
Defense Report

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Single Parents—Society Presents the Military with a Problem

One of the phenomena growing out of the trend toward greater individual freedom is the single parent. Unmarried men and women are being permitted to adopt children, the spiralling divorce rate creates more and more one-parent households and there is far less stigma applied to a single woman who has a child and chooses to rear it.

As a microcosm of our society, the military establishment shares in this situation. Military commanders have always been exposed to the problems of a single male parent whose situation was created by the death of a wife or by being given child custody following a divorce but only recently have single female Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines been permitted to remain on duty after giving birth to a child. The services were determined that single mothers would be given the same opportunity to continue to serve that has long been available to single fathers.

In concept this is a good, common-sense policy but in the relatively short period it has been in effect a number of realities have arisen. First of all, a female service member who has a child is lost to her organization for an extended period of time. During that absence her duties must be performed by other people and in a unit with a high percentage of female members this compression of the numbers available for full duty can work severe hardships. A 1977 Army survey showed that seven percent of its enlisted women were single parents compared to one percent of enlisted males.

It is difficult for a male commander to be completely objective about this. Any remark he might make that adversely compares the utility of female members to that of males automatically brands him a chauvinist despite the fact that his primary interest is in accomplishing his unit's mission. One Army division commander in Germany recently asked a congressional investigator what he was supposed to tell female soldiers who arrived at a tactical alert area with their babies. Should he send them back to the base camp or let them continue to their tactical position? The quandry would be even more acute if the alert were a real one, not just a practice.

The Army hopes to be able to improve the availability of day care centers and other facilities that will make it easier for a single soldier to care for a child while still performing his or her full share of duty. But in spite of this effort and the Army's best intentions to reflect society's standards there will always be a serious question about the propriety of soldiers being taken away from their assigned duties to care for children.

Should the military services be so intent on reflecting our civilian society that their military capability suffers?