

Transitions and Tradeoffs: A Social Worker's Snapshot of the American Military Family

Patricia Coccoma

Abstract: With men and women of the U.S. military abroad at war, the risks and challenges they face performing those duties, while also remaining in contact with their families, can be significant. This article traces the personally and professionally rewarding experience of a social worker observing military service members' abilities to cope with stress and the determination of troops stationed overseas and their families to overcome those challenges and remain connected during a period of separation.

Keywords: military families; stress; trauma; physical separations; deployment

Introduction

Are social workers prepared to understand the myriad of transitions and tradeoffs our military men and women endure when deployed away from home and their families? The profession focuses upon returning combat troops and their acclimation to home, family, and familiar surroundings. But do we know firsthand some of the experiences they encounter while deployed, including how they maintain connections to their families? Such first-hand information for a social worker may be the exception, but certainly would add value to our work with this special group of individuals.

Recently, I took advantage of Space-A travel, a benefit available to military personnel and their families (active or retired). It provides direct travel to the air terminals located at active United States military bases in Europe. This experience allowed me to openly observe the daily operations of our military transportation and base operations in addition to interactions between military personnel and their visiting family members. While I did not directly connect with any military service members and their families, I quietly observed interrelationships and both the personal and service related situations they encountered. These opportunities inspired me to consider more their ability to cope during challenging times, such as times of transition, and reflect upon the usefulness of this experience in providing differentiated social work practice skills to them as clients upon my return from this trip.

The stand-by status experience with Space-A travel

occurs at the passenger air terminals on active military bases. I had to wait to either catch a flight or hop to another military base to eventually reach my final destination: Germany. One's military status (highest to lowest) is ranked accordingly: active, family of active member, and retired. That status determines one's place in line at the ticket counter and who boards the next available flight. My spouse is retired military, so our stand-by status was behind active military and their families.

While navigating this process, we flew from Charleston Air Force Base in South Carolina to our final destination of Ramstein Air Force Base in Ramstein, Germany. The aircrafts are typically C-7s or C-17s, which are generally used to transport needed supplies to military and/or civilian personnel in many parts of the world, including areas of conflict.

It took several days to leave Charleston because of flight cancellations and flights that could not accept passengers while transporting hazardous (combustible) materials. This time afforded me the opportunity to observe several family situations of enlisted members of our armed forces who were motivated to remain together during their time with each other. This also included a variety of situations such as when military family members travel from the U.S., simultaneous to their military spouses leaving the war in Iraq and meeting at a friendly destination for a brief visit. This paper is a reflection of those occasions, snapshots of personal exchanges, tradeoffs, and transitions between family and military personnel. This resulted in a greater awareness and appreciation for not only the

determination, coping strategies, and hardiness of these families, but also my own professional knowledge from lessons learned.

The active-duty American service member makes major personal and physical commitments and sacrifices for the protection of our country, especially during periods of deployment to foreign lands, be they times of war or peace. Much has been said of the motivation and focus of such brave men and women, yet little is directly known of the motivation, challenges, and desires of deployed service members and their families to physically visit, relocate, or both, to the deployment location. Stress and coping with physical separation can take an emotional toll on service members and their families.

Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1989) stated that individuals cope with stress in two different ways: problem focused coping, which occurs when problem resolution reduces one's stress, and emotional focused coping, which aims to reduce the emotions experienced rather than addressing the source of those emotions.

While Di Nola (2008) supports these two methods of coping, the author refers to three types of stressors experienced by families of deployed troops where the coping methods were utilized:

emotional (missing the soldier, safety concern for the soldier), deployment-related (managing budget, Powers of Attorney, and increase in childcare costs), and general life events (non-English speakers, new to installation, etc.). The list of stressors noted at that time were loneliness, financial insecurities, children's discipline, and an overall feeling that the military was not concerned for their well-being. Some spouses did not use programs available to them for fear of being classified as unable to handle their problems. Others were not able to seek family support because they were not stationed near them. Family roles had to be changed and required adjustment by both parents and children. (p. v)

The Internet has provided an array of opportunities

for all members and their families to stay connected. Receiving current information on family and friends back home or Internet phone calls to hear one's voice, for example, promotes family connections. While being electronically connected may have its disadvantages, such as interruptions in troop member's concentration to their duties, its benefits include reduced stress as a result of familial separation. The use of email, cell phones, social networking sites like Facebook or Twitter, and texting can provide instantaneous news. However, even with the stress reduction benefits of these electronic methods, the desire to personally connect is often of great importance to both deployed troops and their families.

