



Top NGOs testify before House Subcommittee on Military Quality of Life and Veterans' Affairs, February 2004

# Transforming the “Retention Sector”

By MEREDITH LEYVA

**T**he U.S. Armed Forces will likely face a retention problem in 2005. Not only will this impede America’s ability to execute foreign policy, but also the Pentagon will require massive budget outlays to recruit and train replacements at a time when some argue that it should be doubling personnel strength.

The wars against terrorism and in Iraq are not the specific causes of the retention problem.

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Rather, it stems from the military’s shortcomings in transitioning to an all-volunteer force and the continuing treatment of wartime personnel as draftees. The key to keeping troops is recognizing that they are professionals with personal commitments who are concerned with the care their families receive.

## What Does *Not* Affect Retention

Many argued that the Department of Defense (DOD) was facing a junior officer retention problem before September 11. In attempting to address key retention factors, policymakers

debated whether to increase military pay, which 28 percent of separating servicemembers indicated as the primary reason for leaving.<sup>1</sup>

Research by the RAND Corporation confirms that “if a wide pay gap is allowed to develop, recruiting and retention problems will follow.”<sup>2</sup> The 2004 Defense Authorization Bill brought military pay much closer to civilian pay. Because RAND found that pay growth over a career decreases

### quantitative data and anecdotal evidence show a strong connection between spouses and retention

for military professionals compared to civilians, policymakers increased senior enlisted pay at higher rates. These efforts alone are not likely to solve the problem, however, because current servicemembers also cited pay and benefits as the top reasons for staying. Clearly, pay is a factor in retention, but perhaps in a different way than commonly assumed.

A sense of purpose, credit for accomplishments, promotion opportunities, and respect are ranked as equally or more important than pay. On quality of life surveys, a majority of service personnel consistently indicate high satisfaction with these factors but moderate dissatisfaction with the pace of promotions, unit morale, and a perception of zero tolerance for mistakes.<sup>3</sup> Overall, however, these factors do not appear to harm retention.

Current level of deployments, live combat, training, and relocation are also frequently cited for poor retention. However, servicemembers indicate that deployments are part of the job; only 6 percent of separating members said deployments were their primary reason for leaving.<sup>4</sup> Eighty percent of active-duty personnel felt very satisfied, satisfied, or neutral toward deployments and other duties that took them away from home.<sup>5</sup> RAND studies found that “rather than decreasing reenlistment, deployment generally served to increase it or leave it unchanged.”<sup>6</sup> Servicemembers look forward to using their skills, and informal surveys indicate that spouses understand and generally support their partners’ passion for their jobs and have incorporated deployments into their lives.

Similarly, fear of live combat may not be a substantial factor in retention. Servicemembers appreciate receiving the associated honors and awards and perceive opportunities for faster promotions. Perhaps more important, combat in Afghanistan and Iraq has created a sense of purpose among service personnel and their spouses, given their strong support for the mission to fight terrorism.

Finally, relocation is probably not a significant factor in retention; service personnel report 51 percent satisfaction, with 32 percent “neither satisfied nor dissatisfied” with the frequency of relocation.<sup>7</sup>

### Real Factors in Retention

While pay, deployments, and combat alone are not major retention factors, they are linked to the real reason for separating. Analysis of quantitative data and anecdotal evidence show a strong connection between spouses and retention. Although the majority of servicemembers indicated a willingness to stay in the military as long as 20 years, most of them do not. By contrast, nearly 33 percent of servicemembers with companions or spouses indicated that their significant other wanted them to leave, while 15 percent said their significant other had no opinion.<sup>8</sup> In other words, nearly 50 percent of spouses and companions either dislike or are ambivalent about the military lifestyle. Only one RAND study shows a direct connection: If spouses have “very unfavorable” attitudes toward military life, then 63 percent of *nonmobilized* Reservists said they would separate from their service.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, although servicemembers cite pay and deployments as their reasons for separating, spouse dissatisfaction may be the real factor. Spouses supply an array of logistic and personal support services that allow servicemembers to do their jobs. They provide meals, care for children, manage finances, and maintain careers that often pay more than the servicemember receives. When personnel deploy, spouses must assume the role of single parents, perform tasks their partners once did, and make family decisions alone.

If a spouse is frustrated with any aspect of the military lifestyle, the servicemember feels the impact both logistically and emotionally. For example, disruption of a spouse’s career because of relocation or deployment hurts financially. A spouse’s casual comments about a civilian neighbor’s higher pay may lead a servicemember to conclude that civilian life would be better for the family. This may explain personnel citing low pay rather than lack of family support as a primary reason for separating.

