



**Chronic Fatigue in a Special Operations  
Aviation Unit: Spouse Survey**

**By**

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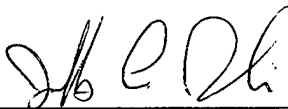
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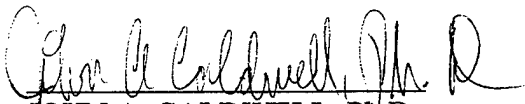


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## Introduction

In August 1994, the U.S. Army Safety Center, Fort Rucker, Alabama, requested that the U.S. Army Aeromedical Research Laboratory (USAARL), Fort Rucker, Alabama, develop a methodology for evaluating fatigue and stress levels to be applied to members of a special operations aviation unit and provide resultant findings and recommendations to the unit commander. A USAARL team was assembled, and after discussions with key unit personnel, a data collection plan devised. Both the aviation unit and USAARL team members considered it critical that data collection be accomplished with minimal manpower and be nonintrusive, while focusing on the problems of "overtasking" and operational tempo (OPTEMPO). The unit commander approved a plan consisting of several parallel efforts, including determining soldier high-risk behavior rates, accident analyses, and soldier surveys. This report describes the results of an anonymous family stress survey distributed to unit spouses in early 1995. This survey complements other parts of the evaluation by providing a glimpse of soldier behavior from the viewpoint of the family. Although a low response rate complicates the interpretation of the data, the questionnaire may be useful to aviation safety/aeromedical personnel in the future as part of a unit stress evaluation process.

## Method

### Survey

A novel survey was assembled that consisted of 41 questions of various types (e.g., job demands, domestic stress, perception of adequacy of support services, etc.; Appendix A). Some questions were adapted from previous DoD soldier surveys (e.g., Neidig, 1991), while others were specifically created for the present study.

### Procedure

The surveys were placed in envelopes along with pre-stamped return envelopes addressed to USAARL. Sufficient surveys to enable distribution to every spouse within the unit

were provided for mailing to the home of each spouse. Since security reasons precluded the release of address lists to the research team, we relied on unit administrative personnel to mail the questionnaires. Meetings were held with unit command, administrative, and medical personnel to ensure familiarity with the survey and its purpose.

Due to the anonymous nature of the survey, individual follow up to enhance compliance was not possible. Unit administrative and medical personnel were contacted several times and urged to stress the potential importance of the results of the questionnaire to unit personnel and families. These measures did result in brief surges in returned surveys.

## Results

### Respondent demographics

One hundred twenty-seven questionnaires were returned from three battalions and a separate Headquarters and Headquarters Company (HHC). Based on an estimated dependent spouse population of 1013, the overall return rate was 12.5 percent (table 1).

Table 1.  
Survey response statistics

	Spouse's unit			
	HHC	BN A	BN B	BN C
No. returned	7	25	4	73
Percent of total surveys returned (n=127)	5.5	19.7	3.1	57.5
Percent of estimated potential sample	4.0	6.0	2.0	35.0

Note: Eighteen surveys did not specify a unit affiliation (n=109). Estimated percent of potential sample was calculated from unit manpower data and a previously conducted USAARL soldier survey on the same unit (unpublished data, 1994). The proportion of soldier respondents describing themselves as married was multiplied by the reported personnel strength of each unit, which are not reported here for security reasons.

Table 2.  
Rank of soldier

	Soldier's rank			
	Commis- sioned officer	Warrant officer	NCO	Enlisted
percent returned	12.0	19.0	82.0	13.0
percent of total	09.4	15.0	64.6	10.2

Note: n=126

NCO spouses formed the largest respondent group (table 2). Information was not available to allow calculation of rank-specific response rates. Soldiers' occupations were varied and not exclusively flight-related (table 3). Sixty-eight (53.5 percent) respondents indicated their spouses were on flight status and 55 indicated they were not (n=123). Many respondents had been assigned to this particular unit for several years (figure 1).