Social workers assisting this population knowingly promote available resources and advocate for military members and their families using available resources to benefit family connections during times of deployment. Yet, firsthand experiences of a social worker witnessing an enlisted military member and his/her family devote their energies to being together when deployed, and sharing that experience to further the social work profession may be infrequent.

While traveling, this civilian social worker witnessed and reflected upon snapshots of military personnel and their families attempting to visit together with limited time. During these occasions, opportunities for me to converse with some families occurred. What I have learned in reflection of these snapshots and interactions with the families has provided help to me with my practice skills. These snapshots included moments rich with information affirming the resiliency of the family systems during times of transitions and tradeoffs as well as lessons learned for the social work profession. Several of these snapshots are shared below.

Snapshot One

In Charleston, South Carolina, while waiting for the next scheduled departure to Ramstein, Germany, an Air Force Major and his family were awaiting the same flight. He and his family are stationed in Germany. They had been in the U.S. to attend a family wedding. Now, they were returning to his base in Germany and their temporary home, as his leave orders were soon ending.

During our wait, this family shared their fun-filled and memorable experiences of the recent family wedding. Throughout their stories of the wedding itself, some talked not only of their pleasure being back in their home town visiting with family and friends, but also of the strain of being away from all those familiarities for so long. Despite the festivities of the wedding, their moods were melancholic at best.

The wait for this flight was long. Later that evening, the family was observed sleeping in the waiting room on the floor and in several oversized chairs. The Major was awake, making several telephone calls advising his commanding officer of the likelihood that he was unable to meet his leave orders, specifically the return date deadline. His facial expression was strained yet pensive. One could not help but wonder if the sense of pleasure from being with family in the United States had given way to worry and urgency to return to base, a sense of personal crisis. As a social worker, seeing the event unravel in real time provided a different and more personal perspective rather than from hearing about it in an office setting at a later date.

After several hours, everyone on "stand by" was able to board a flight being readied to leave for Germany. Seating in a C-17 is not comparable to the seating on a commercial 757 aircraft. Passengers sit in uncomfortable troop jump seats which fold down from the wall of the plane and are made of a mesh material. Because there were fewer passengers on this flight, most people occupied three seats for comfort. Some had inflated air mattresses placed upon the floor and stretched out to sleep while others inserted ear buds and listened to music on their iPods. My husband and I made efforts to become comfortable although we did not prepare for comfort like others. Our seating was in close proximity to the Major and his family. Once airborne, the mood of the Major's family seemed to change from one of tension and worry to relief. But not the Major, who was now trying to sleep on an air mattress on the floor between cargo containers. The flight across the Atlantic Ocean was eight hours.

I was filled with the excitement of flying in a C-17, thus I was far from sleep. There was an instant when the Major's wife and I glanced at one another

and we smiled. This gave way to a brief conversation between us. She shared that her husband had to go directly to his office the moment he stepped off the plane, adding that she would be responsible for deplaning with her children, carrying their luggage, and finding transportation from the terminal. My interest in her story was apparent, and she told me how they enjoyed their visit home, especially with their older children, who have established their own lifestyles and families. She was already missing them. The conversation was friendly and supportive. Listening to her details of their trip seemed releasing for her and beneficial for me. I learned firsthand about some of the difficulties military families endure during deployment.

