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Overcoming stressful experiences: Military families in the frontline

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Introduction

As of the beginning of the nineties of the previous century, it has become army policy to deploy its personnel abroad for peacekeeping, peace-enforcing or humanitarian missions. Ever since, many men and women in the army have been deployed to missions in Bosnia, Angola, Mozambique, Cambodia, and other countries across the world. More than before, army families have been involved in the serviceman's work: a deployment, usually six months, means that families miss a father, mother or spouse for six months. In other words: army policy has entered the homes of military personnel quite deeply, deeper than before, as a separation from the military spouse or parent for six months places a heavy burden on military families.

In the Netherlands, this problem was first recognised by navy wives in the seventies, but army wives took over this recognition with the first large scale army deployments. They demanded the army's attention for their situation during deployment, a situation they had hardly found themselves in before. The army response to this problem has been the official recognition of this problem by making family support an issue in its mission statement. Furthermore, a home-front organisation has been set up, to support the home front committee from every deployed unit. Despite these measures and good intentions to support military families, during the spouses' deployment military families endure stress.

This paper deals with the stress spouses endure prior to, during and after their husbands' deployment and their experiences with the family support system in the Royal Netherlands Army (RNLA).

Our central research question is:

How do spouses cope with the long-time separation from their husbands?

After discussing the theory, a survey among 423 spouses will be elaborated on.

Family support in the RNLA

The first forms of family support organisations in The Netherlands originated in the navy. In 1976 a submarine boat, the Tuna, departed from its harbour leaving the crew's wives behind without any arrangements at all. They complained about this and founded the first "home front group". Together with the union and some clergymen they organised meetings and provided help for each other. Navy headquarters ordered a study into this phenomenon with the result that home front groups were to be founded for each ship. The navy as an organisation accepted this responsibility for initiating new groups and facilitating them.

Army wives of military personnel being deployed in the beginning of the nineties found themselves in the same situation as the wives of the Tuna sailors. Some of them knew about the navy arrangements for military families of deployed servicemen and wrote a black book to the general in command of the peacekeeping missions. The book complained about the lack of

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attention for army wives, badly organised farewells and return gatherings and lacking support in general. The RNLA responded to these complaints by improving the home front organisation.

The home front organisation consists of a permanent home front committee that organises information days, mid-term gatherings, and is responsible for the general coordination. The home front groups are organised by volunteers (family of deployed personnel on a certain mission). They can command the officer in charge of the home front committee to attend their interests at higher levels in the organisation. This way, volunteer influence travels bottom-up. The home front organisation organises a telephone circle among relatives of deployed personnel (mostly spouses participate in this). The home front organisation sends the magazine "Monitor" to the closest relative of every deployed serviceman and has a permanent staff for any questions from the relatives.

Greedy institutions
Traditionally, the armed forces had many institutional features: serviceman, partner and children were all very much involved in all kinds of military activities. This is still the case for military personnel that is placed abroad. Not only the serviceman himself, but also his wife and children are "in the army". In this setting, the armed forces have always been the most greedy institution of the two (armed forces and family).

Integration into the military community has decreased with the shift of the military profession from an institutional to a more occupational nature (Moskos, 1977). It is becoming more and more "a job like any other". Partners are more likely to have a job and a circle of friends of their own. Partners do not depend for their friends and acquaintances upon the serviceman and his colleagues, but rather build up a life of their own, side by side with the serviceman. They also claim the serviceman's attention, more than they used to do. Now military personnel is trapped between two greedy institutions: the armed forces and the military family. They both make strong claims upon the serviceman. Where in the past military families more subsided in "after all, it is his job", the choice of the serviceman for the army nowadays is much more likely to cause stress because it demands attention as well. Greediness of institutions can easily lead to a conflict between the family and the military organisation.

Emotions prior to, during and following deployment
Relatives, spouses in particular, endure stress throughout the period from announcement of the deployment to return from the deployment. This stress is not always on the same level, but varies through time. There are different stressors, and differences in the way stressors are experienced. De Soir (2000) distinguishes seven stages in the way spouses experience stress over time.

The first stage is the stage of shock and protest when a spouse hears her husband is going to be deployed. The fact that spouses know in advance that the husband can be deployed does not help: stress will be experienced. There are, however, differences in the length of time prior to deployment: if a spouse hears her husband is going to be deployed very long or briefly before deployment a higher amount of stress is experienced than with a medium amount of time, approximately three months.

The second stage is a stage in which a spouse goes through a period of alienation and disengagement due to various uncertainties surrounding the departure (date, place of deployment, political and military situation in the country of deployment).

