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Deployment Experiences of Guard and Reserve Families

Implications for Support and Retention

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Summary

The nation's reliance on the Reserve Component, which includes the Army National Guard, Air National Guard, Army Reserve, Navy Reserve, Air Force Reserve, Marine Forces Reserve, and Coast Guard Reserve, has steadily increased since the first Gulf War in 1990–1991. Over 550,000 reserve component members have been deployed to Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, and these guardsmen and reservists represent almost 30 percent of all deployments.¹

This increased dependence on the Reserve Component has implications for reserve families. Although some research has examined the effect of deployment on service members and their families, such research has focused almost exclusively on the Active Component. Because reserve component personnel and their families differ from their active component counterparts demographically, such research may have only limited applicability to reserve component families. For example, reserve component personnel tend to be older than their active component counterparts, and a greater proportion of the Reserve Component is female. Further, guard and reserve families tend to be more geographically dispersed, which may have important implications for how best to support them.

¹ From October 1, 2001, to October 31, 2007.

Scope of Research and Methodology

This research addressed family deployment-related issues of concern and interest to the entire Reserve Component. We conducted military family expert interviews that include professionals representing six reserve components; only the Coast Guard Reserve was excluded. However, the interviews with service members and spouses themselves were limited to four of the reserve components: Army Reserve, Army National Guard, Air Force Reserve, and Marine Forces Reserve. Additionally, this research focused on junior and mid-grade enlisted families and on junior officer families. This research scope was determined in conjunction with the research sponsor, reflecting the level of funding available for this research and a focus on personnel who had not already committed to a long military career. This research also focused on guard and reserve families that had experienced at least one deployment outside the continental United States (OCONUS) since 9/11.

The cross-sectional data summarized in this monograph stem primarily from interviews with military family experts, service members, and spouses. Initially, we interviewed, via telephone, individuals identified as experts on the issues concerning reserve component families. This effort included 15 interviews with DoD employees who represented each of the DoD reserve components and the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and also 11 interviews with experts from military advocacy and support organizations. The core of this research is our analysis of the telephone interviews we conducted during the summer of 2006 with 296 service members and 357 spouses of service members, representing 653 guard and reserve families. These interviews consisted of closed-ended questions as well as open-ended questions that were transcribed, reviewed, coded, and analyzed for this research. They provide within this research a rich, qualitative description of the experiences of reserve component families. This summary provides a brief overview of the responses, while the main text of this monograph provides considerably more detail, including exemplary comments as well as an analysis of the interviewee characteristics that help explain differences in comments provided or experiences reported. These characteristics include some of the demographic attributes that differ between reserve

component and active component families on the whole, as well as other potentially important factors, such as indicators of maturity, relationship strength, and experience with military life and deployments.

Research Questions

How Ready Are Guard and Reserve Families?

Family readiness is regarded as a critical aspect of preparedness for a service member's active duty service. DoD has stated that "The Department's ability to assist service members and their families to prepare for separations during short and long term deployments is paramount to sustaining mission capabilities and mission readiness" (Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs, no date). However, how family readiness is defined and measured varies, and some surveys of reserve component service members overlook this subject entirely. This research assessed the meaning of family readiness to both service members and spouses. Overall, three types or components of family readiness were each cited by approximately two-fifths of interview participants: financial readiness, readiness related to household responsibilities, and emotional or mental readiness. Additional, less frequently mentioned aspects of family readiness included those related to legal matters, military resources, and getting a support system in place.

Financial readiness includes an assortment of financial tasks, including saving money in anticipation of a break in pay or in case of emergency, notifying creditors, and both short and long-term financial planning. This was the most frequently cited type of family readiness overall, mentioned by 58 percent of the service members in our study who provided a definition and by 45 percent of the interviewed spouses who provided a definition. Readiness related to household responsibilities includes preparing to handle household responsibilities normally taken care of by the service member, as well as making arrangements related to children. Among those who provided a definition of readiness, this kind of readiness was mentioned by comparable percentages of service members and spouses: 50 percent and 48 percent, respectively. Comments pertaining to emotional or mental readiness

included a number of references to “being mentally ready” or having enough time for all family members to “deal with” the fact that the service member will be separated from his or her family for a potentially considerable length of time. Among those who defined family readiness, emotional or mental readiness was mentioned by more than half—approximately 54 percent—of spouses and a significantly smaller proportion—37 percent—of service members.