The remainder of the overnight flight to Germany was uneventful; most passengers slept and awoke to an early morning sky in Ramstein. The moment we were able to deplane, the Major leapt into a waiting car and left his family to tug, pull, carry, and drag luggage and bags of their belongings down the ramp of the aircraft, onto the tarmac, and over to the bus waiting to take passengers to the terminal. The family's irritability, physical exertion, and exhaustion, while obvious to me, were carefully controlled. Once in the terminal, the Major's wife and two adolescent children again struggled to convey their belongings through the terminal to a taxi outside; they then drove away. They seemed familiar with the routine. Knox and Price (1995) acknowledged the importance of the military spouse and his/her contributions to the performance, readiness, and retention of active duty and reserve military members. This snapshot affirmed the importance of family support for the deployed service member. My experience viewing the Major's ability to instantly transition from being with his family to being with his service family affirmed that it could only successfully occur with the support and understanding of his family. I gained insight into the demands and stress of military life. Maintaining family connections is an important consideration as I practice and I assist a military family.

Snapshot Two

Inside the large bustling terminal at Ramstein Air Base, it was amazing to see the number of men and women from our military either coming or going on

flights. A look at the travel board reflected flights to Kuwait, Mindenhall, Spangdaheim, Okinawa, and other air bases in the United States and Europe. All of the flights formed connections to other parts of the world, especially the Middle East, such as Iraq and Afghanistan. We maneuvered through customs and answered questions to assure our true intent in visiting Germany. As we did, we found ourselves looking up at a large banner simply stating "USO." In that designated area, dozens of men and women were using the Internet and calling home from available phones as well as their cell phones. Some were laughing, some appeared anxious, and others were asleep. At this location, I realized that these troops were awaiting their next flight to take them to their new assignment or were returning to their assigned location in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kuwait, or elsewhere. Here they were enjoying a short respite from the war in the terminal USO.

The Iraq and Afghanistan wars did not have to be explained, they had a presence in the terminal and the USO area. Men and women chatted about their war related experiences. Some had sustained non-life threatening injuries and were using crutches or wheelchairs. Nearby was a dining area with fast food restaurants. Tables were occupied by United States military as well as Iraqi military. Seated near our military personnel, one could easily hear these men and women share their exploits. It felt surreal; I did not have any prior direct exposure to war. Ten hours earlier, I was in the United States, yet now I was observing a scene that I was not prepared to see: active-duty U.S. and ally soldiers either returning to or arriving from combat. Having spent a moment to acquaint myself to the surroundings, I realized what I heard firsthand today, a world away from home, will be read in the U.S. news tomorrow. How is it that these men and women, here to protect us from harm, were able to converse outside of the war theater so casually? Were they debriefed prior to landing in Ramstein? Were they so exposed to war situations that they had become callous or immune? What services were available to assist these people with the transition from war zone to safe zone? This heightened awareness lingered within me.

As the time on base passed, answers to my questions became apparent. I discovered that military personnel are provided orientation and

information surrounding what Waldrep, Cozza, and Chun (2004) refer to as the emotional cycle of deployment. The authors describe five phases of deployment. The first phase being pre-deployment, this occurs when the military personnel is aware that they have been assigned to the war zone but may experience a sense of denial even though the clock to leaving has started. At this phase, the military member and his/her family begin to receive training, information, and preparation for this event: the deployment. They are supported by the military, taught how to prepare for and create a "normal" life with their spouse abroad at war, and also introduced to other military spouses in the same or similar situation. This can result in the natural evolution of informal and formal support groups, where the process of normalizing what they will see, hear, and do is allowed to occur.

Up to one month from their departure date is considered the deployment phase, where many emotions arise, some expected, others not. Yet, the camaraderie witnessed highlighted that this group of military men and women strongly supported each other. They stay abreast of their normal lifestyle at home despite their direct involvement in the war. For example, they can be heard talking about sports scores back home and the latest entertainment news. Doing so provided them the relief and the balance they needed from their work in the war.

During the sustainment phase, the service person is in the midst of deployment while their family develops a new routine to accommodate to their lifestyle. During this phase, families experience their greatest challenges. The children's experiences of the absence of their parent may affect academics and behaviors in general. The parent at home may find difficulty adjusting to the responsibilities that both parents once shared. During this phase, resources to support the families' success are optimal.

