

BUILDING (FAMILY) MUSCLE: HOW PROLONGED CONFLICTS CAN STRENGTHEN MILITARY FAMILIES

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**BUILDING (FAMILY) MUSCLE:
HOW PROLONGED CONFLICTS CAN STRENGTHEN MILITARY FAMILIES**

by

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BUILDING (FAMILY) MUSCLE:
HOW PROLONGED CONFLICTS CAN STRENGTHEN MILITARY FAMILIES

Our families have been with us in a way that some of us would not have imagined possible back in 2001.¹

—Admiral Michael G. Mullen
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

In the years since the inception of the all-volunteer service, military families have undergone a nearly transparent, yet profound metamorphosis. Once viewed by the institution as an afterthought (epitomized by the infamous adage “if the Army wanted you to have a wife they would have issued you one”), today they are recognized universally for their significant contributions, with entire organizations throughout the Armed Forces designed to focus specifically on the needs of the military family.² Changes in society and subsequently the military forced the services to modify both its attitude toward military families and its policies.

The effects of prolonged conflict and its likely continuance into the near future are now beginning to manifest themselves in military families. The figures associated with the current fight are well documented and sobering:

Since September 11, 2001, American military service personnel and their families have endured challenges and stressful conditions that are unprecedented in recent history, including unrelenting operational demands and recurring deployments in combat zones. Approximately 1.5 million American troops have been deployed in support of the war effort; one-third of them have served at least two tours in a combat zone, 70,000 have been deployed three times, and 20,000 have been deployed at least five times.³

Many see the current prolonged conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan as an obvious contributor to the stress military families experience. Pundits argue that the war on terror (known today as the war against al-Qaida), which requires service members to

deploy repeatedly in harm's way, has irrevocably damaged the military family.⁴ The prolonged conflict, they contend, has created a casualty of war that history tends to forget: the military family. Increased divorce rates, rising suicide rates, increases in domestic violence, problems in schools with children of deployed parents, are just some of the many symptoms, they argue. Military families are without question experiencing high levels of stress and feeling the strains of the relentless operational tempo (OPTEMPO). They are, however by no means broken. Like the weight lifter who spends hours in the gym building a stronger body, families are similarly becoming more resilient after ten years of prolonged fighting. The weight lifter knows that in order to build muscle, he or she must stress the muscle to the extent that it breaks down at the cellular level, resulting in increased protein synthesis, which produces thicker muscle fibers. He also knows that muscles grow during rest, not during training. Without adequate time to recover, the muscle building process regresses. Today's military families are analogous to the weight lifter; stressed by each subsequent deployment experience, but with proper training and adequate time to rest and recover, they too can become stronger.

It is important to conduct a critical examination of the assumptions and findings regarding how ten years of war has affected military families. A critical analysis requires us to carefully consider both the positive and negative aspects. How would today's military families withstand and cope with the typical daily stressors of military life had there not been the need to fight the global war on terror? Put another way, are families weakened by the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment that they live in today, or are they stronger? Research has shown that with knowledge and

a set of realistic expectations, military family members can and do adapt to the challenges of military life; become self-reliant and confident; and lead fulfilling, satisfying family lives.⁵

How is it possible that the VUCA environment in which military families currently function serve to strengthen them? Recent studies and articles certainly do not support this viewpoint. A *USA Today* article heralds the debilitating effects deployments have on spouses and children, stating wives of soldiers sent to war suffered significantly higher rates of mental health issues than those whose husbands stayed home.⁶ The *New England Journal of Medicine* published a report that found “prolonged deployment was associated with more mental health diagnoses among U.S. Army wives.”⁷ Recent Congressional testimony identified similar concerns with children of deployed service members, citing “children of deployed parents suffer more emotional issues, particularly if separations are long or the parent at home is troubled.”⁸ Clearly, no good can come from a family’s exposure to the prolonged and repeated deployments their service members experience. Or can it?

The Evolution of the Military Family

Before attempting to answer this question, it is prudent to first look briefly at the progression of today’s military family. This retrospective will provide a much needed framework and insight on how families, society, and the military have collectively evolved, and how this evolution bears on military families today and in the future.

