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Army Spouses Expect Reenlistment Problems

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CLARKSVILLE, Tenn. -- Patty B. Morgan's husband was fighting in Iraq with the 101st Airborne, and she was caring for two children by herself. Their lease was expiring and they had committed to buying a house across town, so she was going through with the move anyway.

One hot morning last July, as she was about to drive boxes to the new place, she walked outside, infant car seat in hand, and opened the garage door -- to find that her green Jeep had been stolen.

A few days later, she was told that her husband wouldn't be home by Labor Day, as she had expected, but would serve in Iraq six months more, for a total of a year.

"It was a hell of a week," Morgan said in her throaty voice.

Morgan's experience is part of a significant change in Army life brought about by the post-9/11 world: The extended, or repeated, deployments that have characterized the Army since then have intensified the burdens traditionally borne by military families. And most of the spouses who have remained behind are wondering how long the Army can keep it up.

This change is reflected in a recent poll conducted by The Washington Post, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University, and in dozens of supplemental interviews. The poll, the first nongovernmental survey of military spouses conducted since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, included more than 1,000 spouses living on or near the 10 heaviest-deploying Army bases.

While most of them said they have coped well, three-quarters said they believe the Army is likely to encounter personnel problems as soldiers and their families tire of the pace and leave for civilian lives.

Lt. Gen. Franklin "Buster" Hagenbeck, the Army's personnel chief, said in an interview that, overall, The Post/Kaiser/Harvard poll results seemed to reflect those of the service's internal surveys.

The findings come at a time when the Army is providing soldiers' families with unprecedented levels of support. Over the past 30 years, beginning with the end of conscription after the Vietnam War, the service became smaller, more professional -- and more married. By the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the military was caught flat-footed by the growing need to support soldiers' families during a major deployment.

In response, the Army built a robust network of family supports ranging from day care to counseling to legal help to instruction in Army basics, household finance and coping with stress. In addition, spouses can volunteer to watch over one another through Army Family Readiness Groups.

As Patty Morgan dealt with her crisis last July, she also drew on another common, and powerful, resource: her "military girlfriends" from nearby Fort Campbell, Ky. They swooped in, she recalled, to provide babysitting, transportation and relief from her volunteer duties with her Army Family Readiness Group so she could go ahead with her move and do the paperwork to replace the Jeep. "We have formed bonds," she said. "We're all family."

Hagenbeck said the Army is taking family concerns over deployments into account. "We recognize that as a major issue," he said. Yet since Sept. 11, 2001, the Army has been increasingly expeditionary -- that is,

based in the United States but prepared to take on a stream of new missions overseas. "That's the business we're going to be in for a while," said Col. Michael Resty, the garrison commander at Fort Carson, Colo. "Anybody who thinks differently is fooling themselves."

The strain on troops and their families has led some in Congress to advocate a big boost in the size of the active-duty Army, which stands at about 485,000 troops.

The Pentagon is planning to add 30,000 soldiers over the next several years, but before agreeing to further expansion, it wants to see whether the other steps it is taking will ease the strain. Most notably, the Pentagon is reorganizing divisions to expand the number of the Army's deployable brigades from 33 to 48. In addition, the Army has announced a new policy under which troops will serve longer tours at bases, permitting their families to put down deeper roots.

The question is whether those steps will be sufficient. "There's no way to know for sure," said Tom Donnelly, a former staff member of the House Armed Services Committee. Donnelly said he expects that 2005 will be "the make-or-break year," as some soldiers who have already served in Iraq for a year are sent back for a second tour.

In the meantime, repeated and unpredictable deployments remain Army spouses' biggest issue. In The Post/Kaiser/Harvard poll, a slight majority -- 55 percent -- said their spouses' current deployment had been extended longer than they expected. Of that group, more than a third said that had created "major problems" for them.

"It was a roller coaster," said Meg Davis, whose husband, a lieutenant in the 101st Airborne Division, spent the past year in Iraq. "Everybody said six months, so we were expecting August, worst-case scenario." Instead, her husband did not return home until February.

Of the spouses polled, 95 percent were women. Three-quarters had one or more children younger than 18. The same proportion had had a spouse deployed overseas since Sept. 11, 2001. A third of those whose husbands had deployed and returned said they expected another deployment in the next year. The poll did not examine the problems faced by the families of National Guard and Reserve troops because they are a far more difficult population to locate and survey.