The re-deployment phase occurs when the service person prepares to return home while their family prepares for their return. Excitement and anticipation is shared by all members as is the awareness that the return will affect the adaption of the family routine during the sustainment period.

The Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs

offer much in the way of debriefing post war / post deployment. This includes face to face training, emotional support with trained clinicians, and other needed activities prior to returning home.

Established resources such as the Army's Family Readiness Group, the National Military Family Association, the Air Force Key Spouse Program, Marine Corps Key Volunteer Network, and the Navy's Ombudsman's Program provides assistance, information, and support to family members of military personnel throughout the enlistment period, including times of deployment. These services are essential to reducing the stress military personnel and their families face when they are deployed overseas.

Personal hardiness is a dimension of control when a commitment to respond to a challenging and stressful event(s) occurs. Hardiness encompasses various coping styles in real-time (Crowley, Hayslip Jr., & Hobdy, 2003; Kobasa, 1979). Listening to those men and women's normal conversations allowed me to become aware of their individual hardiness and use of available resources in their efforts to reduce their stress. As a social worker, this was enlightening. Their behaviors while being with each other, conversing about normal daily activities at home, etc., were able to occur as a result of the support from within their command and from family and friends, as well as their personal resolve, focus, commitment, and hardiness to transition home, post combat. It is likely that those men and women were not appearing callous or immune; they most likely employed coping skills to preserve a sense of normalcy for themselves and their fellow personnel. This was important knowledge for this professional.

However, when military personnel return to a life, post deployment, the ability to cope with their former home routine and lifestyle is strongly challenged. It is this challenge where a social worker can provide continued support and interventions of new coping strategies to empower them during their process of change. Ford, Shaw, Sennhanser, Thacker, Chandler, et al. (1993) stated timely preventive interventions during the acute phase of the readjustment process appeared to assist veterans and their spouses in the readjustment process.

Snapshot Three

During different moments of my travels in Germany and France, I realized that, for some, life traveling abroad is not leisurely or without incident. As I observed U.S. military families separated due to deployment, their efforts to remain connected became more apparent. On one occasion, while taking base transportation, a young woman and her three children boarded our bus. This woman carried her youngest child on her back in an infant backpack. Her two other children, boys about three- and four-years-old, were holding hands as they climbed up the stairs and onto the bus. As they cautiously walked the aisle, the overall silence broke when their mother proclaimed, "Sit in the next seat." They quickly did. As she watched her boys seat themselves, she returned to the curb and began to pick up her suitcases. She clearly was struggling to walk up the stairs of the bus with an infant on her back. Spontaneously, several people leaped from their seats, assisted her, and brought her bags on the bus for her. She appeared relieved and exuberant as she displayed her appreciation.

Once comfortably seated with her children and her large bags of luggage in view, we began to converse; I was the nearest seated passenger. She shared that this was their fourth day of trying to board a flight back to the U.S. and, for many reasons out of her control, she had not been able. She and her children had spent long days at the terminal without the relief of day care or a place for the children to nap. Their meals consisted of sandwiches from Subway for lunch and cereal for dinner.

She was physically exhausted. Her face was drawn and her voice was tired. Yet, when she spoke of her visit with her husband who had already departed back to Iraq, she visually brightened. She smiled, and the drawn look on her face disappeared. She talked about how her older children laughed and played with their dad nonstop. She described how it was for them, as a couple, when he saw their infant child for the first time. Clearly, this was an emotional moment for her. Remembering those events in addition to her retelling of the experience served as an example of emotional focused coping (Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub, 1989). As I listened, I considered all the effort, struggle, and

perseverance this young mother undertook with her young children to travel from the West Coast of the United States to Germany to see her spouse and father of her children, if only for a brief visit. She never sounded disappointed about her marital separation due to her spouse's military deployment. Her observed love and dedication to her family appears to support her during these periods of transitions and tradeoffs. From our discussion, I found her to be independent, resilient, and well versed in the resources available to her, which allowed her to travel a long distance to be with her spouse and allowed him to be with his family. While she may have been weary, she was determined to remain strong in her commitment to her spouse and her family.