After asking service members and spouses how they defined family readiness, we then qualitatively assessed how ready they felt their family was for their most recent deployment. Overall, 65 percent of the service members and 60 percent of the spouses in our study indicated that their family was ready or very ready. Approximately one-sixth of both service members and spouses characterized their family as somewhat ready, and approximately one-sixth of both groups characterized their family as not at all ready. Additional analyses not only showed which spouse and service member characteristics helped account for differences in reported family readiness levels, but also demonstrated a strong interrelationship between family readiness and military preparedness. Specifically, we found that service members who said they were well prepared for active duty tended to characterize their family as ready or very ready, while those who believed they were poorly prepared for active duty tended to feel their family was not ready at all. Given the cross-sectional nature of our data, however, we could not determine whether one type of readiness affected the other, or if a third factor, such as an underlying personal attribute, influenced both family readiness and military preparedness.

What Problems Do Guard and Reserve Families Report?

When we asked experts on reserve component family issues about problems that they believed reserve families confront, the majority of experts indicated that guard and reserve families experience the following problems: financial problems, health care issues, emotional or mental problems, and household responsibility issues. We subsequently heard about many of these problems from service members and spouses themselves during our interviews, but to varying degrees. Emotional or mental problems were mentioned most frequently; 39 percent of

spouses and 26 percent of service members mentioned such problems. The interviews suggest a range of severity of these problems, from relatively mild sadness and anxiety to more severe emotional or mental difficulties that required medical attention. Problems with household responsibilities were also frequently mentioned by spouses, and almost as frequently mentioned by service members. These comments related to accommodating the demands of family life, including difficulties with child care, household chores, and chauffeuring children. Children's issues were mentioned by 26 percent of spouses and 12 percent of service members. These issues included a range of emotional or mental problems as well as other sacrifices or difficulties experienced by children of deployed service members. While financial/legal problems and health care problems were emphasized by the reserve family experts, they were mentioned by relatively small portions of the service members and spouses interviewed: 15 percent of all interviewees mentioned financial or legal issues, and only about 10 percent mentioned health care problems. Other problems mentioned and discussed in this monograph involve education, employment, and marital strife. Additionally, 29 percent of service members (albeit only 14 percent of spouses) reported that their family had experienced no problems stemming from deployment.

What Positives Do Guard and Reserve Families Report?

The majority of guard and reserve families do experience some positives as a result of activation and deployment. Twenty percent of service members and 29 percent of spouses mentioned increased family closeness as a result of the deployment experience. Twenty-six percent of service members and 20 percent of spouses mentioned financial gain as a positive. Twenty-four percent of spouses and 15 percent of service members mentioned some combination of patriotism, pride, and civic responsibility as a positive aspect. Roughly 20 percent of interviewees mentioned that spouses or families at home felt an increase in independence, confidence, or resilience as result of the deployment. Although the majority of all interviewees reported a positive aspect of deployment, 20 percent of service members and 13 percent of spouses indi-

cated that their family had not experienced any positives as a result of the deployment.

How Well Do Guard and Reserve Families Cope?

Because prior research had focused on the coping ability of families, and despite the potential ambiguity of this concept, we asked interviewees what coping meant for their family and how well they had coped. A sizable minority—37 percent of service members and 29 percent of spouses—were unable to provide any definition of what they meant by coping. The definitions that were provided included the notions of coping emotionally and also coping with household responsibilities, but neither was mentioned by a majority. Despite the absence of a consistent, predominant definition, almost all respondents were able to assess how well their family had coped with deployment, and the majority (63 percent of service members and 62 percent of spouses) said that they or their family coped well or very well.

What Resources Do Guard and Reserve Families Use During Deployment?

In addition to considering the problems and positives, this research also examined the resources to which families turn for support during deployment and why families may not be accessing resources. Our interviews included questions about both the military resources and the informal, nonmilitary resources that families used. Our findings indicate that most of the guard and reserve families we interviewed used some type of resource during their most recent deployment experience. The most frequently cited military resources included TRICARE and family support organizations (such as Family Readiness Groups or Key Volunteer Networks). Military OneSource was a distant third resource, in terms of frequency of mention. Among the nonmilitary resources, the most frequently mentioned were extended family, religious organizations, and friends and neighbors. Across both military and nonmilitary resources, only extended family was cited by a majority of interviewees (among the spouses) as a resource they used during deployment.