Table 3.  
Soldier's job

	Job category					
	Maint- enance tech	Crew chief	Admin- istra- tive	Pilot	Arms tech- nician	Other
No. returned	32	31	27	25	13	32
Percent of total	20	19	17	16	8	20

Note: n=126

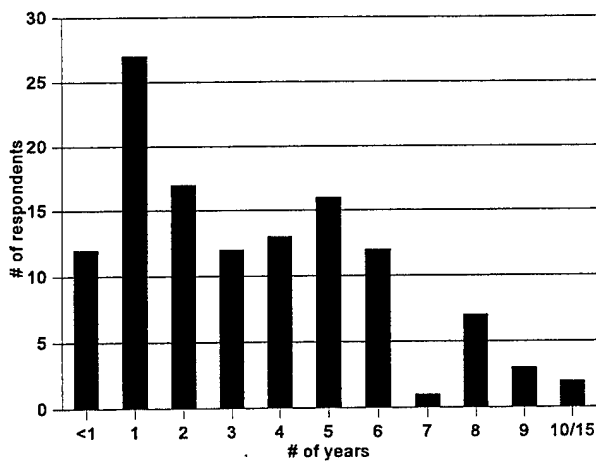


Figure 1. Number of years soldier has been assigned to this unit (n=122).

#### Job demands

Respondents' spouses were away from home on temporary duty (TDY) an average of 6.8 weeks over the past 12 months (median 6.0 weeks) (figure 2). When in garrison, soldiers worked an average of 10.5 hours per day (median 10.0 hours) (figure 3). Eighty-six percent of respondents reported that their spouses worked a 5-day work week while in garrison; 13 percent of soldiers worked 6 days per week.

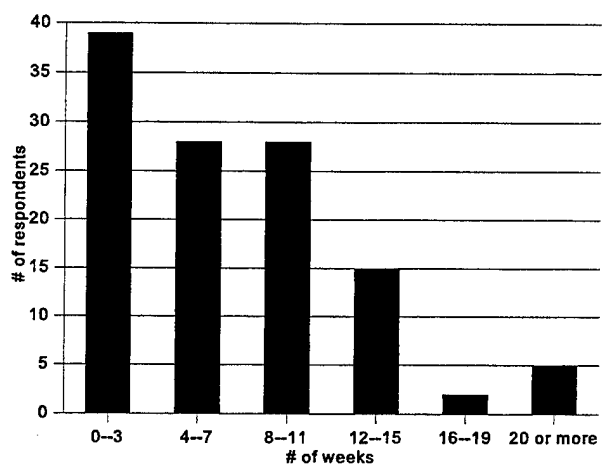


Figure 2. Number of weeks soldier was on TDY over last 12 months (n=117).

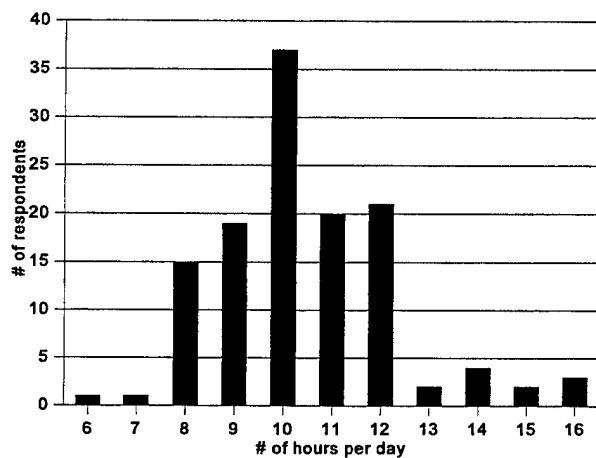


Figure 3. Hours per day soldier works while in garrison (n=125).

### Job satisfaction

Seventy-eight percent of the respondents indicated that their spouse felt "good about his/her work," and only 17 percent "wished their spouse would look for a job in a different organization" (Appendix B). Forty-two percent strongly denied that "my spouse and I have very different opinions about this organization."

### Intrusiveness of work on home life

Twenty-eight percent of the respondents agreed with the statement, "my spouse frequently brings work home," while 51 percent disagreed (Appendix B). Thirty-two percent felt that their spouse did not "get the sleep he/she needs." Over one-fourth of respondents (27 percent) strongly indicated that their spouse did not take vacations when he/she needed them, although almost one-half (46 percent) felt that their spouse did set aside time to do things he/she "really enjoys."

### Domestic stress

Respondents felt that their spouse's job exerted similar levels of stress upon them and their spouse (figure 4).

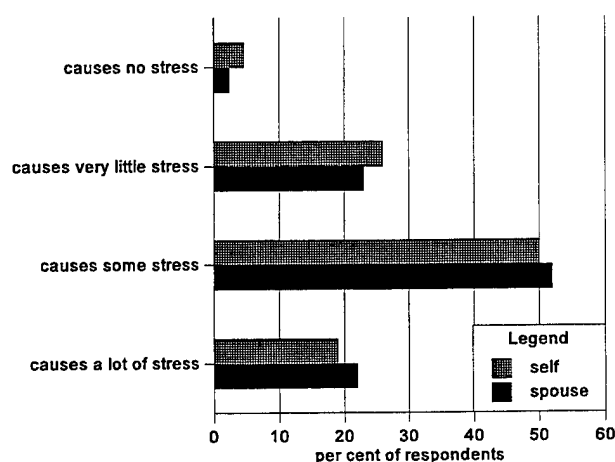


Figure 4. Rating of effect of soldier's current job on spouse's and own "stress level."