Since the inception of our Nation’s first organized and armed force, family members have played important, albeit behind the scenes, roles in its growth and development. Wives often accompanied their spouses into battle and performed services such as cooking, sewing, cleaning, and even loading and firing muskets. The

American Army “first took note of service members’ families in 1794, when a death allocation of cash was designated to widows and orphans of officers killed in battle.”⁹ Globally recognized today as the world’s premier war fighting force, the United States Armed Forces owes a debt of gratitude to the families for their unconditional support to those in uniform. Despite their sacrifices, recognition of the importance of military families by the military has taken quite some time to translate into meaningful support.

Militaries and families amount to what Rose Coser calls “greedy institutions” in that they both require “great demands of individuals in terms of commitments, loyalty, time, and energy.”¹⁰ Historically, the family took the back seat to the needs of the military services. As the military continued to evolve and transform through the First World War, there was no equal emphasis placed on family programs. Much of the stagnation was attributed to “faulty assumptions and ingrained prejudices against family inclusion in its ranks.”¹¹

The services’ attitude began to thaw in the early 20th century, due in part to the public law enacted by Congress in 1942, which granted basic benefits for military family members. Yet it would be another twenty years before the family support programs we know today would begin to take shape. By the 1960s, military families outnumbered uniformed personnel. This factor, combined with the significant social changes of the period served as a forcing mechanism for the Army to develop a Family Support Program under the direction and leadership of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel.¹²

By the end of the 1970s, the advent of the All-Volunteer Army would bring the needs of military families to the forefront, and senior Army leadership established the first *Quality of Life Program* to address those needs. One could argue that this period

represented a time where the services were merely paying lip service to military families. For example, it was not until the early 1980s, when Chief of Staff of the Army (CSA) General John Wickham's *The Army Family White Paper*¹³ properly identified the connection between viable family support programs and a quality force. As the foundational basis of today's *Army Family Action Plan* (AFAP), Wickham's writings placed the responsibility for family readiness squarely on the shoulders of the Army, calling it an "institutional obligation to articulate a philosophy for its families."¹⁴ Perhaps most significantly, Wickham's paper acknowledged that the military family was no longer that of his generation or those of days past. Wickham recognized that the military family's organization and dynamics mirrored those that occurred in society. The definition of the traditional family now included single parent families, couples without children, working spouses, and an increase in divorce rates, all requiring changes in how the military supported its families.¹⁵ During the Cold War era, family support programs took root and became more visible on the radars of senior leaders. As the Cold War concluded and new emerging threats required a shift from a stationary to expeditionary military, roles and responsibilities within American families changed as well. Working military spouses went from being a begrudgingly accepted anomaly to the expected norm in many circles, and expectations that family support services would meet, if not exceed their civilian equivalent, became the general rule of thumb.

Despite this recognition and efforts made by all of the services to address these issues, CSA General Erik Shinseki accurately surmised, "We have made wonderful progress in twenty years of Army-wide effort, yet much remains to be done."¹⁶

Services began to place greater emphasis on improving quality of life in housing, schools, daycare, and customer service. Many assignments once considered “hardship tours” are now permanent change of station moves in recognition of the importance of keeping families together and the negative impacts of separation. Managing expectations of service members and their families began to take on a significant role in the overall effort to improve quality of life. Today, the Department of Defense (DoD) has established the *Millennium Cohort Study*, a “large longitudinal occupational health study designed and initiated prior to the combat deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan specifically to assess any short or long-term health outcomes during and after military service and career.”¹⁷ Additionally, the *Army’s Well-Being* program, initiated in the early 2000s, recognized the need to provide holistic care for Soldiers and their families:

The objective of Army Well-Being is to address the physical, material, mental and spiritual needs of each member of the Total Army Family so they have the opportunity to achieve each of these goals to the degree they desire, enhancing their preparedness to perform and support the Army’s mission.¹⁸

These advancements ostensibly took a step backward in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001. The VUCA environment of post 9-11 supplanted the somewhat predictable military lifestyle of the post Cold War era. Army policies that once looked to stabilize families and soldiers at installations for four to five years, as opposed to two to three, became difficult to honor. Families now faced the frightening reality of multiple deployments, prolonged separations and the increased risk of injury or death of their service member.