How Do Guard and Reserve Families' Retention Plans Differ?

This research included analysis of the service member's intent to remain in the reserve component until retirement eligibility and the spouse's opinion toward his military career. Both service members and spouses were asked versions of both of these questions. For example, service members were asked how they perceived their spouse's attitude toward their military career. In addition, service members were asked to evaluate how their most recent activation affected their career plans. Spouses and service members responded similarly to the question about career intentions; just over half of each indicated plans for the service member to remain in the Guard or Reserve until retirement eligibility. Forty-one percent of spouses and 42 percent of service members indicated plans to leave prior to retirement eligibility. Thirty-eight percent of service members said their most recent activation had no influence on their career plans, while comparable percentages of service members indicated it either increased their desire to stay or increased their desire to leave (30 percent and 32 percent, respectively). Fifty-eight percent of spouses interviewed favored their service member staying in the Guard or Reserve whereas significantly fewer service members—35 percent—believed that their spouse favored their staying.²

Similar to the other topics highlighted in this summary, a number of patterns based on demographic attributes and other differing characteristics help to explain variation in reported retention intentions, and they are detailed in the body of this monograph. In addition, we found that family readiness, many of the problems and positives cited by families, and family coping all had implications for retention and, consequently, military effectiveness. Specifically, those who described their family as ready or very ready for the deployment and those who believed their family coped well tended to have a preference for staying. The same was true for those who mentioned one of the major positive aspects of deployment: financial gain, increased family closeness, or patriotism and pride. Conversely, many of the most frequently men-

² Interviewed service members and spouses were from different households, so it is unclear whether the individuals married to the service members in our study actually had less favorable views than the spouses interviewed.

tioned problems had negative implications for retention. Those who cited problems related to emotional or mental concerns, employment, education, marital issues, or health care all were more likely to express a preference for leaving.

Conclusion

This research features a rich description of both the problems faced and the positive aspects enjoyed by guard and reserve families as a result of deployment. Our detailed analysis of characteristics that explain which families tend to experience particular types of problems or positives should guide policymakers as they endeavor to support reserve component families. In short, we found that the majority of families mention a deployment-related problem, yet the *kinds* of problems and the *types* of families associated with each problem both differed. The majority of families also cited a positive aspect of deployment, and, as with problems, the characteristics of the families likely to report different positives varied. It should be noted, however, that our exploratory analysis, based on cross-sectional data, did not permit us to address causality or to control for interactions between different characteristics. Thus, we are unable to say, for example, whether family readiness has a direct effect on individual military preparedness, or whether age, pay grade, and marriage length—three potentially interrelated attributes—each have a separate influence on the problems and positives experienced.

It is important that policymakers and those organizations chartered to support military families understand the problems encountered and the positives enjoyed by military families, for several reasons. First, DoD has committed to ensuring and promoting general family well-being as part of a “new social compact” that recognizes the tremendous sacrifice of military families (Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy [MCFP], 2002). Second, not only is family readiness viewed as critical to mission success, but quality-of-life issues in general are regarded by DoD as inseparable from overall combat readiness (Myers, 2004). Finally, our analysis indicates a relationship between families’ problems and posi-

tives and military outcomes, including readiness and retention intentions, that affect DoD's ability to satisfy the military mission.

While many of the problems and the positives merit short-term attention and the allocation of support resources, our findings suggest that successful family support should be assessed, perhaps even primarily assessed, in terms of family readiness, family coping, and retention intentions, as these are measures of military manpower and family-related outcomes that can guide long-term management of reserve component personnel. Unlike the problems and positives families identified, there were common patterns across these three interrelated metrics in terms of who tended to respond in ways with favorable implications for family well-being and military effectiveness: being ready or very ready for deployment, coping well or very well, and expressing a preference for staying. For example, in general, more mature interviewees, those in stronger relationships (as suggested by marriage length), and those with prior military experience were more likely to be ready for deployment and to indicate a preference for staying in the Guard or Reserve. In a similar vein, spouses who had children, were married longer, or were married to service members with a record of prior active duty service also were more likely to report that their family had coped well or very well.