This complex dynamic may also explain the seemingly contradictory data regarding the impact of deployments on reenlistment. RAND studies found that a standard deployment actually increased the likelihood of reenlistment. But “an additional tour of duty atop the first—such as

another three months away from home—reduces the likelihood of reenlistment, especially in the Army and Marine Corps. The negative effect of the extra tour is strongest when it involves hostilities.”<sup>10</sup> The issue is both the length of the tour and the uncertainty of the servicemember’s return, which may reflect the spouse’s need for predictability. Spouses accept deployments because

**access to some basic services is essentially denied to spouses because of bureaucratic rules and attitudes**

they support their servicemembers’ careers, but when additional tours are ordered, family life becomes

unstable and the spouse and servicemember may feel as though their loyalty is being abused.

A direct survey of Army wives confirms their opinions. While 64 percent of wives felt a 3- to 6-month deployment posed no problem, and 43 percent were unconcerned about a 7-month absence, the number reversed dramatically when the deployment increased; 48 percent felt a deployment of more than 1 year posed a serious or very serious problem, while 58 percent felt the same about a mission of undetermined length.<sup>11</sup>

Insufficient research has been conducted to substantiate the link between spouse satisfaction and retention and to determine spouses’ needs. The lack of data has partly to do with the employer-employee relationship and the mutual need for some distance between the military establishment and families. Moreover, some military leaders perceive spouses as impediments to that relationship, and the high divorce rate discourages them from involvement in families’ lives. This approach should be reconsidered, not because spouses deserve special treatment, but because DOD must retain its best people.

### Who Spouses Are and What They Want

Two common stereotypes of military spouses are as World War II-era wives pining away at home and as “trouble-making trailer trash.” Demographic data presents a very different image. Ninety-four percent of military spouses are women, and the remaining 6 percent are primarily older, prior-service husbands who need less assistance than a 23-year-old woman new to military life. Nearly 85 percent of military wives work outside the home. They are better educated than the average American, with only 5 percent of junior enlisted wives failing to finish high school and 67 percent working toward or having a post-secondary degree.

Given these characteristics, wives obviously need support during disruptions to their careers and home life caused by the military. Equally important, they need some degree of predictability within reason of military logistics and security. They want to return to the firmer homecoming dates of past deployments, so they can establish some stability in their professional and family lives. The tempo of deployments more than tripled in some services before September 11 and has increased with missions to Afghanistan and Iraq. Ongoing deployments to the Middle East and the DOD transformation plans for last-minute battlegroup formations could further reduce predictability and correspondingly heighten spousal desire for separation.

### Inadequacy of Support Services

Current support services include various official, semiofficial, and unofficial organizations. The fact that unofficial organizations are more likely to handle the more complex problems reflects both the employer’s fear of entanglement in family life and the failure to recognize a direct correlation between spouses and retention.

Access to some of the most basic services provided by official military support for families, such as relocation and housing, is essentially denied to spouses because of bureaucratic rules and attitudes. For example, spouses may not receive services and counseling from most relocation and housing offices without a unique power of attorney from their servicemembers specifically authorizing it. Traffic Management Office (TMO) officials have explained that some spouses have tricked them into relocating household goods to a different place than indicated on the orders, enabling the spouse to leave her husband at the military’s expense. The TMO approach is to deal directly with the servicemember, regardless of whether he is currently deployed or occupied at work.

Another example is the fact that the military will not ship a second vehicle during a relocation within the United States. Without a car, a spouse might not be able to work. Military families must either relocate using two cars or pay to ship a spouse’s car to a new location. Thus, this policy can cause tremendous financial and emotional strain.

The secondary source of official support is the family support center (FSC), which provides counselors on relocation logistics, financial management, domestic violence, and career assistance for spouses. A RAND analysis of the 1992 Quality of

1<sup>st</sup> Combat Camera Squadron (D. Myles Cullen)

**General Myers swears in Soldiers at reenlistment ceremony at Camp Victory, Iraq, March 2005**

Life Survey reveals that FSC programs for spouse career assistance, spouse and child abuse, and housing were rated well below satisfactory—even though they are perhaps the most important functions of FSCs for spouses.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, only 23 percent of survey participants had used the centers in the last 2 years, and the majority were overseas. A reason for the lack of use is found in the 2001 Morale and Quality of Life Study, which includes a policy goal of responding to changing family demographics:

*The family support system has not kept pace with the changing family structure. Nor has it kept pace with the higher aspirations and expectations of an increasingly better educated workforce and their families. Critical enhancements include childcare; opportunities for military spouses to find employment and programs to develop careers and enhance education; education for military children; and family support networks.<sup>13</sup>*

A 1997 survey of junior enlisted spouses concluded that:

*Very few spouses used any EAP [employment assistance program] service. Accordingly, very few spouses found their jobs through the EAP. . . . There is also a need to determine why almost one third of those who did use the EAP were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the program.<sup>14</sup>*

RAND analysis indicates that DOD founded the FSCs believing that family morale and retention are strongly linked.<sup>15</sup> However, the report criticizes DOD for failing to confirm that link, track progress, and set goals. The FSC system is divided into service “silos” that do not share best practices, and a survey indicates that families fear being seen at an FSC lest they be labeled as troubled.