Seventy percent of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement, "My spouse and I are happy together," and over one-half (52 percent) felt that they didn't get to spend enough time with their spouse. Only 22 percent reported frequent disagreements or quarrels with their spouse.

In response to the question, "Have you sought professional counseling for marital problems anytime in the last 12 months?," 9 percent indicated that they had. Eight percent of the respondents agreed with the statement, "This assignment may end our marriage."

#### Mental health

Thirty-eight percent of the respondents felt that their spouse had lately been "easily irritated," while 41 percent did not. Sixty-four percent did not feel their spouse had been depressed lately, although 17 percent did. Only six percent felt that their spouses had been "drinking a lot lately;" 87 percent did not.

Five percent responded that they had sought counseling for personal problems "not including marital" in the past year.

#### Support services

About one-third of the respondents agreed that "the unit really cares about my well-being," while another one-third disagreed. In response to a series of questions regarding utilization of support services, most respondents appeared satisfied with the services that they had used (table 4).

Table 4.  
Assessment of support services

Support element	Rating			
	Very useful	Useful	Not useful	Never used
Chaplain (n=126)	9	7	2	81
Flight surgeon (n=124)	24	26	3	44
Psychologist (n=125)	4	9	2	84
Support groups (n=124)	18	35	10	34
Army Community Service (n=126)	8	24	2	65
Community Mental Health (n=126)	2	9	2	87
Recreation center (n=122)	13	28	2	54
Military medical care (n=126)	26	49	21	4
CHAMPUS (n=123)	24	37	11	24
School system (n=126)	8	12	2	77

Note: Numbers are expressed as percent.

#### Likes/dislikes

Respondents were asked to list the three things that they liked most about their spouse's current assignment, and the three things that they would most like changed. These narrative responses were categorized and are listed in Appendices C and D, respectively. The top three "likes" were: location, spouse enjoys work/happy/treated well, and caring people/friends. The top three things that respondents would like changed were: work schedule/TDY/ deployment, chain of command/communication, and the medical care system.

#### Discussion

Domestic life often bears the brunt of energy or frustrations that cannot be released in the "high-stress" workplace (Green, 1988). Operational military units frequently fit into this category. Assessing the home environment could provide great insight into a unit's

psychosocial situation when combined with more worker-oriented measures.

Methods for assessing the home environment commonly include a survey or interview of some type, often in the home or over the telephone. Surveys have the advantage of being potentially anonymous, which may entice some reluctant respondents to provide more honest and complete information than if there is the possibility of being identified (Berdie and Anderson, 1974). If we could be sure of a representative sampling, comparisons could be made both within this unit (e.g., among battalions or rank groups) and with external comparison groups (e.g., other civil or military aviation organizations). This was the logic in deciding how to survey this military family environment. Unfortunately, the abysmally low response rate in this study precludes any meaningful statistical analysis.

It is possible that the actual response rate is somewhat better than the 12.5 percent cited in this report. Since the unit could provide no solid data regarding the number of married soldiers, we were compelled to estimate using results from an ongoing USAARL study involving soldiers from this unit. Because that study may have under-sampled young unmarried soldiers, it may have overestimated the number of married soldiers, thereby artificially lowering the calculated response rate. However, the effect of this potential error is minute considering the low number of returned surveys.

The poor response rate may have been due to faulty questionnaire distribution or to spousal noncompliance. The large differences in response rate among the three battalions suggest that faulty distribution may have been responsible. Spousal noncompliance or apathy seems less likely in these highly motivated units, especially considering that several family issues were in public debate during the time this survey was distributed. However, spouses may have received the questionnaire and decided not to respond based on a variety of different (and unknown) factors. Although our intent was to encourage response by ensuring respondent anonymity, our consequent inability to follow-up was crippling.