The third stage is the stage when spouses become emotionally disorganised shortly after departure. They feel sad and desperate, depressed, have trouble sleeping and picking up their

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daily routines. Usually this stage lasts for about six weeks, but it could take longer when there is trouble in the deployment area. Communication between the serviceman and his spouse could help get the spouse quicker through this difficult stage. Spouses need certainty about their husband's well-being, and how the husband can be reached in case of emergency.

The fourth stage is when spouses' lives are gradually stabilised as feelings of sadness fade. They get used to coping with the daily hassles, but any crisis, no matter how small, can quickly bring them back into the stage of disorganisation. Routine is helpful, as well as maintaining family and friendship ties, visiting neighbours and participating in "home front groups".

In the fifth stage, spouses anticipate the serviceman's homecoming. This starts about six weeks prior to the return. The feelings are a mix of anxiety, uncertainty about the partner's reaction, hope and euphoria.

The sixth stage is the reunion and reintegration into the family. The reunion may take up to six weeks, but the reintegration may take longer. It is often underestimated how difficult it is for both serviceman and spouse to reintegrate: the spouse has had to deal with various difficulties during those six months alone, and she may have discovered that some problems that seemed to be real problems can be easily dealt with, making her much more self-supporting. The serviceman thinks he can take over his old role again, but that does not always go so easily.

The seventh stage is the stage of stabilisation. Everyone has taken over daily routine. Spouses have found their warmth and closeness again. Any negotiable differences that may have occurred shortly after return will have been stabilised.

Stress due to the deployment

Military psychological research shows us that a period of separation takes the third place in the list of stressful events, only preceded by death of a partner or divorce (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). The experience of stress can be divided into different aspects. First, there is the stressful event. This can be the anticipation to the serviceman's deployment, or the deployment itself, but also other circumstances such as a move, a renovation or difficulties with the children.

People develop different coping strategies to cope with stress. Some people are focused on solving the problems, others reveal their feelings to friends. Also, not letting the serviceman know how much one is under stress from the deployment – a seemingly useful coping strategy - can cause new stress.

However, not everyone experiences a deployment and its related events in the same way. There are severe personal differences. This difference works as a moderator between the event (deployment) and the eventual stress, crisis or chaos. As one experiences stress, Murphy's law can add to it, doubling the problems: if one has a slight problem which is experienced as something big, it may cause so much stress that other things will go wrong as well.

Experiencing Stress and Coping with Stress

People can learn how to cope with stress. Negative coping strategies are the use of alcohol, drugs, denial of or flight from the problem. Positive coping strategies are – among others - keeping the family-ties intact, developing social support, learning about a problem, learning to express oneself by talking, crying, or a hobby (McCubbin, 1979). Cohesion also diminishes stress. For that matter, military wives have proven to be much more effective in coping with stress than civilian wives as they tend to score higher on cohesiveness and expressiveness

(Eastman, Archer & Ball, 1990). This could be due to the housing situation. When in the Netherlands, people within the same operational unit often live nearby, in a town or village. Abroad, military families often live in a close community. Both situations create possibilities for a certain degree of cohesion. On the other hand, the opposite may also occur, when individual deployments are concerned: the families of those individuals are not likely to know many other families of deployed personnel.

A good way to approach the stress experienced is by using elements of McCubbin and Patterson's double ABC-X model.

Figure 1:   The ABC-X model

The model suggests that there are three stages: pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis. In the pre-crisis stage, a person experiences stress. This may be caused by an upcoming deployment of the partner. One uses resources to cope with the stressor, such as social support from friends and family (interaction between stressor and resources). The perception of the stressor is very important and may work as a moderator for the actual experienced stress (interaction between perception and stressor). The final interaction between resources and perception defines the amount of stress experienced during the crisis, the deployment. In the post-crisis stage the stressors are formed by piling up various stressing happenings prior to and during the crisis (the deployment). The same goes for the resources: resources prior to and during the crisis are being piled up. Both, the piling up of stressors and the piling up of resources, are decisive for the coping strategy, as well as the perception of the crisis, stressors and resources. The coping strategy that is thus developed results into a degree of adaptation, or non-adaptation, or mal-adaptation.

If we relate the stages in the double ABC-X model to those found by De Soir, we conclude that stages one and two represent the pre-crisis situation, stages three, four and five represent the crisis situation, and stages six and seven represent the post-crisis situation.

What are the stressors for military spouses in a deployment situation? Some examples from a series of interviews in 1996 and 1997 (Moelker & Cloïn).

Pre-crisis. Experiences from previous deployments can alleviate the stress, as some women had built up self-confidence during their husband's previous deployment. One woman was about to get married after the deployment, so she was in happy anticipation of her husband's return throughout the pre-deployment, deployment and post-deployment stages.

