
Defense Report

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When Military Families Can't Go Overseas, It's Another Blow to Morale

When Congress passed the Defense Authorization Bill for the current fiscal year (1980) it approved language that would require substantial reduction in the number of families accompanying service personnel to overseas assignments. The reasons cited for this reduction were the cost of moving and supporting the families and the potential risk of their becoming a problem if hostilities occur. The legislators turned a deaf ear on arguments that the cost of moving families within the United States while their sponsors were assigned overseas is just about the same as it would be if they were permitted to proceed to the foreign duty station.

Congress dictated a ceiling of 325,000 military dependents overseas, to be achieved by 30 September, 1980. This represents a reduction of about ten percent from the number now living in foreign countries with their military sponsors. The Department of Defense has, in turn, allocated the Army a share of 168,000 of the total. Approximately 42 percent of the Army, or 325,000 soldiers, is on duty overseas at any given time and about half the members of our volunteer force are married. Even if all our overseas soldiers had only a single dependent, the potential number of family members who would want to follow their sponsors on foreign duty reaches 162,500 before any children are considered. Realistically, the potential total for the Army alone is probably in excess of 350,000.

Admittedly, we have substantial numbers of troops in places like Korea where the bulk of the soldiers serve a short 12-13 month tour and whose families cannot join them, but the minimum tour for a soldier in Europe without his or her family has been two full years—a long time to be separated. Soldiers whose families are sent to Europe or other "full tour" areas stay there for three years.

The Army will offer an alternative that it hopes will soften the impact of the new ceiling, including a plan to offer married soldiers an 18-month tour in Europe without their families. The service must strike a balance between unaccompanied tours short enough to maintain morale and long enough to support combat readiness. No soldier, after all, can instantly become a functioning member of a combat team. There is an inescapable period of learning. The task is to prevent the shorter period of assignment, with its greater turnover, from contributing to lower combat readiness.

Our soldiers are spending more and more time overseas with ever-shorter periods of stateside duty between deployments. The stresses of a military career are hard enough on soldiers' families without the added threat of more unaccompanied tours or lengthened delays in the families' travel to join their sponsors. The money to be saved by imposing the new ceiling is not worth it. The congressional concern over the risk to the families is overstated. The future impact on morale of repeated and extended family separations could add further to the growing problem of retaining skilled soldiers.