
Defense Report

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The Young Soldier—He Can't Afford to Get Married

There has been abundant comment from Capitol Hill and elsewhere on the fact that military pay has increased markedly over the past ten years. A World War II private who was paid \$50 per month finds it remarkable that today's recruit starts with a base pay of \$374. Even acknowledging the effects of inflation that seems to be a big jump.

The basic difference, of course, is the rationale under which our armed forces exist today. When we take a young man or woman into the ranks now we hope they will stay beyond their first enlistment and pay a career dividend in return for the training they receive. And as long as the new enlistee stays single and lives in the comfortable new barracks that are available on most military installations he or she is in good shape.

But they see their civilian friends getting married, having children, buying cars and doing all the things our society associates with getting started in the adult world. The young service member wants to do the same thing but finds it difficult.

To begin with, the new enlistee is not authorized government family housing. Congress long ago dictated that this benefit be limited to married personnel with over four years' service and in enlisted grade E-4 or higher. This means that the young family must find a home in the civilian community, often many miles from the military installation. This immediately presents a second problem—transportation. Most young military people cannot afford to buy a reliable car and pay for insurance and gasoline while paying high civilian rents. The military member often tries to solve the problem by becoming a daily hitchhiker, frequently arriving at his duty station late and returning home at unpredictable hours. Without transportation he and his family are also cut off from the potential saving of commissary and post exchange shopping.

A recent Army survey revealed that 137,000 enlisted personnel "moonlight" at another job to make ends meet. This is 17 percent of the entire Army! In addition many young wives also find work if they have no children or if public day care facilities are available.

Some young military couples manage to survive financially, many of them with help from food stamps. But even the most frugal have little insurance against a financial disaster like a broken-down car or the illness of a working wife.

We certainly cannot consider going back to the "Old Army" practice of forbidding young soldiers to marry. If we are to have a professional, Volunteer Army we must see that the married first-term enlistee can live economically and prudently without going into debt. Their families should be entitled to the same support they will begin to receive during their second enlistment.