Crisis. Happiness, or unhappiness, is a stressor for some women. Reasons for unhappiness are the absence of the partner, especially because they have no buddy with whom they can share their feelings and problems. External factors causing stress can be situations like a recent move into a new house, in which much needs to be done about the house but there is hardly time. If the partner has a new job and has to learn the ropes, serious thinking about the deployment is shoved to the background and "saved for some other time", but as it is not gone, it will pop up later, causing stress.

Post-crisis. How spouses experience the stage after deployment depends for the greater part upon the pre-deployment and deployment experiences and the coping strategies that were developed during those stages. The army wife with experience from her husband's previous deployment is expected to have little trouble adjusting again. Army wives who suffered severe stress will want to tell all their experiences, whereas deployed serviceman might want the same, causing stress because both parties want to "send" rather than to "receive".

If the serviceman suffers from a post traumatic stress disorder due to the deployment, the army wife may develop a secondary traumatisation. This happens when the deployment was dangerous and life threatening.

In general, studies on stress and deployment report a correlation between the dangers in a deployment area and measures of stress and well-being.

The survey

Respondents. In April 2001 we asked 2000 military men and women who have been deployed in KFOR 1 (1999), SFOR 8 (1999) and UNFICYP (1999) spouses to participate in this study. Out of these 2000, 423 reacted positively. Some men or women did not (want to) participate because they were single or their spouses indicated that they were annoyed with the huge amount of questionnaires they were confronted with.

What is the statistical profile of the Dutch military family? In our sample, 66% were married and 34% unmarried. Traditionally, soldering seems to be a male occupation, as only 3% of the spouses were male. The majority was a traditional family with children (56%). Average age of the respondents was 34 years, and on average they had a relationship with their partner for 12,5 years. The ranks ranged from soldier to lieutenant-colonel, 22% were soldiers or corporals. The majority of the servicemen were NCO's.

Although from previous research there seems to be a linear correlation between rank and participation in home front groups, this does not go for our sample. The most active participants were wives of NCO's and subaltern CO's. Wives of higher ranking officers participated less.

Greediness. As to greediness, the family-military conflict was a reality for some families. We also found that 16% of the spouses was not able to attend family activities because of the serviceman's work. Another 16% admitted that they lacked leisure time because of the serviceman's job. But spouses' commitment should not be underestimated: the commitment level of the spouse has a very strong effect on the serviceman's commitment to his work. (Bourg & Segal, 1999). This family-military conflict can be lessened by supportive policy by the armed forces and support from the unit.

Stress prior to and during deployment. When missions are dangerous or life-threatening, long term stress of soldiers and secondary traumatisation of their spouses are likely to occur. The soldiers in our survey had differing experiences, according to their spouses: for 39% of them, the mission was not dangerous, on the other hand 8% dealt with extreme danger. Occasional risks, but never life-threatening, occurred in 53% of the cases. The differences in risk can be related to the missions: missions in Cyprus and Bosnia were hardly dangerous, whereas the mission in Kosovo (KFOR-I) was extremely dangerous.

Depression among spouses appeared on a limited scale: on a scale from 1 to 5, two spouses (less than 1%) reported extreme depression (score 5), 8% of the spouses reported feelings of despair, emptiness, or feeling down. A score of 2 or higher was reported in 18% of the cases. There was a high correlation with physical complaints (.58), sexual problems (.19) or a bad relationship with the spouse (.31). In 12% of the cases, the spouses attributed the psychic and physical complaints to the deployment. We found a correlation of .43 between depression and the reported complaints. Spouses attributed these complaints to the deployment, but we find it is hard to determine whether this causal relation actually exists or if the deployment was a trigger for previously existing "below the surface" problems.

Many studies report a correlation between dangers in a deployment area and stress and wellbeing (e.g. Dahl & Hunter, 1967; Figley, 1993; Knapp & Neuman, 1993; Rosen Teitelbaum & Westhuis, 1993; McCubbin, Adler, Bartone & Vaitkus, 1995; Durand et al., 2001). In our study we found a small but significant correlation between experienced danger

and depression (.11). As the survey was taken over nine months after return from the deployment, it implies that even after a long time soldiers and spouses can be troubled by stress and secondary traumatization.

Support. Social support appears important for the military family: 64% agreed to the statement "the support from family, friends and neighbours is more useful to me than the family support rendered by the army". This does not imply that family support by the military would not be important, as 39% reports that the support group meetings are useful, though 63% of them never visited them. There may be various reasons for this finding: support group meetings may have taken place on for the family important dates, or there may have been other reasons why support group meetings were not visited (distance too long, no time). The opinion that support group meetings are found useful may be a general opinion, apart from specific visits to the meetings. Also, the opinions on support group meetings can be very individual.

The support spouses do want from the organisation are possibilities to communicate with their loved ones, and information about his area of deployment, how he is doing etcetera. The support does not seem to pertain so much to financial support: only 26% reported to need mainly material support, rather than anything else. Emotional support is most needed by family or friends (64%).

