
Defense Report

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Soldiers with Children but No Spouse — Things are Tough for Everyone Concerned

A soldier's family has never had a bed of roses. There have always been frequent moves from one station to another and long periods of separation when the family had to stay home while the soldier served in some uninviting place overseas. Children born to military families often miss the continual love and guidance of both parents, even when the soldier in the family is officially at home but working long hours or on extended duty in the field. Also, there have always been some military families which, because of death or divorce, had only one participating parent.

But changing societal standards have had a major impact on the number of military families in this last category. In addition to the one-parent families created by death and divorce, we now have a large number created by the birth of children to unmarried parents. Today the Army has 20,000 soldiers in its ranks who have children but no spouse to care for them. There is still another group composed of families in which both parents are soldiers. Both types of families can usually cope reasonably well with the day-to-day stateside routine with the judicious (but often very expensive) use of babysitters or day-care facilities, but even at a stateside post an extended field training exercise can cause a lot of problems.

Overseas, the problems are magnified tremendously because our soldiers are there, primarily, to be ready to fight. Soldiers in Germany, for instance, ordered out on a tactical alert, are not sure if they will be coming back to their home base in a matter of hours, days or, if the alert becomes the real thing, may not return at all.

In a recent computer exercise to test the Army's ability to respond in an emergency, the exercise staff had to wrestle with a decision about sending single parents overseas as part of a reinforcing unit. Because there was no iron-clad assurance that the children would be cared for adequately, the exercise staff decided it had to hold these parents out of the overseas shipment. That meant that replacements had to be found before the unit could be brought to full strength again and, of course, those replacements would not have had adequate time to train with the unit before being committed to combat.

In realization of this problem, the Defense Department recently withdrew a proposed directive that would have required the services to enlist sole parents of minor children if they were otherwise qualified. When selective service was used in the past, single parents of minor children were never called for induction. But the Army, pressed to fill its ranks with volunteers and to bend its traditional standards to conform with a more tolerant societal view of parenthood without marriage, is caught in a very tight spot. Our understrength Army must make the best possible use of every soldier in its ranks and it cannot afford the luxury of having 20,000 people whose availability would be suspect at a time of crisis. It should have the power, both legal and moral, to discharge any soldier, including one partner to an all-military marriage, regardless of rank, whose availability cannot be guaranteed because he or she has children to care for.