As families adapted and adjusted to the changing environment, the simultaneous introduction of communications technology added a new dynamic. With the advent of technology, specifically the explosion of the internet and social media, family members

virtually bridged the separation gap created by deployments. Cellular phone technology, email, social networks like Facebook and video teleconferencing tools like Skype now enable family members to stay in touch and informed on events that just ten years ago were generally off limits. This advancement may serve as a double-edged sword, particularly as the technology continues to mature and gains a wider audience. The speed by which information is exchanged, combined with the ability to contact deployed personnel may result in tragic consequences. In some cases, the news about the death of a service member is on Facebook before families receive formal notification from the service.¹⁹ In spite of this, the Army, as noted in a recent CNN article titled *Military Families Call Facebook A Blessing*, has fully embraced social networking for military families.²⁰

All of these factors, improved quality of life and family support programs, lessons learned through repeated exposure to prolonged separations, and the accessibility to information and ease of communication with deployed service members offer great promise for military families. Leveraged properly, leaders can use many of the positive aspects (technology in particular) to lead, shape, and strengthen today's military family. Recent studies of military wives of deployed service members substantiate this observation. One study found that the deployment experience left spouses with greater feelings of independence and strength, leading to "the emergence of the high levels of marital and individual happiness.....that could be pillars on which to build programs and services, versus the focus on the negative aspects of deployment."²¹

Framing Today's Environment

With a proper perspective on the military family's evolution during the past half century, we can now further examine how today's environment and military lifestyle

affects them. The demands and affects of military life on military family members are important to consider for both Active Component (AC) and Reserve Component (RC).

The prolonged conflict endured by many family members during the past decade explains why OPTEMPO is the most frequently cited demand placed on military families.²² Additionally, the definition of the military family continues to evolve, and now includes dual military couples, blended families and younger married couples. The number of married personnel has steadily increased throughout the twentieth century, and today, fifty-five percent of the force is married and 40 percent have two children.²³ The significant numbers of younger families with relatively limited life experience, combined with the OPTEMPO of post 9/11, tend to magnify the stressors military families typically experience.²⁴

Deployments and OPTEMPO notwithstanding, families are, by virtue of their association with the military, conditioned to deal with varying levels of stress. There were and remain several other constant demands, including risk of death or injury, frequent relocation, living overseas and behavioral expectations that perhaps help families better cope with the stresses associated with repeated deployments. A 2010 Military Lifestyle Survey of over 3,600 AC and RC service member families suggests as much, revealing, “Even though deployment stress is widespread, reported mental health problems are limited,” and “on the whole, military families are experiencing high levels of stress but are coping.”²⁵ Sixty-three percent of those surveyed were between the ages of 25 and 44; the results perhaps reflect a gradual strengthening of families who have experienced prolonged conflict.

The inherent risk of death or injury is another demand that military family members face, even when their loved one is in a garrison environment. Training and off duty vehicle accidents, illness, homicide and suicide are some of the reasons attributed to peacetime deaths. Studies show that hostile deaths actually accounted for less than 2% of military deaths from 1980 to 2008, while accidents accounted for the majority.²⁶ One could argue that this habitual exposure to the harsh realities of the military lifestyle prepares military families to cope with the possibility of death.

With many military families moving every two to three years, frequent relocation is another aspect of the military lifestyle that can contribute to unintended negative consequences on quality of life.²⁷ Military services traditionally relocate service members in order to ensure parity and meet the demands of the strategic missions they support. While many service and family members consider living and traveling abroad one of the fringe benefits of serving in the military, there are some drawbacks. They include decreased employment opportunities for spouses, lack of continuity in the education of schoolchildren, and shortage of available housing at new installations.²⁸

Finally, many military families find that there is a distinct difference with regard to their behavioral expectations when compared to their civilian family counterparts. Many military families, and particularly those that live on military installations, find the military lifestyle, culture, ethics, and tradition indelibly imprinted upon the family's fabric. Yet as roles and expectations within society evolve (e.g., working spouses, blended families, religious freedoms, sexual orientation, etc.) military families more frequently tend to rebuff some of these norms. Unlike past generations, there may be increased reluctance among today's Soldiers and families to accept longstanding Army traditions,

particularly those that affect the balance between work and family.²⁹ Rejection of these norms, which arguably contribute to stability and a sense of purpose, may cause additional stress to the military family.

