

Deployment, Stress, and Intention to Stay in the Military

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Recent developments in the national security environment have led to unprecedented strains on the all-volunteer force. Personnel are sometimes deployed for 12 months in nontraditional, hostile conditions, with only six months at home before their next deployment. One question on the minds of decisionmakers in the Department of Defense (DoD) is how the changed nature of service affects service members and influences their reenlistment intentions.

To help answer this question, researchers from the RAND National Defense Research Institute (NDRI) took a multidisciplinary perspective, reviewing the literature in economics, sociology, and psychology, the last with a focus on the relationship between stress and performance. They also developed an expected-utility model of deployment and reenlistment. The expected-utility model shows how home time, deployed time, pay, and other factors can be portrayed in a cohesive framework describing service members' satisfaction and willingness to stay in service. With this foundation, the researchers conducted focus groups of service members that explored expectations and experiences of military life, including those related to deployment. They also analyzed DoD's Status of Forces Surveys of Active Duty Personnel, surveys of military personnel conducted by the Defense Manpower Data Center from March and July 2003, regarding work hours, deployment, preparation, and their relationship to higher-than-usual stress and reenlistment intention. Taken together, the literature review, model, focus groups, and data analysis provide insight into the effect of deployment on military personnel and permit several implications to be drawn for policy.

Service members value deployments as an opportunity to use their training in real-world missions and participate in meaningful operations. Service members realize a sense of accomplishment

Key findings:

An analysis of focus groups and surveys of service members suggests that DoD should

- spread deployments widely across service members and units, doing so to the extent consistent with mission requirements
- examine additional ways to compensate personnel deployed repeatedly or for long durations
- consider additional pay and recognition for nondeployed personnel who frequently work long days
- provide deployed troops with effective, accessible, inexpensive communication home
- consider ways of removing the stigma from seeking professional counseling for combat-related stress.

from deployments, which contribute to positive attitudes among personnel and help explain why deployment had not decreased intention to stay among many survey respondents. But service members have preferences and expectations for deployment frequency and duration, and deployments exceeding those parameters—e.g., unusually long deployments or uncertain deployment schedules—can adversely affect satisfaction with the military life. Because service members value deployments and yet do not appreciate unexpectedly long deployments, deployments should be spread widely across service members, subject to overall mission requirements.

Deployment pay helps to offset negative aspects of deployment. Deployment pay may need to be higher to compensate personnel who have an unusually

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high amount of deployment. DoD is looking into such compensation. Increasing deployment pay depending on the member's deployment history could offset some of the negative effects of long and frequent deployments on morale and reenlistment. In addition, high current and future deployments may deter some prospective recruits, and the military may need to compensate for this greater perceived risk—e.g., through enlistment bonuses.

It is worth considering additional pay and recognition for non-deployed personnel who are often called upon to work longer than the usual duty-day. Like deployed personnel, many nondeployed personnel frequently work long days to support the heightened pace of military operations. Survey data showed that frequently working long days caused higher-than-usual stress (see the figure) and a lower intention to stay—for both nondeployed and deployed personnel. Nondeployed service members in the focus groups said such hours created both work stress and family stress, and left little time for their personal life. Service members receive no additional pay for frequently working longer than the usual duty-day. One option for introducing such pay would be to extend the eligibility for Special Duty Assignment Pay, which is payable to personnel in specific jobs as defined by the Secretary of Defense, to include certain personnel who do not deploy but who fill positions that prove to require many long days.

Family separation, high operations tempo, long work hours, and uncertainty surrounding deployments are some of the more negative aspects of deployment and ones that affect stress and intention to stay most significantly. These aspects could be addressed through various means. Comments in our focus groups implied that effective,

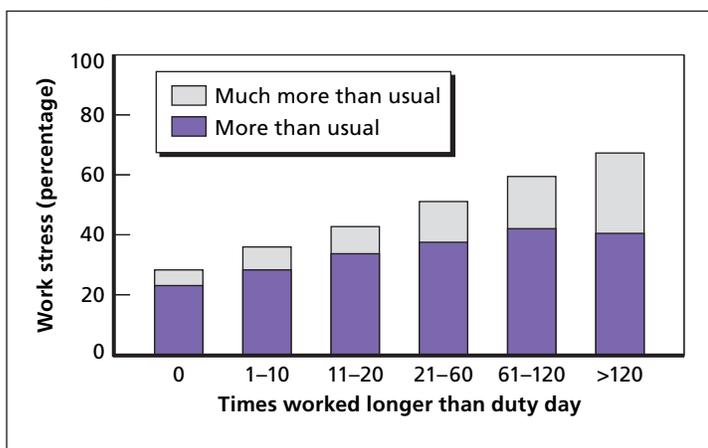
accessible, inexpensive communication home while on deployment helps to reduce the stress of family separation. A predictable rotation cycle could aid in offsetting the adverse effects caused by uncertainty in the deployment schedule. When deployment times are not predictable, it would be useful to advise members of this uncertainty so that they and their families can plan around it. To address long hours, certain tasks might be eliminated or postponed, personnel might be temporarily reassigned to assist with tasks, and, as mentioned, pay might be increased. Expanded family programs might also play a role.

Training and preparation are important to improving the ability of personnel to respond effectively in challenging and unfamiliar circumstances. The survey analysis showed that service members who felt well prepared and felt that their unit was well prepared had lower-than-usual stress and higher reenlistment intentions. Focus group members also mentioned the importance of training, and they added that training needed to be continuously revised to keep up with nontraditional tactics, counterinsurgency, and peacekeeping operations. The military is, in fact, adapting its training to include lessons learned in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Many service members cope with combat-related stressors informally by turning to their peers for support. The researchers found that involvement in combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq in 2003 was unrelated to the survey measures for stress and intention to stay. However, some focus group participants reported that they felt combat stress, and they most frequently turned to their buddies rather than seeking professional help. Among the reasons given for doing so were that their buddies had shared the same experiences and “understood,” and that visiting a mental health professional entered their personnel file and might be perceived as a sign of weakness. Military health officials are aware of stress-related mental-health risks and now mandate screening for post-traumatic stress disorder among returning personnel. Mandatory screening eliminates the stigma an individual might feel in seeking help. Also, the services now offer counseling to departing and returning personnel, helping them cope with stress from family separation and reintegration. In addition, because soldiers rely on their buddies, it might be useful to train soldiers in how to help other soldiers handle stress.

Further research on the issue of how deployments affect reenlistment seems warranted. Analysis of more-recent Status of Forces surveys and personnel data would show whether outcomes such as higher-than-usual stress, reenlistment intention, and reenlistment itself worsened as deployments grew longer, more frequent, and, in some ways, riskier, even though the underlying relationships described here might have remained the same. ■

Figure 1
Percentage Reporting a Given Level of Work Stress by
Number of Times Worked Longer Than Usual Duty Day over
Preceding 12 Months



This research brief describes work overseen by the RAND National Security Research Division and documented in *How Deployments Affect Service Members* by James Hosek, Jennifer Kavanagh, and Laura Miller, MG-432-RC (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG432/>), 2006, 148 pages, \$24.00, ISBN: 0-8330-3868-0. MG-432-RC is also available from RAND Distribution Services (phone: 310.451.7002; toll free: 877.584.8642; or email: order@rand.org). The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.



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