DOD has not invested sufficiently in FSCs since their establishment. Offices typically are

open from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., hours when most spouses work. Additionally, some centers are reluctant to coordinate actively with semiofficial or unofficial support organizations, namely out of privacy concerns, even though coordination could provide more effective services. Also, a lack of funding impedes services. Because many counselors do not have telephones or voice mail, families must try repeatedly to reach them. RAND points out that personnel programs are a non-wage benefit equivalent to just \$700 per Soldier.

The services and the Pentagon have attempted to provide information and services on

the Internet, most recently with the launch of Military OneSource. This site is significantly better than the service sites such as Navy LifeLines, in part because a person can always be reached on its around-the-clock hotline, but families still cannot conduct business or receive counseling services over the Internet.

Nonprofit organizations are another form of official support in the sense that they often act as an arm of the FSCs. Army Emergency Relief and the Air Force Aid Society both receive Federal funds, while the Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society is fully funded by donations. These organizations often provide excellent financial counseling and relief services, but they are hampered by restrictive policies and procedures of the military agencies with whom they work. For example, they cannot extend office hours to help working wives because base accounting and personnel offices, which provide key information, typically close at 4:00 p.m. or earlier. Other nonprofit organizations such as the United Services Organization and Armed Forces YMCA often do not market their programs to wives sufficiently.

The Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) office conducts recreational activities and events to support family morale. However, it has been pressed into profit generation, so events and services are underutilized because families cannot afford them. The funds go toward supporting family programs such as counseling. DOD schools and the Exceptional Family Member Program are generally well regarded but are no better than what would be expected in a civilian community.

### Semiofficial Support Organizations

Leading the semiofficial support organizations are the family support groups (FSGs) and family readiness groups (FRGs). They are a major support source for spouses during deployments and relocation but are only as good as the volunteers who lead them. FSGs used to be led by the wives of commanding officers, but now junior wives are increasingly taking over even if they lack experience.

The issues of infrastructure, continuity, and institutional memory are major problems facing semiofficial organizations because of high turnover among volunteers. For example, one elementary school serving the junior enlisted population at Camp Pendleton had no Parent-Teacher Association because the past-year association officers all relocated simultaneously. FSCs and commands are often unwilling to get involved because of

Loadmaster oversees spouse orientation flight of C-17 at Charleston Air Force Base



1<sup>st</sup> Combat Camera Squadron (Matthew Hennen)



U.S. Navy (Johnny Eberaj)

**Spouses Club members and their families sort messages to troops**

fear of entanglement and failure to recognize the importance of family morale on retention. FSCs may support semiofficial organizations by sharing office space, but volunteers overall have little interaction and coordination with the FSCs. Perhaps most important, there is no central guide to best practices for support group volunteers.

Official and semiofficial organizations' failure to meet the needs of military families has prompted the increase in unofficial organizations, including large Internet-based communities and local meeting groups. Unofficial groups address spouses' need to be respected

and not patronized, and to receive the unofficial "scoop" on topics the military establishment is unable or unwilling to address—including marital problems, financial difficulties, and living conditions in base housing—and do so with convenient meeting times and communication platforms.

Military family support agencies cannot recognize or cooperate with unofficial groups unless the groups apply for recognition on base, which is often not worth the effort of time-pressed vol-

unteers. Thus, the agencies do almost no coordination with unofficial groups, even though a majority of wives turn to them for support.

Perhaps more important, the increase in unofficial organizations has reduced cohesion in the military community. For example, many wives relocate but refuse to meet other local military families because they prefer to chat online with wives elsewhere. This trend undermines the emotional and logistic support military families need in times of crisis.

### **Staving Off a Retention Problem with Transformation**

DOD must apply the principles of transformation to the "retention sector" and rethink its approach toward spouses, recognizing that their satisfaction is vital to retention. This is a purely business decision. DOD should protect its investment in quality personnel and mitigate the cost of recruiting and training replacements by addressing the less costly needs of spouses.

The department should adopt wives as "personal support command centers" (PSCCs) and change the minds and attitudes of officers, senior enlisted, and civil servants. This campaign must

**family support groups and family readiness groups are only as good as the volunteers who lead them**



Soldier returning from Operation Iraqi Freedom greeted by family at homecoming ceremony in Plymouth, New Hampshire, March 2005

157th Air Refueling Wing (Dawn Friniss)

be led by senior Pentagon officials and, beyond the initial launch of the concept, be incorporated into nearly every discussion topic.