Similar factors also affect service members who serve in a part time capacity. For the first time in recent history, National Guard (NG) and RC forces are part of a routine deployment cycle in support of the war on terror and homeland security. The NG and RC mobilized over 575,000 since September 11, 2001.³⁰ Once considered a force multiplier in a supporting role or “round out” capacity, these units now deploy as the lead effort just as often as their active duty counterparts. While the demands placed on AC and RC families operating in today’s VUCA environment are arguably very similar, research indicates there are unique aspects of RC families that may help them better cope with the demands of the military.³¹

An important factor is the maturity of the marriage or relationship. In the Army, 45% of NG and RC service members are married. Nearly 25% of all Soldiers in the NG and the RC are older than 40, whereas the average age of all active duty Soldiers is 29.³² Studies similarly indicate Soldiers and spouses in the RC have been married longer than their AC counterparts. There is, not surprisingly, a direct correlation between length of marriage and spouses’ successful adjustment and coping with mobilization and deployment.³³ As such, the relative maturity of marriages may provide an important indicator of coping potential for leaders in AC units to consider and closely monitor.

Another factor unique to RC families is spousal employment. Research indicates a higher percentage of RC spouses work full-time or part-time outside of the home

compared to their AC counterparts. An obvious benefit of spousal employment is the additional income. A secondary, but perhaps more important benefit is that employment serves as a source of social support for RC spouses, helping to alleviate the stress of mobilization and deployment.³⁴

While maturity of the couple and spouse employment may prove helpful in coping with the demands of the military lifestyle, it does not necessarily guarantee success one hundred per cent of the time. The earliest deployments of post 9-11 challenged many RC families, like AC families with making the mental transition from peacetime to prolonged armed conflict.³⁵ Over time, the transition became easier, as RC and NG service members contributed significantly to operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and within the United States. Another contributing factor may have been better advance notification of pending deployments and shared best practices resulting in improvements in administrative procedures.³⁶

Regarding the effects these experiences have on family members of the NG and RC, there are subtle nuances that warrant further discourse. National Guard family members, for example, tend to enjoy a distinct connection with their local communities due in large part to the nature of the NG mission. "Because of its dual role (and associated semi-independent funding structure), the NG has a strong family support program that includes well-organized state-level family support services".³⁷ RC families, on the other hand, may face a slight disadvantage. RC personnel generally mobilize as individual "augmentees" and deploy with other units as needed. Additionally, many RC units are specialized, comprised of Soldiers with unique professional and technical skills that must travel great distances from their home area to fulfill their military obligations.

As a result, maintaining connectivity with families can be challenging, but has improved as deployments become more frequent due to heightened awareness on the part of units and community members.³⁸

Despite these differences, families of both NG and RC service members share a common bond because of recurring deployments, known as the “suddenly military” phenomenon. This axiom neatly captures the concept of deployments becoming as commonplace in the RC as in the AC. Families of NG and RC service members routinely experience circumstances and pressures similar to those of AC families.³⁹ Ultimately, AC leadership can glean invaluable lessons from the RC regarding keys to families coping with the VUCA environment.

Effects of VUCA on Today’s Military Family

With the development of the 21st century military family as a backdrop, we now can critically assess the data researchers have collected that evaluates how the VUCA environment affects families. Most often, these reports, as mentioned earlier, present a “doom and gloom” picture, rarely finding anything positive for military leaders and families to capitalize on. Researchers use several indicators or factors to determine the impact the military lifestyle has on families. They often include domestic violence statistics, divorce rates, and poor performance of military children in school.⁴⁰

