
Defense Report

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The Quality of Life for Soldiers and Their Families—It Can Build or Tear Down Morale

Once the nation committed itself to an all-volunteer armed force it inescapably moved in the direction of promoting careerism. The services recruit most of their people for a minimum of three years, and many volunteers sign up for even longer service. They undertake military service at a time of life when most of their civilian peers are getting married and starting families. So many young soldiers try to keep pace with civilian friends that today's U.S. Army is more "married" than at any time in its history. This phenomenon has put great demands on the Army's ability to house these young families, particularly in overseas areas.

This problem has manifested itself in two ways: the Army's inability to build or lease enough family quarters to keep up with the need, and the lack of funds to properly maintain the family housing units the service already has. In Europe alone, the Army finds itself needing more than 8,600 family housing units to take care of the existing requirement. Congress has appropriated funds to lease almost 1,800 units and the proposed 1983 budget, if it is approved, would add 4,600 more leases and 313 more units to be constructed.

The lack of adequate funds has forced the Army to defer \$421 million worth of routine maintenance on existing family housing units, about one-third of that total applicable to family housing in Europe. And, of course, the longer that maintenance is deferred the greater the deterioration and the higher the backlog grows. Funds for improvements to existing quarters, designed to bring them up to contemporary living standards, have also been very short. The accumulated shortfall in alteration funding has grown to \$727 million, once again about one-third attributable to Europe.

Gen. Frederick Kroesen, who commands U.S. Army forces in Europe, recently told a congressional committee that duty in Europe is no longer the plum it once was. Many soldiers, particularly the younger ones, choose to leave their families at home and to serve a two-year unaccompanied tour rather than subject spouses and children to the kind of housing conditions they would face. The situation is grim; it is one that only lots of money can improve.