Snapshot Four

The most personally and professionally rewarding experience during this trip was the return flight to the United States from Germany. Having spent two long days and several closed flights to Space A travelers, I boarded as one of the last passengers on the Freedom Shuttle. The Freedom Shuttle is an independently operated commercial 737 jetliner contracted by the United States military to fly U.S. military men and women home from their duties in the war theaters of Iraq and Afghanistan. While many troops return via military transports, this airliner runs round trips three times per week from Baltimore-Washington International Airport to Ramstein, Germany and Aviano, Italy. Available seats for Space A travelers are few and infrequent.

We traveled back to the U.S. seated among men and women returning home from the front lines of the Iraqi war, either permanently or for a leave. Many looked tired yet glad to be going home. Many had carry-on duffels with white sand in the crevices and creases. Their boots, also covered in sand, were white where they were once either khaki green or tan. Some had minor wounds to their faces or limbs; one person used crutches to walk. Fortunately, all boarded the aircraft independently.

Imagine the excitement as well as anxiousness these service men and women were experiencing as they returned home. I was proud; I was humbled. I wanted to speak to one or two of them to ask about their experiences, not just about being in war, but also about returning home. Who was waiting for

them? What did they want to do first when they walked into their home? But, I did not intrude, as I realized this was their time to unwind and ready themselves for home. It would not be appropriate for me to inquire about their combat experiences, but if approached, I decided I would engage in conversation. This was a rare event to be among men and women returning home directly from a war.

Most of the flight was quiet. It was 10 hours of air time, non-stop to Baltimore. Many people slept, many people read, and some sat silently while others were engaged in soft conversations. I wondered what their thoughts might be. Maybe those first hugs, a favorite meal, a cool drink, a local newspaper, or a glance from a parent's or a child's eyes. All so intense, and yet so comforting at the same time.

As the plane approached Baltimore and prepared for landing, the lieutenant seated next to me put down his book and met my glance. Without considering anything but enthusiasm for him and the others, I said, "Welcome Home," to which the lieutenant replied, "Thanks, it's good to be on friendly soil."

Upon leaving the plane, collecting bags from the carousel, and going through U.S. Customs, the enthusiasm of the military personnel was palpable. Not only did the custom agents welcome them home with excitement, but off in the distance, in the direction of the main terminal, band music could be heard.

As the young men and women gathered up their duffels and walked towards the main terminal, they were curious, as if to ask, "What is the music all about?" They promptly found out. As they exited through the arrival gate to the main terminal, the USO was celebrating their return. The gate area was decorated with red, white, and blue balloons and banners. Marching band music from a stereo was loudly playing while military veterans from several past wars had formed a line to shake their hands as they entered the main terminal. It was a proud moment to experience, for all.

We sat and watched nearby for a long while pondering the commitment these men and women have toward all American citizens. Their certainties

and confidence in their undertakings reflect their and their family's knowledge that the tradeoffs and transitions are very important and part of their commitment to ensure our freedoms.

Conclusion

A social worker seldom has a direct opportunity to gain an awareness and knowledge of the challenges enlisted men and women encounter, including remaining connected to their loved ones when deployed away from home. With the Internet and other technological advancements, information is exchanged routinely over miles between these men and women and their families. Yet, observing and listening to their attempts to meet and spend time together in foreign lands provided me with a first-hand appreciation for the determination of a family to remain connected. They travel for days, sleep in terminals with small children while awaiting the next flight, and advance through multiple transitions in the process, trading off conveniences with the goal of spending time with their spouse, father, or mother worlds away.

There are valuable lessons gained from this adventure for the social work profession. It is essential for social workers to know that, while our freedom at home is significant, it is even greater for the men and women of our armed forces and their families. Realizing this heightened my understanding of the motivation that drives those in combat and the family members who support them. Freedom empowers them to survive on the front lines, but may also be a barrier in their transition to a different lifestyle once home. From a clinical perspective, a social worker must be knowledgeable about a person's motivation, hardiness, and drive between situations of combat and returning home, which can be either a benefit or deterrent to this transition for the service member and their family.