With a mandate from the top, both commands and key agencies should be required to review and revise their operations to ensure that spouses' needs

**commands and family support agencies must make their operations more accessible**

are given appropriate consideration. First, commands should bring predictability to deployments where possible. Defense planners must weigh the benefit of their new concepts for battlegroups that deploy almost randomly against new concepts of predictable "human maintenance" cycles that allow members genuine recuperation time.

Under the PSCC concept, commands and agencies must view spouses as partners in providing logistic support to uniformed personnel. Spouses should receive predeployment briefings alongside their servicemembers to prepare for per-

sonal logistic and financial contingencies. Briefings should be held during nonworking hours, and childcare should be available. Similarly, relocation and housing offices should view spouses as the primary contacts during the relocation process, thereby easing the burden on service personnel (and their commands). Bureaucratic obstacles such as power of attorney should be removed.

DOD must also get serious about providing and adequately funding genuine support services for spouses. With a small investment in spouses' careers, DOD not only improves their morale but also increases members' income at minimal expense to taxpayers. Opportunities include hiring preferences for spouses in government jobs, incentives for defense contractors to hire military spouses, G.I. Bill portability, and access to military courses for spouses.

**Network Centric**

Commands and family support agencies must make their operations more accessible.

Office hours and business approaches should be convenient to working spouses, and most business should be conducted over the phone or Internet. DOD Web sites should not be designed along service silos as lists of links to outside information; instead, families should receive genuine counseling and transact family business over one consolidated site. Job searches and financial management may be better handled by a central network than by individual FSCs. A network-centric approach would also allow relocating spouses to fully access services at the new base, meaning they could find housing, child care, and jobs before packing their bags.

The consolidation of family support into a Pentagon-level joint command, possibly along with privatization at base offices, should be considered. FSCs can more easily recruit staff as well as do a better job of sharing best practices across the services. Staff members must build relationships with semiofficial and unofficial organizations even if it means spending several nights a week at FSC and spouse club meetings. Partly for this reason, it makes sense for FSCs to hire active-duty wives who are already involved in their community and understand their peers. An FSC should provide space, resources, and continuity for semiofficial support organizations instead of competing for attention. In that capacity, FSCs can also help direct and coordinate local civilian support for military families.

Further, consideration should be given to merging FSCs and MWR organizations across services. Both organizations would benefit from leadership and representation at the Pentagon level, better tracking and methodological processes, economies of scale, and enhanced negotiating power in dealing with corporate sponsorships.

The launch of the PSCC concept should initiate critical research on the link between spouses and retention and ways to track the effectiveness of family programs. As these programs are developed or revamped, methods must be developed to identify and share best practices and link them to retention and morale—the ultimate measure of return on investment.

The keys to retention are to recognize that servicemembers are not draftees and to treat them as professionals with families and personal commitments. A relatively small investment in spouses could prevent a massive expenditure on bonuses to stave off a retention crisis, followed by an expensive campaign to recruit and

train replacements. These transformation-based recommendations are only some of many excellent possibilities. Few require extra budget dollars, but all require an attitude adjustment toward spouses and an overarching strategy for genuinely addressing their needs. The military must be comfortable dealing with spouses if it wishes to retain experienced, professional servicemembers and complete its mission.

**JFQ**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Norman J. Rabkin, "Preliminary Results of DOD's 1999 Survey of Active Duty Members," testimony before the Subcommittee on Military Personnel, Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives (March 28, 2000), 7.

<sup>2</sup> "Is There a Gap Between Military and Civilian Pay?" (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, August 18, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Defense Manpower Data Center, "July 2002 Status of Forces Survey of Active-Duty Members," Report 2002-021 (July 2002), 58-74, 94-96.

<sup>4</sup> Rabkin, 7.

<sup>5</sup> "July 2002 Status of Forces Survey," 118-121.

<sup>6</sup> "Perstempo: Does It Help or Hinder Reenlistment?" Research Brief RB-7532 (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> "July 2002 Status of Forces Survey," 116.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-44, 56.

<sup>9</sup> Sheila Nataraj Kirby and Scott Naftel, "The Effect of Mobilization on Retention of Enlisted Reservists after ODS/S," Report MR-943-OSD (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 1998), 29.

<sup>10</sup> James Hosek and Mark Totten, "Serving Away from Home: How Deployments Influence Reenlistment" (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Morris Peterson, Army Personnel Survey Office, U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, "Survey of Army Families IV: Final Quick Summary" (January 2002), question 24.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Buddin, "Building a Personnel Support Agenda," Report MR-916-OSD (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 1998), 50-52.

<sup>13</sup> The RAND Corporation, "Defense Morale and Quality of Life Study" (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, June 2001), 6-7.

<sup>14</sup> Rita Bureika et al., "Effective Strategies to Assist Spouses of Junior Enlisted Members with Employment: Analysis of the 1997 Survey of Spouses of Enlisted Personnel," Defense Manpower Data Center (June 2000), 167.

<sup>15</sup> Buddin, 7.