It is clear that the results of this survey can be interpreted only as the opinions of a select few, who for whatever reason, chose to respond. We cannot assume that their responses are representative of the majority who did not respond (Chatfield, 1988). Despite this limitation, the data permit a few general observations:

a. More NCO spouses responded than did spouses of commissioned officers, warrant officers, or junior enlisted.

b. Battalion C had a much higher return rate than the other two battalions or the HHC (although still unacceptably low).

c. Job demands, domestic stress, and mental health of those who responded did not appear to be grossly different than the average military or civilian work force. Although no attempt has been made to rigorously compare these responses with established norms, this is in agreement with previously collected, but as yet unpublished, data from soldiers in this unit.

d. Respondents' spouses (i.e., soldiers) seem to have very high levels of job satisfaction and unit pride. This is also corroborated by previously collected soldier data.

Notwithstanding the very low response rate, the spouse survey form itself appeared to work well. In the future, when confronted with a unit concerned about chronic fatigue or morale, this survey form may be useful to researchers or unit flight surgeons. Increased attention to enhancing the response rate, possibly at the expense of absolute anonymity, should help.

As a final note, after this survey had been distributed, an excellent critique of the form was received from the Army Personnel Survey Office. Many suggested enhancements have been included in an improved survey form shown at Appendix E.

## References

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Appendix A.

Sample spouse's opinion survey

## **SPOUSE'S OPINION SURVEY**

The \_\_\_\_\_, and the US Army Aeromedical Research Laboratory are gathering information about job satisfaction and the family situation around the \_\_\_\_\_. Because you, the spouse, are an important part of the "family," we want your thoughts and opinions.

(A similar questionnaire was distributed to your spouse within the last month.) Our intent is to provide useful information to commanders and safety personnel to help improve "quality of life" in the \_\_\_\_\_.

This questionnaire is **COMPLETELY CONFIDENTIAL**. Do not write your name anywhere on the survey form. We are only interested in group opinions, not individual responses, so please feel free to tell us how you truly feel--the results will not be presented in any way that could identify you.

Please complete this short survey, and return in the enclosed, prestamped envelope to:

Commander  
US Army Aeromedical Research Laboratory  
ATTN: (SGRD-UAB) Survey  
PO Box 620577  
Fort Rucker, AL 36362

We are interested in your opinions--try not to consult with your spouse until after you have completed the survey.

**Do not write your name on any of these materials.  
Your responses will be completely anonymous.**

**Thank you for your honesty.**

*Turn page over and complete reverse side* 



Instructions: For each of the questions in this section, use the following scale and circle the number in front of each statement that reflects your agreement with that statement.

Strongly  
Disagree

Neither Agree  
Nor Disagree

Strongly  
Agree

1-----2-----3-----4-----5

1 2 3 4 5

My spouse frequently brings work home

1 2 3 4 5

My spouse feels good about his/her work

1 2 3 4 5

Lately, my spouse is easily irritated

1 2 3 4 5

Lately, my spouse has been depressed

1 2 3 4 5

I quarrel with my spouse

1 2 3 4 5

My spouse and I are happy together

1 2 3 4 5

My spouse has been drinking a lot lately

1 2 3 4 5

When my spouse needs a vacation he/she takes one

1 2 3 4 5

My spouse gets the sleep he/she needs

1 2 3 4 5

My spouse sets aside time to do the things he/she really enjoys

1 2 3 4 5

This assignment may end our marriage

1 2 3 4 5

The unit really cares about my well-being

1 2 3 4 5

I wish my spouse would look for a job in a different organization

1 2 3 4 5

My spouse and I have very different opinions about this organization

1 2 3 4 5

My spouse and I spend enough time with each other

1 2 3 4 5

My spouse and I disagree about a lot of things

Instructions: For the next question, circle the word that expresses your feelings about the usefulness of each of the following support services, in your family's experience:

CHAPLAIN	never used	very useful	useful	not useful
FLIGHT SURGEON	never used	very useful	useful	not useful
PSYCHOLOGIST	never used	very useful	useful	not useful
SPOUSE SUPPORT GROUPS	never used	very useful	useful	not useful
ARMY COMMUNITY SERVICES (ACS)	never used	very useful	useful	not useful
COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH	never used	very useful	useful	not useful
RECREATION CENTER	never used	very useful	useful	not useful
MEDICAL CARE	never used	very useful	useful	not useful
SCHOOL SYSTEM	never used	very useful	useful	not useful
OTHER: _____		very useful	useful	not useful

---

Please list three things that you like most about your spouse's current assignment:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Please list three things that you would like changed about your spouse's current assignment:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

---

Feel free to write any thoughts or comments on the reverse side of this questionnaire. Please return the survey using the pre-addressed envelope to Commander, US Army Aeromedical Research Laboratory, ATTN: SGRD-UAB (Survey), PO Box 620577, Fort Rucker, AL 36362-0577. Thank you very much for your cooperation and time. Your responses will remain completely confidential.