A recent Government Accountability Office report, titled “Military Personnel: Sustained Leadership and Oversight Needed to Improve DOD’s Prevention and Treatment of Domestic Abuse,” provides intriguing data that contradicts some of the more commonly held beliefs. Since 2000, the number of substantiated incidents in DoD’s Family Advocacy Program’s Central Registry has actually *decreased* each year. Some might argue that the probability for domestic violence occurring will naturally

decline given the number of service members who have been frequently deployed since 2001. While family advocacy officials do attribute the decline to “intimate partners being separated more frequently,” they also credit “other factors, such as public awareness and other prevention methods.”⁴¹ Of note, the numbers of incidents increased from 2008 to 2009, attributed to “the increased stress of repeated deployments, financial stresses and other factors.”⁴² In 2007, President Bush ordered a 20,000-troop surge in Iraq, which resulted in the extension of 12-month tours to 15 months. While most families could manage a yearlong deployment, the additional 90 days became insurmountable to some, with widespread reports of some publicly vocalizing their displeasure with the decision. The line between growth and injury is fragile indeed, and these events serve as a powerful reminder of how building families and building muscle are quite similar. Without adequate time to prepare, rest, and recover, damage occurs instead of growth.

Another data point commonly viewed as indicative of the toll the VUCA environment has taken on military families is divorce rates. In the RAND Corporation’s 2007 study on military marriages, “existing models of marriage suggest that military couples should be ill equipped to cope with the regular relocations, lengthy deployments, and physical threats that military service entails.”⁴³ Indeed, in those instances where service members suffer with post-traumatic stress disorder or severe physical injury, marriages are more likely to dissolve under the subsequent strain these medical conditions placed on the relationship. Interestingly, the study reveals:

The majority of service members, however, do not experience these adverse outcomes. Absent these specific sources of strain, merely serving in the military or being deployed has not been reliably linked to poorer

marital outcomes, and, as the results of the current analyses reveal, may in fact lead to reduced rates of marital dissolution.⁴⁴

How is it that families most at risk for failed marriages survive and apparently reduce the risk for dissolution? Various military programs, for one, provide formal and informal support systems that counter the vulnerabilities military marriages and families typically face. Family Readiness Groups, Army Community Services, social service, and assistance programs, as well as communities that collectively experience the same challenges help to manage and even anticipate problems. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the study finds that “when the stresses of military service are at their peak, most couples may be able to cope effectively,”⁴⁵ adding, “in general, the more the armed forces adapt to family needs, the greater the commitment of both service members and their families to the institution.”⁴⁶ In other words, investing in the needs of families yields great return to the military as an institution. Perhaps most telling, the study refutes the commonly held belief about how deployments adversely affect military marriages:

...the conventional wisdom...turns out to be wrong. Whereas media reports and military leaders themselves describe deployments as harming marriages, our analyses suggest, based on ten years of data from the entire population of the military, that deployments generally reduce risk of marital dissolution.⁴⁷

Finally, research shows that the longer the deployment of a married service member, the lower the subsequent risk of ending the marriage.⁴⁸ This is due in large part to the improved benefits, awareness, education, and focus on quality family programs over the past decade.

Children are another litmus test for the degree of impact the military lifestyle has on military families. As with marriage, the general belief is that certain aspects of the

military adversely affect children, especially in areas of social and educational development. Frequent and extended separations seem to have the greatest impact, with studies showing that children, particularly those under the age of six, are most likely to struggle. “Parental absences and geographic mobility do negatively impact military children’s test scores—especially children with single parents, mothers in the Army, younger children, and children with ‘lower-ability’ parents.”⁴⁹

Another recent RAND Corporation study indicates deployments have also taken their toll on children, as reflected in “greater difficulties in children’s social and emotional functioning, at least based on caregiver reports.”⁵⁰ Children in military families experienced emotional and behavioral difficulties at rates above national averages.⁵¹ Nearly one-third of the children surveyed reported symptoms of anxiety, and older youths and boys reported more difficulties with school and more problem behaviors, such as fighting. Younger children and girls reported anxiety symptoms.

A recent study on military families disputed this widely accepted notion. “Despite the challenges of the military way of life, military children fare well, on average, when compared with their civilian peers in terms of academic achievement, consistently scoring better in the major testing areas.”⁵² Finally, studies found a correlation between living on military installations and reduced problems for children both during and after deployments.⁵³ Whereas NG and RC families have closer relationships with their communities, the transient nature of AC families may preclude such a relationship, even if they reside off-post. The prolonged conflict, repeated deployments, and the resultant problems military children experience in school and social settings served to move education officials to action. After a decade of war, educators have, just as military

families, adjusted to meet the needs of schoolchildren. Today they quickly identify potential symptoms and understand the associated challenges military children face.⁵⁴ The result is a comprehensive approach in both the military and civilian education systems that help families manage and cope with the military lifestyle.