Large majorities of Army wives said that coping with their spouses' deployment had been a problem, but that they were proud of their service to the country. Many resented media coverage that portrays them as not handling it well. "It's not fair to us, or to the guys over there, to say that we're all having nervous breakdowns, because we're not," said Holly Petraeus, wife of the commander of the 101st Airborne.

At the same time, some worry about the toll on their marriages, and far more worry about the emotional strain they see in their children.

There is almost one child -- a total of about 470,000 -- for each soldier on active duty in the Army. In interviews, mothers said the Iraq deployment has been harder on their children than it has been on them. In the poll, three-quarters said the deployment had created problems for their offspring, with more than a quarter characterizing the troubles as major. Two-thirds said their sons and daughters were "sad"; somewhat less than a third said their children were more aggressive or had trouble concentrating.

"When my husband deployed to Afghanistan, my fourth-grader, the light kind of went out of her face," said Amanda Hicks, whose husband is a pilot in the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment. Hicks and her fellow teachers at Ringgold Elementary School, the school closest to the gates of Fort Campbell, said their current students are notably fragile. "I have got the teariest class this year," said Debbie Sanders, a kindergarten teacher. "They just cry all the time."

While half of the spouses rated their own morale as high, less than a third rated the morale of the families around them similarly.

And even though they feel at least somewhat supported by their nonmilitary countrymen, the spouses do not feel particularly well understood by them -- not even by their own extended families. With the community of wives living on and around Army bases offering an attractive alternative, this generation has broken the long-established pattern of going back home for the duration of a husband's deployment.

"We have become a sorority of separation," said Anne Torza, wife of an Apache attack-helicopter pilot in the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment, "and I wouldn't give up my sisters for anything. You know that 'band of brothers'? We're a band of sisters."

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"It's been a rough, rough, tiresome year," said Jeniqua Knuckles, mother of three and wife of an artillery sergeant in the 101st Airborne Division who spent most of 2003 in northern Iraq.

That was what the women who did well tended to say. More than 40 percent of those with deployed spouses said the experience had left them depressed, and nearly 80 percent said they often felt lonely.

Family-oriented holidays were especially difficult: Candice Foster, whose husband is a staff sergeant in the 4th Infantry Division, said she left the Christmas tree up an extra two months with all her husband's presents underneath.

"The hardest part is going to bed and waking up alone, every night and day being alone," said Amy Greene, wife of a 3rd Armored Cavalry medic and mother of a baby born while her husband was in Iraq for the past year. "It's very hard, especially when you see all the happy families together and you know that your family may never be together again."

Although the possibility of death has become part of their everyday lives -- over the past year, 588 U.S. troops have died in Iraq -- the women do not talk about it much, at least not directly. Their avoidance was reflected in the cautious way some talked when asked about memorial services. Foster said she simply could not attend them. "I thought it was just too hard, with my husband still over there," she said. "It could be him."

Even when things are going well, their spouses' absence remains a source of chronic underlying tension, imposing a small daily tax on their psychic energy.

"It's always there," said Jennifer Trantham, wife of a Black Hawk helicopter crew chief in the 3rd Infantry Division, which returned from the Middle East last summer. There were whole days, she said, when she would hang around the house, "kind of hoping he will call." He has already been told to expect to redeploy to Iraq next year, she added.

Counterbalancing the daily burdens are not only the wives' Army and informal networks, but also their own sense of purpose. Three-quarters felt they were "doing something important," and more than eight in 10 said their spouses' deployment had made them more confident in their ability to take care of themselves and their families.

Diane Campbell, wife of a warrant officer in the 43rd Area Support Group, said that one night at a movie, her young daughter turned to her and out of the blue said, "My daddy's saving the world."

Many have eased their emotional load by getting out of the house and staying busy volunteering or taking on new projects. Some have blossomed, learning new skills ranging from changing tires to paying bills.

Ileana Arnold, wife of a motor pool sergeant in the 3rd Armored Cavalry, said that until last year she had always left home-improvement projects to her husband. But when he shipped out, she said, she began building a patio behind her house. That done, she moved on to a series of woodworking projects. When she began hammering and sawing, she joked, her five children began muttering things such as, "Daddy needs to come home *now!*"

From Kitchen to Battlefield

Technology -- not only 24-hour news, but also e-mail -- has kept this generation of spouses extraordinarily close to their husbands' lives. But that, they have discovered, is a mixed blessing. The Iraq deployment has been the U.S. military's first war fought in an interconnected environment, in which even front-line soldiers generally have access to e-mail and the Internet. "It's the 'kitchen table to the battlefield' war," Morgan said. "Something happens -- between cable news, the cell phone, the Internet, e-mail -- it goes back and forth instantly."

