces, 36,650 service men have been deployed, and 6,525 of these 36,650 have been on deployments for several times (two times or more). In total the number of deployments equaled 47,100\(^1\) (Tweede, 1999–2000). The bottom line is that every serviceman, unless for a very good reason, is or will be sent on a peacekeeping or peace-enforcing mission. They will be sent on mission not once, but continuously during their whole career.\(^2\) Those who refuse to go are certain to lose their job.

These cold numbers are one of the causes of the emotional pressure that is experienced by the military and their families, a pressure that was so very well put into words by Marrit Schipper. This brings us to the problem dealt with in this chapter and to the title "a two-sided affair." The general question that runs through all sections below is "How do military families, and spouses in particular, cope with the burden of deployments, with the burden of being separated from their husbands and coparents?"

---

\(^1\)This number includes soldiers who were deployed two, three, or even four times.

\(^2\)Military who serve as instructors or are on staff at the Central Organization in The Hague operate under a slightly less severe regime, but they also can be sent on missions abroad. Mostly these are observer missions.