What are military families saying? This paper identifies varying viewpoints and findings concerning prolonged and repeated deployments, separation, divorce rates, domestic violence, and children's education. How do these findings lash up with what the families are reporting as important issues? AFAP, instituted in the early 1980s to address family quality of life issues, is the Army's primary means of assessing family issues and measuring the effectiveness of its family programs. Each year, installations across the force identify and prioritize their respective top issues and vet them through each geographic combatant command for presentation at the annual Headquarters Department of the Army (HQDA) level AFAP conference. The forum, which includes elected family member representatives, subsequently prioritizes the top issues for action by the Army's senior leaders. This process has resulted in hundreds of legislative and policy changes and improvements in programs, many of which focus on families.⁵⁵

The top five family issues identified at the 2011 AFAP conference included: formal standardized training for designated caregivers of wounded warriors; medically retired service member's eligibility for concurrent receipt of disability pay; military child development program fee cap; and medical retention processing two-time restrictions for RC Soldiers.⁵⁶

These issues do not indicate a significant or systemic problem with more commonly associated deployment related issues like domestic violence, divorce, or

problems in the school. This is not to say that these problems no longer exist or that the current VUCA environment no longer exacerbates them. Since none of these AFAP issues directly relate to families and deployments, perhaps they serve as a reflection of the military's family's continued strengthening in the face of the challenges borne of persistent conflict.

Future Implications

On the surface, and perhaps during the first years of the war on terror, the effects on family members were reportedly largely negative in nature. Service members, spouses, children, and the services *writ large* were not totally prepared and did not anticipate some of the challenges discussed in this paper. Over time, the services adapted admirably, and studies show these changes have had positive impacts on military families. As the war on terror approaches its ten-year anniversary, what are the future implications for military families? Several recent studies on the impact of deployments on marriages and children offer insight to what the future may hold.

First, a RAND Corporation study conducted in 2006, found that, "Deployment pay helps to offset negative aspects of deployment. Military officials should examine additional ways to compensate personnel who are sent on long, difficult, or dangerous deployments or are deployed frequently."⁵⁷

Another study reveals society as a whole and public opinion play a vital role in the resilience of military families. Dr. Leonard Wong's research on the effects of multiple deployments on adolescents provides fresh insight and perspective. He identifies three factors; sports, strong families, and personal beliefs that Americans support the war, that have the greatest potential to offset the negative impacts experienced by families during deployments.⁵⁸ Interestingly, his findings also dispel the notion that cumulative

deployments degrade the military family, and conclude, “The strongest predictor of an adolescent’s ability to cope with a life of deployments is the child’s perception that their deployed parent is making a difference.”⁵⁹ While Wong’s research reflects only a small sampling of the greater military adolescent population, his findings indicate we may need to reconsider previous assumptions and warrant additional study.

There is a general acceptance that not enough research exists to corroborate possible trends and results. Specifically, more studies must be done in the area of military marriages and how military couples function. To date, most research in this area has merely scratched the surface by focusing on raw data, and “requires research that moves beyond administrative and survey data to examine military couples directly.”⁶⁰ Additionally, there have been no extensive studies on the impact of military service on families from initial entry to conclusion (separation or retirement). “Advancing our understanding of how military service affects military families requires research that, at minimum, assesses these families at the outset of their service, and then again at some point after their service has ended.”⁶¹ Finally, the psychological and social impact of the prolonged conflict on families is an area that deserves more study.

Strategic leaders within the DoD should monitor several areas regarding the sustainment of military families in the VUCA environment. The Obama administration recently published a strategy for strengthening military families that succinctly captures essential areas requiring strategic leader focus. It identifies four priorities that speak to the concerns and challenges of families: well-being and psychological health; improvements in military children’s education; career and educational opportunities for spouses; and improving childcare services and availability.⁶² The initiative calls for a

coordinated, government-wide approach to address these issues by harnessing the requisite resources and expertise to better enable and empower military families.

Strategic Leader Imperatives

Current research identifies core principles⁶³ that strategic leaders must recognize and use as a means to counter the negative impacts the VUCA environment exacts on military families.