That speed can be vexing: Almost every wife seems to have gotten a predawn call telling her to turn on the television because the "crawl" on the bottom of the cable news screen was reporting that a soldier had been killed in the region of Iraq where her husband was posted.

To squelch rumors sparked by such reports, the Army has had each unit's Family Readiness Group quickly transmit information on events in Iraq. "When something happens, the phone tree lights up, so you're not sitting there watching TV trying to figure out if your husband is hurt," said Kristin Jackson, whose husband is a mechanic in the 101st Airborne.

But even when the news is that he is safe, she quietly added, it carries a pang of grief. "It still hurts, because it is someone's husband, and it is a loss in our family," she said.

About four in 10 spouses said they had had problems communicating with their deployed soldiers. But that number reflects more than anything the height of their expectations: Many of them grew up on instant messaging. At first, as units deployed to Iraq last spring, most had to write letters to communicate -- and for some, it was an unfamiliar exercise.

Hiccups in the mail compounded their worries. Tanya Metansingh, whose husband is a scout in the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment, mistakenly believed for some time that her husband had been wounded in the face twice, both times by shrapnel: Her mother-in-law received a letter about an incident in May, and a month later, as she was about to give birth, Metansingh received another -- not realizing that the second letter had simply been held up for four weeks.

Later in 2003, e-mails and phone calls from Iraq became more common, and something of a lifeline. Many wives said that, in recent months, they had received electronic communications three or four times a week -- including digital photographs of their soldier-spouses, which are especially meaningful for children who cannot yet read.

"Technology has made a huge difference," said Sonia Scott, whose husband, an Apache attack-helicopter pilot in the 3rd Armored Cavalry, spent the past year in western Iraq. "I think it's kept marriages together."

Given a close-up view of the war, two-thirds of the spouses said things were going well for the United States in Iraq. Only four in 10 said media coverage of the war was good, and even fewer approved of the

coverage of military families.

"Our soldiers are doing wonderful things, like painting schools, and they never see it in the newspapers," said Jeanne Koss, who works with Family Readiness Groups at Fort Carson.

Television news, the spouses said, acted like a powerful drug for them over the past year, reviled but craved. "It's a necessary evil," said Jean Patterson, wife of a senior sergeant in an engineering battalion that was in Mosul, Iraq, for 12 months. "We're addicted to it, we need the information -- but then we turn around and bash it."

Morgan said simply, "It can make you physically ill."

That was not an idle observation. Army counselors and others said that one of the leading indicators that a deployed soldier's wife is headed for trouble is that she takes hours-long wallows in the news. The problem was especially acute last spring, when all the broadcasts from correspondents embedded with front-line combat units made it possible to watch hours of coverage at a time -- a new experience for Army wives and everyone else.

Here, too, the wives were concerned about their children: The coverage tends to show the most violent aspects of the deployment -- firefights, helicopter crashes and the aftermath of bombings -- so children tend to assume that is what life is like for their deployed fathers. And coverage of casualties and funerals, many wives found, was insensitive, even rude.

One other thought hovered in the back of their minds: "Family members believe in the mission," said Jan McConnell, a youth services coordinator at Fort Carson. "But as you keep hearing press reports about how other people feel about Iraq, everybody wonders, 'Will the American public turn against the military?' "

Civilian Cluelessness

When Traci Lever, married to a platoon sergeant in the 3rd Armored Cavalry, had a fender bender not long ago, she mailed the damage estimate of $500 to the driver who had hit her. When the driver learned that her husband had just returned from a year in Iraq, he sent a check for $600 -- and enclosed a second one for $50 with the notation, "Dinner for two."

Despite such gestures, military wives see a gap between themselves and the civilian world. About 90 percent of spouses said they were satisfied with the respect the American public shows soldiers. But Davis, wife of the 101st Airborne Division lieutenant, spoke for many when she said: "The farther away you get from post, the less understanding there is."