Appendix B.

Tabular results of agreement scales

Appendix B. Tabular results of agreement scales (count data)

My spouse frequently brings work home.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
37	19	25	16	15

Note: 15 missing data

My spouse feels good about his/her work.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
5	8	12	38	49

Note: 15 missing data

Lately, my spouse is easily irritated.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
28	18	23	21	22

Note: 15 missing data

Lately, my spouse has been depressed.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
55	18	22	8	9

Note: 15 missing data

I quarrel with my spouse often.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
51	19	19	11	12

Note: 15 missing data

My spouse and I are happy together.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
7	3	10	14	78

Note: 15 missing data

My spouse has been drinking a lot lately.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
90	8	8	5	1

Note: 15 missing data

When my spouse needs a vacation, he/she takes one.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
32	19	24	17	20

Note: 15 missing data

My spouse gets the sleep he/she needs.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
15	19	26	26	26

Note: 15 missing data

My spouse sets aside time to do the things he/she really enjoys.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
16	22	24	23	27

Note: 15 missing data

This assignment may end our marriage.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
85	5	14	1	7

Note: 15 missing data

The unit really cares about my well-being.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
16	21	35	25	15

Note: 15 missing data

I wish my spouse would look for a job in a different organization.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
57	9	27	6	13

Note: 15 missing data

My spouse and I have very different opinions about this organization

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
49	10	37	10	6

Note: 15 missing data

My spouse and I spend enough time with each other.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
25	32	15	23	17

Note: 15 missing data

My spouse and I disagree about a lot of things.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
49	19	19	15	10

Note: 15 missing data

Appendix C.

Compilation of respondents' likes about  
spouse's current assignment

Appendix C.

Three things liked most about spouse's current assignment

Category	# responses
location	42
spouse enjoys work/ happy/treated well	33
caring people/friends	24
work schedule	20
stability	17
support groups	15
close to family/home	12
training/school	10
pride in/quality of unit	9
money	8
family-oriented organization	4
travel	4
both in same unit	3
command information	3
good commander	3
no advantages	3
special organization	3
interesting for spouse	2
public schools/school system	2
special ops above normal	2
well-equipped	2
care while husband away	1
doctor and medics good	1
mission important	1
no females in unit	1
promotion opportunity	1
safe working conditions	1

Appendix D.

Compilation of things respondents would like changed about  
spouse's current assignment

Appendix D.

Three things would like changed about spouse's assignment

Category	# responses
work schedule/TDY/deployment	47
chain of command/communication	17
medical care system	15
support groups	10
lack of encouragement/ care for soldier	9
no problems	8
mandatory events	7
money	6
lack of pilots/personnel	5
location	5
opportunity for promotion	5
training/school	5
lack of knowledgeable/ responsible personnel	4
lack of activities	4
child care	2
danger/threat to soldier	2
favoritism	2
limited/poor housing	2
attitude of soldiers re:women	1
distance of work from home	1
excessive calls at home	1
husband unhappy/stressed out	1
motor pool excluded from activities	1
PT standards abnormal	1
paperwork problems	1
too many NCOs	1

Appendix E.  
Revised spouse opinion survey

# **SPOUSE'S OPINION SURVEY**

**We are gathering information about job satisfaction and the family situation around the unit. Because you, the spouse, are an important part of the military "family," we want your thoughts and opinions. Our intent is to provide useful information to commanders and safety personnel to help improve "quality of life" in this unit.**

**THE SURVEY IS ANONYMOUS. Your responses are anonymous because you do not provide your name, social security number, or information by which you can be identified. Only persons involved in collecting or preparing the information for analysis will have access to completed survey questionnaires. Only group statistics will be reported.**

**YOUR PARTICIPATION IS NEEDED. The Army needs information from you in order to make informed decisions. Your participation in the survey is voluntary. Failure to respond to any question will not result in any penalty. However, your participation is encouraged so that the data will be complete and representative of all soldiers/spouses.**

**Please complete this short survey, and return in the enclosed, prestamped envelope to:**

**Commander  
US Army Aeromedical Research Laboratory  
ATTN: (SGRD-UAB) Survey  
PO Box 620577  
Fort Rucker, AL 36362**