Recommendations

The recommendations were informed by spouse and service member suggestions for improvement, but they neither adopt all those suggestions nor are limited to interviewees' comments. We view these recommendations as constructive steps, but we cannot estimate the result of these changes or their cost-effectiveness without further analysis. In some instances, DoD policymakers, including those within OSD and the services, have begun to implement policies and programs consistent with these recommendations. Our research suggests that such actions may prove effective, and our recommendations underscore their importance.

These recommendations are divided into those related to activation and deployment personnel practices, families' expectations and perceptions, support of and information for families, and measurement of important constructs and outcomes.

Activation and Deployment Personnel Practices

Pursue predictable mobilization in terms of both the length of deployment and the amount of notice.

Ensure that any notice sufficient for service members and families to prepare for deployment is also sufficient for the military to prepare to accommodate the entire family. There should not, for example, be delays in receiving pay for guardsmen and reservists.

Limit the average length of mobilization. Our research suggests that spouses and service members experiencing longer deployments, particularly those one year or longer, were more likely to cope poorly with deployment and to express a preference for leaving the military. This recommendation is consistent with and emphasizes the significance of announced intentions to limit guard and reserve mobilizations to one year.

In a similar vein, DoD should **reduce the use of cross-leveling for reserve component personnel.** Our findings suggest the cross-leveling (deploying individuals with units other than their usual drill unit) may have negative implications for family support. DoD has announced efforts to limit this personnel practice that should have favorable implications for guard and reserve families.

Perceptions and Expectations

Ensure that family expectations are consistent with the DoD vision of a Reserve Component that is both operational and strategic. Service members and families should recognize that they are likely to begin a new deployment every six years, and that some service members may be tapped to serve more frequently.

Recognize that family perceptions are sometimes more important than actual experiences. We found this to be the case with amount of activation notice, where the perceived adequacy of the

notice received appeared to be a more compelling influence than the actual amount.

Recognize that families focus on “boots away from home” and not “boots on the ground.”

Emphasize the positives of activation and deployment. Consistent with prior research, many of our interviewees experienced an increase in income during their deployment, and some of these financial gains were either unanticipated by the service member, or the service member felt that he or she was unusual in enjoying financial gain.

Support of and Information for Families

Increase levels of readiness among not-yet-activated families.

Know how to find families. DoD should improve the centralized data about families to ensure that both notice and information are received in a timely manner.

Seek ways to make deployment-phased and “on-demand” information available to families. Given that families continue to ask for more and better information, but also criticize the pre-deployment deluge of information, **it is important to tailor both the content and amount of material provided to their needs.** Pre-deployment briefings might be sufficient for some spouses, but they might appear to be a “firehose” of information for spouses unfamiliar with deployments. Focused and intensive workshops might be helpful to some spouses, while others may feel that information from centralized Web sites is sufficient.

Explore ways to connect families to one another, including families that live near one another but represent different units or reserve components.

Bear in mind the limited capacity and capabilities of volunteer-based resources, either military or nonmilitary. Many family support organizations, such as Family Readiness Groups, and local community support, such as VFW organizations, depend heavily on volunteers. DoD should recognize both the strengths and the limitations of these organizations and plan accordingly.

Consistent with this, and given the reliance that our families reported on nonmilitary resources, **seek ways to improve awareness**

of, and support or partner with, local and community resources for families.

Recognize that different kinds of families confront different issues during deployment and **tailor efforts to avoid and mitigate deployment-related problems.**

Recognize that, just as the problems experienced by families vary, so do the severity and consequences of problems.

Consider not only how to help those families that are struggling, but also how to **reinforce and learn from those families who appear to proceed through the deployment cycle with fewer problems.**

Measurement of Key Constructs and Outcomes

Recognize that family readiness and coping are multifaceted constructs and develop measures accordingly. Given the importance of family readiness and coping to outcomes such as retention intentions, metrics should be developed that take into account their key dimensions, such as emotional or mental aspects for some families and household responsibilities for others.

Recognize that service members and spouses may provide different assessments of the same deployment experience and that data collection efforts that focus exclusively on either population are inherently limited.

Use metrics to consider both the short-term and long-term effectiveness of family support.