Often, the spouses see good intentions thwarted by a lack of comprehension. Desaree Venema, whose husband has been gone for a year as a senior sergeant in the 4th Infantry Division, said that in her, nonmilitary neighborhood, residents have been supportive, shoveling snow and babysitting her daughters "when I have a bad day." But when they complain about a spouse having to go on a week-long business trip, she said, "I just about have to draw blood from my tongue" to stop from shouting at them.

"It's wonderful to put the red, white and blue Dixie Cups in the chain-link fence to show patriotism, but you need specific tools," said McConnell, the Fort Carson youth services coordinator. Civilians sometimes will say things such as, "It's good your dad can e-mail you because it shows he's alive," unaware of how scary it will sound to a child -- especially when the e-mail breaks down, said Mary M. Keller, executive director of Military Child Education Coalition, a nonprofit group.

Many wives said that even their own parents and siblings back home don't get it.

"I would talk to my parents" back home in Texas, said Marisela Martinez, wife of a 4th Infantry Division sergeant who was deployed to the Sunni Triangle until recently. "But they don't know what we're going through. I try to explain to my dad what I'm going through, and he'd say, 'Well, you signed up for this.' "

Coming, Going, Gone

There was only one point on which the spouses' views of the Army turned toward to the negative: About half said the Army had done a "not so good" or "poor" job of keeping them informed about the timing and duration of deployments.

When deployments were extended, spouses said, there were direct and painful consequences: Those whose husbands were gone for longer than expected were nearly twice as likely as the others to report that a child was having trouble at school or acting more aggressively. Extensions also sharply increased the percentage of spouses who reported feeling depressed and anxious.

"We are not a bunch of whiners," said Joyce Dolinish, wife of a commander in the 101st Airborne. "But the repeated deployments worry us."

Many Army wives did not sign up for that life. At Fort Carson, for example, the major unit is a brigade of the 4th Infantry Division, which had not seen combat since coming home from Vietnam in December 1970. And until 9/11, Army recruiters tended to dwell less on the adventure of Army life and more on financial incentives, such as education benefits.

The spouses who were interviewed estimated that one or two of every 10 wives take deployment very hard. "Their husbands will probably get out," Kristin Jackson said.

That sentiment is widely shared: About 76 percent of those polled said they believe the Army is heading for personnel problems as soldiers and their families tire of the post-9/11 pace and leave the service.

And yet, the same percentage said that, knowing what they know now about the Army, they would do it all over again.

What those numbers reflect, said wives and other Army insiders, is that the Army is adapting to the post-9/11 world. "We're seeing a harder Army come out of this," full of veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, said Lt. Jason Davis, the husband of Meg Davis.

"The reenlistments that we'll see will be good ones," the Iraq veteran said. "These guys are experts, and they know what they're getting into."

A strong minority of military wives want no part of that frequent-flier life.

About half of those polled said they expect their spouses to reenlist, and that they will support the decision. But about three in 10 said that they are certain their spouses will get out -- and that they want that to happen.

If those numbers prove true, "that's a good news story for the Army," said Master Sgt. J.D. Riley, a Pentagon expert on enlisted personnel issues. Currently, he said, about 50 percent of soldiers leave at the end of their first term.

The greater worry is that more seasoned soldiers -- especially the senior sergeants who are the backbone of today's Army -- will start leaving in unusually large numbers, as they did during the latter part of the Vietnam War. It is too early to tell if Iraq will provoke such an exodus, but some Army experts are concerned by internal Army data indicating morale problems among troops serving there.

"He's getting out," Erika Storm said of her husband, a seven-year Army veteran who is a mechanic for Bradley Fighting Vehicles in the 4th Infantry Division. "As good as the Army is, he doesn't want to tear himself away from his family."

The most vulnerable spouses are also those newest to the Army. Shyla McLaughlin said she and her husband will "definitely" leave the Army as soon as they can. "I knew there were chances of deployment, but I didn't know how hard it was going to be," she said.

But some Army wives hope their husbands will stay. "This is the first time my husband has said, in 12 years, that he's ready to get out," said Candice Foster. But if she has anything to say about it, she said, "he's going to stay in." A steady paycheck, good benefits and a safe environment in which to rear children all combine to provide a powerful lure.

Those who intend to stay in especially cite the powerful sense of comradeship they have developed over the past year with other Army wives -- the "sorority of separation" to which Anne Torza referred. "This life is an adventure," she said, "and we're in it together."

In military terms, they have achieved unit cohesion.

Assistant polling director Claudia Deane contributed to this report.

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