**We are interested in your opinions--try not to consult with your spouse until after you have completed the survey.**

**Do not write your name on any of these materials.  
Your responses will be completely anonymous.**

**Thank you for your honesty.**

*turn page over and complete reverse side* 

## Spouse Questionnaire

1. Please circle your spouse's unit:
2. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_ (years)
3. What rank category is your spouse?  
 commissioned officer (O-1 and above)  
 warrant officer (W-1 to W-5)  
 NCO (E-5 to E-9)  
 enlisted soldier (E-1 to E-4)
4. Is your spouse on flight status?  
 yes  
 no  
 don't know
5. Please check which of the following describes your spouse's job:  
 pilot  
 maintenance technician  
 crew chief  
 armament technician  
 administration  
 other (please describe) \_\_\_\_\_
6. Is your spouse a supervisor in this unit?
7. How many years has your spouse been assigned to this unit? \_\_\_\_\_ years
8. How many weeks has your spouse been deployed or on official travel in the past 6 months? \_\_\_\_\_ weeks
9. On the average, how many **hours per day** does your spouse work (when not deployed)? \_\_\_\_\_ hours/day
10. On the average, how many **days per week** does your spouse work (when not deployed)? \_\_\_\_\_ days/week
11. How would you rate the effect of your spouse's current job on **HIS/HER** "stress level"?  
 causes a lot of stress  
 causes some stress  
 causes very little stress  
 causes no stress
12. How would you rate the effect of your spouse's current job on **YOUR** "stress level"?  
 causes a lot of stress  
 causes some stress  
 causes very little stress  
 causes no stress
13. Have you sought professional counselling for **marital problems** anytime in the last 12 months?  
 yes  
 no
14. Have you sought counselling for personal problems (**not including marital**) anytime in the last 12 months?  
 yes  
 no

Instructions: For each of the questions in this section, use the following scale and circle the number in front of each statement that reflects your agreement with that statement.

Strongly Disagree                      Neither Agree Nor Disagree                      Strongly Agree  
1-----2-----3-----4-----5

- 1 2 3 4 5                      My spouse frequently brings work home
- 1 2 3 4 5                      My spouse feels good about his/her work
- 1 2 3 4 5                      Lately, my spouse is easily irritated
- 1 2 3 4 5                      Lately, my spouse has been depressed
- 1 2 3 4 5                      I quarrel with my spouse
- 1 2 3 4 5                      My spouse and I are happy together
- 1 2 3 4 5                      My spouse has been drinking a lot lately
- 1 2 3 4 5                      When my spouse needs a vacation he/she takes one
- 1 2 3 4 5                      My spouse gets the sleep he/she needs
- 1 2 3 4 5                      My spouse sets aside time to do the things he/she really enjoys
- 1 2 3 4 5                      This assignment may end our marriage
- 1 2 3 4 5                      The unit really cares about my well-being
- 1 2 3 4 5                      I wish my spouse would look for a job in a different organization
- 1 2 3 4 5                      My spouse and I have very different opinions about this organization
- 1 2 3 4 5                      My spouse and I spend enough time with each other
- 1 2 3 4 5                      My spouse and I disagree about a lot of things

go to next page and continue answering questions 

Instructions: For the next question, circle the word that expresses your feelings about the usefulness of each of the following support services, in your family's experience:

CHAPLAIN	never used	very useful	useful	not useful
FLIGHT SURGEON	never used	very useful	useful	not useful
PSYCHOLOGIST	never used	very useful	useful	not useful
SPOUSE SUPPORT GROUPS	never used	very useful	useful	not useful
ARMY COMMUNITY SERVICES (ACS)	never used	very useful	useful	not useful
COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH	never used	very useful	useful	not useful
RECREATION CENTER	never used	very useful	useful	not useful
MEDICAL CARE				
military-provided	never used	very useful	useful	not useful
CHAMPUS-provided	never used	very useful	useful	not useful
SCHOOL SYSTEM (children's education)				
military system	never used	very useful	useful	not useful
civilian system	never used	very useful	useful	not useful
OTHER: _____		very useful	useful	not useful

Please list three things that you like most about your spouse's current assignment:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Please list three things that you would like changed about your spouse's current assignment:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Feel free to write any thoughts or comments on the reverse side of this questionnaire. Please return the survey using the pre-addressed envelope to Commander, US Army Aeromedical Research Laboratory, ATTN: SGRD-UAB (Survey), PO Box 620577, Fort Rucker, AL 36362-0577. Thank you very much for your cooperation and time. Your responses will remain completely confidential.