The preference for more communautarian forms of support was remarkably high (68%), whereas only 15% was of the opinion that for rendered help something needed to be given in return. Others report that unexpected persons supply support (75%), but 24% reports that rendering support cannot be left to amateurs. There is much agreement about the statement that people have to look after each other (86%).

The social support is most of the times rendered by the private surroundings, family and friends. Parents were frequently mentioned as conversational partners (73%), as well as parents in law (57%), friends (85%), colleagues (50%) and neighbours (42%). Conversations with colleagues of the deployed partner or other military wives (not being friends) were much less frequent (27% and 34% respectively). This finding is in agreement with the relatively low perceived usefulness of the support groups.

After deployment. Soldiers are proud if spouses can manage by themselves during their deployment (78%). The relationship had become stronger and closer in 57% of the cases, this was attributed to the deployment. Possible new deployments were not welcomed by 41% of the spouses, but the majority (83%) agreed that they would manage if the partner would be deployed again.

The reaction of the servicemen to coming home and reintegration into the family is quite different. Some of them think everything will be the same (34%), but that this is not the case was confirmed by 26%, saying that they had to get used to each other again. Eventually (remember the survey was done at least nine months after return from the deployment) 88% agreed that the relationship is back where it used to be.

Helpful in the process of marital reconciliation is an open attitude during an after deployment. The means of communication during deployment were telephone, e-mail, letters. This communication appears absolutely necessary not to alienate from each other. After deployment the husbands openly communicated about their experiences (50%), but they were even better listeners to what the spouses had to tell (77%). The pain of separation is well overcome by intimacy and tenderness: 60% of the spouses reported that they kissed and hugged a lot during the first weeks after return. Sexual problems were reported in 9% of the cases, and 3% reported that they'd rather be divorced. It cannot be concluded that these statements were made as a result of the deployment. Listening however does contribute to marital reconciliation.

Conclusions

Deployments place a burden upon spouses of military personnel. Spouses endure stress for
various reasons: Prior to deployment, they are in fearful anticipation of what is coming, but
there are personal differences: spouses experiencing their husband's second deployment are
more self-confident that they will manage than spouses experiencing a deployment for the
first time. During deployment spouses miss their husbands, but this can be alleviated much by
frequent communication. Also, they could find 'a listening ear' with friends or relatives.
Other good coping strategies are getting to know about the problem one finds oneself in, or
expressing oneself. After deployment, it is important for both partners that they listen to each
other. Some spouses attribute problems in their relationship to the deployment. It is hard to
prove this attribution is correct, as there may have been "below the surface" problems prior to
deployment and the deployment has been a trigger for further problems. Other problems after
deployment may occur if husbands have found themselves in dangerous situations during
deployment and suffer from post traumatic stress disorder. Spouses for that matter may
develop secondary traumatization.
The RNLA renders family support during deployments. Although many spouses think this is a
useful organisation, relatively few actually participate in meetings organised by the home
front groups. Still, participation in home front groups is a good coping strategy, as spouses
learn more about the situation and circumstances soldiers spouses are in.

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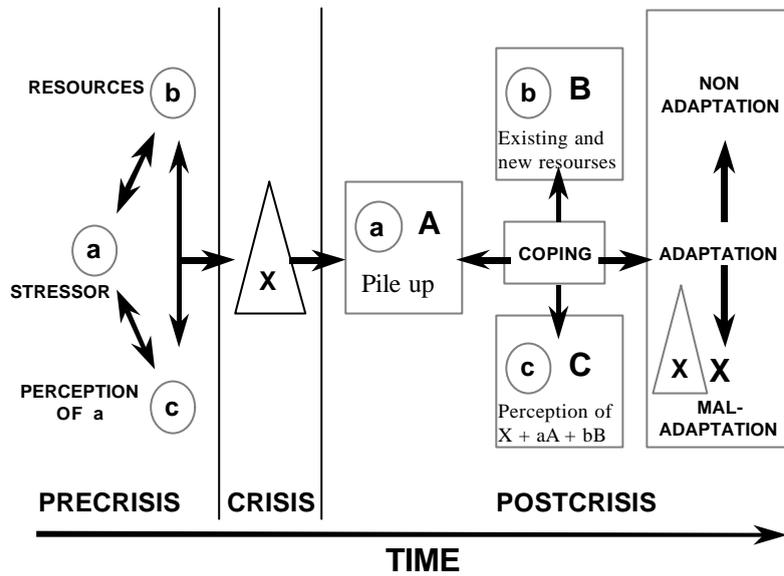Wood S., Scarville, J. & K.S. Gravino (1995). "Waiting wives: separation and reunion among army w

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Figure 1. McCubbin and Patterson's double ABC-X model.