
Defense Report

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When Families Can't Accompany Soldiers Overseas — Another Penalty for Serving Your Country

There was a time not too many years ago when military families looked forward with pleasant anticipation to an overseas assignment. It meant a chance to travel in countries they might otherwise have never seen, to have cultural contacts with people they might have never met and, perhaps most important of all, it meant a chance for a family to stay together through a substantial period of time.

Many of the positive aspects of an overseas tour have now vanished, due primarily to the inflation-driven devaluation of the U.S. dollar. Military families stationed overseas now find it difficult to take care of basic needs, much less to travel or have cultural interchange. The scope of the problem is broadened by the fact that we now have a much higher percentage of married personnel in our volunteer military ranks (almost 60 percent of the Army, for instance). As the percentage of married service members has increased so has the number of dependent spouses and children who expect to accompany the service members on duty overseas.

The growing size of the dependent population has put heavy demands on support facilities and greatly increased transportation costs. There is also some concern in Congress that the presence of large numbers of dependents in Europe may jeopardize the conduct of our defense should a Warsaw Pact invasion occur.

At any given time, about 40 percent of the Army—about 309,000 soldiers—are on overseas assignments. Assuming that, like the rest of the Army, this group of soldiers is 60-percent married, the potential number of dependents eligible to go overseas would be 185,000 spouses and at least that many children. Of course, some soldiers are serving in areas unfit for family life and there will always be some families who cannot or will not travel overseas.

But last year Congressional action forced the Department of Defense to limit the number of Army dependents overseas to a total of 168,000. No gradual phasing was allowed so the Army had to take drastic action to send some overseas families home early, and to substantially delay the departure of families whose soldier-sponsors had already left for overseas assignments. Children had to be taken out of school in mid-term, families who had already moved out of their homes in anticipation of immediate departure had to scramble to find temporary lodging, at their own expense, for an unexpected and indefinite period of separation. The morale of soldier and dependent alike was shattered. Hundreds of cases of legitimate hardship were created. Married soldiers found still another reason to doubt the wisdom of staying in the Army.

If Congress wants a volunteer Army it must recognize that it will be a *married* Army and do whatever is necessary to provide a reasonable quality of family life. Arbitrary actions like the ceiling on families overseas defeat the intent to maintain an effective fighting force.