First, senior leaders must manage expectations. They do this by helping family members acknowledge the sacrifices that are required of them daily, even if their service member is in garrison or has never deployed. These sacrifices range from the death or serious injury of a service member to the loss of employment and putting personal career and educational goals on hold, to extended and repeated periods of separation.⁶⁴

Second, there are constant fundamental stressors that military families will face for the duration of their time with the military. They include separation, relocation, and risk of service member injury or death. Senior leaders must empower and help family members, particularly those new to the military, grow in response to these stressors in order to develop positive coping skills. The Army's Comprehensive Soldier Fitness initiative gives leaders a powerful and proven tool to influence how families learn to manage these constant stressors.

Third, some of the demands of military life, if not managed properly, force change upon families which may negatively influence family functioning, health and well-being of family members. Historically, these demands result in increased levels of work, family conflict, family discord, and marital dissatisfaction. Children seem especially vulnerable to military family stressors, as expressed through their difficulty in handling certain

social and classroom settings.⁶⁵ Leaders must ensure aggressive utilization of programs in place to counter these problems and can further negate problems through their actions and organizational policies. A positive command climate and constant engagement with families via Family Readiness Groups and Family Readiness Support Assistants (FRSAs)⁶⁶ will help leaders fully implement available family programs.

Finally, there are particular characteristics and strategies that enhance military family resiliency. The Army and Marine Corps would benefit from developing policies geared toward enhancing military spouse characteristics like independence, self-esteem, and empowerment. A service wide initiative encouraging children to participate in athletic activities will greatly help to reduce the negative consequences of family stressors, especially during frequent and long separations. As military families learn to manage these stressors, and leaders leverage programs during key “transitional stress windows,”⁶⁷ families will develop lifelong coping skills that “can lead to family growth and the development of a healthy military family identity.”⁶⁸

Conclusion

The 21st century environment will continue to place service members and their families under constant strain. The VUCA environment intensifies the traditional stressors that have always been there and there is no “light at the end of the tunnel” in the fight to preserve security at home and abroad. After nearly a decade of conflict, it is hard to say with confidence how long the fighting will last, or if it will ever end.

The events of 9/11 profoundly changed the traditional definitions of war, with President Obama capturing this reality, stating:

I think that, in this day and age, there are going to be - there is always going to be the potential for an individual or a small group of individuals, if they are willing to die, to kill other people. Some of them are going to be

very well organized, and some of them are going to be random. That threat is there.⁶⁹

These circumstances and conditions have forced military families to change their way of looking at traditional roles and responsibilities, and as a result, military families have undergone a profound transformation. Some families are better prepared than others for the experience, but all have the potential for coming out of it stronger and better equipped for the VUCA environment the military will continue to encounter for the near future.

Despite troubling reports of marital discord, domestic violence, suicide, and increased levels of fear and anxiety amongst military children, military families are proving worthy of the challenge. Numerous studies reveal families “look to an optimistic future imbued with courage, strength, dignity, pride, and strong survival skills.”⁷⁰ As in previous generations, the only certainty for military families is more uncertainty, and they have shown remarkable ability to adapt and overcome in this environment. There remain, however, significant gaps in our understanding of the “complex psychological and social effects on military personnel confronting the kinds of war zone exposures characteristic of the Global War on terror and in turn, their friends and family.”⁷¹

Professor William Frederick Book once stated, “Learn to adjust yourself to the conditions you have to endure, but make a point of trying to alter or correct conditions so that they are most favorable to you.”

Today’s military family exemplifies this adage. The military family has arguably grown because of their experiences with the demands and challenges associated with a decade of sustained conflict. This paper proposes these experiences and associated growth strengthen families in multiple ways (relationships, self-reliance, social skills,

financial management, etc.) so that they continue to make positive contributions both within the military and to society as a whole.⁷² The conclusion of fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan provides strategic leaders with a much-needed “operational pause” by which to address the needs of our military families. Their capacity to sustain themselves and continue to support the war fighter, while daunting, is clearly within the realm of their ability. That said, strategic leaders must take the lead in helping to properly rebuild the family muscle that has been stretched and strained over time. Ultimately, the success and survival of our military family rests with their continued and necessary strengthening and evolution as an institution.

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