Another significant lesson is the ability of military families to create and maintain an emotional bond that not only promotes their lives together, but also fills the void created by the deployment separation. Specifically, the more established their respect, trust, and communication, the greater the likelihood that the deployment separation will be less costly to them and their family upon reunification.

Children are impressionable and also fragile. From

observing these young family members, this writer saw that support for them during this time needs to be rather specific and yet different from that for the spouse. Being mindful of how separation affects children in school, with their peers, with sleep habits, and with behaviors in general is important. Separation may be viewed as a trauma, a loss, even if it is situational; more so if it is permanent. As a social worker, we should not expect that their parent will be able to meet all their emotional needs while also attending to their own. They are a special population deserving special attention.

Lastly, I acquired knowledge, whether informally observed or communicated, of cultures diverse from my own. To observe service members of the Iraqi military seated with U.S. service members, exchanging conversations of humor or of focused intent, reflected their support for and respect toward the mutual goal of freedom. To converse with a service member's family regarding their efforts to spend time together during deployment affirmed their strength and ability to remain connected during periods of separation worlds away. These snapshots of military families not only provided opportunity for knowledge gained and lessons learned, but also left a lasting personal appreciation for the strength and resiliency of the family.

References

- Carver, C., Scheier, M., & Weintraub, W. (1989). Assessing coping strategies: A theoretically based approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 56(2), 267-283. Retrieved from http://ft.csa.com/ids70/resolver.php?sessid=lfmv1tqsk1pnt7ho7diu111de7&server=csawe b116v.csa.com&check=c7a992c0737533b70ecb7fe88fd1850c&db=psycarticles-set-c&key=PSP%2F56%2Fpsp_56_2_267&mode=pdf
- Cozza, S., Chun, R., & Polo, J. (2005). Military families and children during Operation Iraqi Freedom. *Psychiatric Quarterly*, 76(4), 371-378.
- Crawford, W., Crawford, A., & Crawford, R. (2008). *SPACE-A QUESTIONS & ANSWERS*. Retrieved September 19, 2008, from Military Living website: <http://www.spacea.info/faq.html>
- Crowley, B. J., Hayslip Jr., B., & Hobdy, J. (2003). Psychological hardiness and adjustment to life events in adulthood. *Journal of Adult Development*, 10(4), 237-248. doi: 10.1023/A:1026007510134

- Di Nola, G. (2008). Stressors afflicting families during military deployment. *Military Medicine*, 173(5), pp. v-vii.
- Ford, J., Shaw, D., Sennhanser, S., Greaves, D., Thacker, B., Chandler, P., Schwartz, L., & McClain, V. (1993). *Psychosocial debriefing after Operation Desert Storm: Marital and family assessment and intervention*. Retrieved from <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=20&hid=110&sid=36f873e3-591e-4c56-8e83-9d7e1fb97e84%40sessionmgr114>
- Hoshmand, L., & Hoshmand, A. (2007). Support for military families and communities. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 35(2), 171-180.
- Kobasa, S. C. (1979). Stressful life events, personality, and health: An inquiry into hardiness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37, 1-11. Retrieved from http://ft.csa.com/ids70/resolver.php?sessid=949r4bshpph1m9l3kg9ta9nk00&server=csaweb116v.csa.com&check=f6d805dd8ef3218a5f3cab45dbd6282e&db=psycarticles-set-c&key=PSP%2F37%2Fpsp_37_1_1&mode=pdf
- Knox, J., & Price, D. (1995). The changing American military family: Opportunities for social work. *Social Service Review*, 69(3), 479-497.
- Waldrep, D. A., Cozza, S. J., & Chun, R. S. (2004). The impact of deployment on the military family. In *U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, National Center for PTSD, Iraq War clinician guide* (2nd ed.). Retrieved from http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/manuals/manual-pdf/iwgcg/iraq_clinician_guide_ch_13.pdf

About the Author: Patricia Coccoma, E.D., LCSW is Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, Florida Gulf Coast University (239-590-7824; pcoccoma@fgcu.edu).