

*Multiple Transitions of  
Deployment and Reunion for  
Military Families*

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# *Two Studies*

*Coming Home:  
An Army Reserve  
Unit Returns from  
War*

*Global  
Perspectives on  
Deployment and  
Reunion*



# *Purpose*

## *Coming Home: An Army Reserve Unit Returns from War*

- ❖ **To study the reunion period among reservists and their families**
  - **Key events and their timing**
  - **Variation across individuals**
  - **Factors perceived to help and hinder readjustment**

## *Global Perspectives on Deployment and Reunion*

- ❖ **To study deployment and reunion among active duty military members and military service providers**
  - **Perceived positive and negative consequences of deployment**
  - **Positive and negative aspects of reunion**
  - **Coping**

# Methods

## *Coming Home: An Army Reserve Unit Returns from War*

- ❖ **Semi-structured Interviews conducted 2, 4, 6, 12, 24, 36, and 52 weeks following return**
- ❖ **159 Interviews lasting 1 to 2 hours each**
- ❖ **One year following return, participants graphed changes in their well-being over the course of the year, identifying events linked with each change**

## *Global Perspectives on Deployment and Reunion*

- ❖ **Focus groups conducted at 8 OCONUS and 8 CONUS installations – all branches**
- ❖ **Military members and service providers in separate groups (although some participants had dual roles)**

# Participants

## *Coming Home: An Army Reserve Unit Returns from War*

- ❖ Unit deployed in early 2003 with 2 weeks' notice; served in Iraq for 15 months
- ❖ Unit sustained fatal and nonfatal casualties
- ❖ Participants included 16 members, 13 spouses or partners, and 7 parents
- ❖ All but one member was enlisted
- ❖ Average age 30 years, with 8 years of service
- ❖ Average family income \$44k

## *Global Perspectives on Deployment and Reunion*

- ❖ 105 military members and 152 service providers, groups conducted separately
- ❖ E2 to 06
- ❖ 27 focus groups
- ❖ 60% members and 15% service providers had recent hazard duty pay
- ❖ 18% members and 21% providers were military spouses or dual-military

# *Strengths and Limitations*

## **Strengths**

- ❖ **The reserve study is longitudinal, extending a full year following return from deployment.**
- ❖ **The active duty study includes every branch of service, CONUS and OCONUS.**
- ❖ **Diverse participants, including active and reserve components, and members, parents, spouses and service providers.**
- ❖ **The data are qualitative, allowing participants to describe their unique experiences and raise issues important to them. Complete transcriptions permitted detailed analysis.**

## **Limitations**

- ❖ **Neither sample was representative. Results should not be generalized to all military families, but to identify issues that deserve further examination.**
- ❖ **Neither sample was randomly selected. As volunteers, the participants may systematically differ from the military population as a whole.**
- ❖ **Neither sample was large. Results will not represent the full range of deployment and reunion experiences.**



# *Finding #1: Similarities*

- ❖ **Reservists and active duty members described similar reunion patterns, although there were important differences in other areas.**
  
- ❖ **Few service differences among active duty participants. Exceptions were:**
  - **Limited access to communication in the Navy**
  - **Strong recognition of high quality reintegration training in the Army**



## ***Finding #2: Insights about Reunion***

- ❖ **In reservist study, average charts of the first year home corresponded well to emotional stages of deployment, BUT the averages masked three distinct patterns:**
  - **Linear – consistently high well-being following return. Most members and about half of the parent participants reported this pattern.**
  - **Curvilinear – a substantial dip in well-being and a recovery – the classic ‘honeymoon’ pattern. About half of the parents and spouse/partners.**
  - **Bounce – moderate-to-high well-being but with considerable variability during the reunion period, reported by a minority of spouse/partners.**
- ❖ **Less than half of the participants reported a honeymoon. Among those who did, the lowest levels of well-being were 4 to 9 months following return, later than the emotional stages of deployment would suggest.**





## ***Finding #2: Insights about Reunion***

- ❖ **In active duty study, participants described stages prior to and during deployment that conformed closely to the emotional stages of deployment.**
- ❖ **After deployment, participants described a longer and more complex set of stages, lasting on average several months: honeymoon, transition from honeymoon, role redistribution, final readjustment, and preparing to leave again.**
- ❖ **Most participants described the shape of cycle as bumpy, not smooth, with mood swings, and fluctuating comfort levels.**
- ❖ **The adjustment process was complicated and prolonged by longer deployments, newer marriages, combat stress, difficulties re-assuming peacetime duties, and preparation for re-deployment.**
- ❖ **The stages of deployment appear to be changing as military life is changing.**

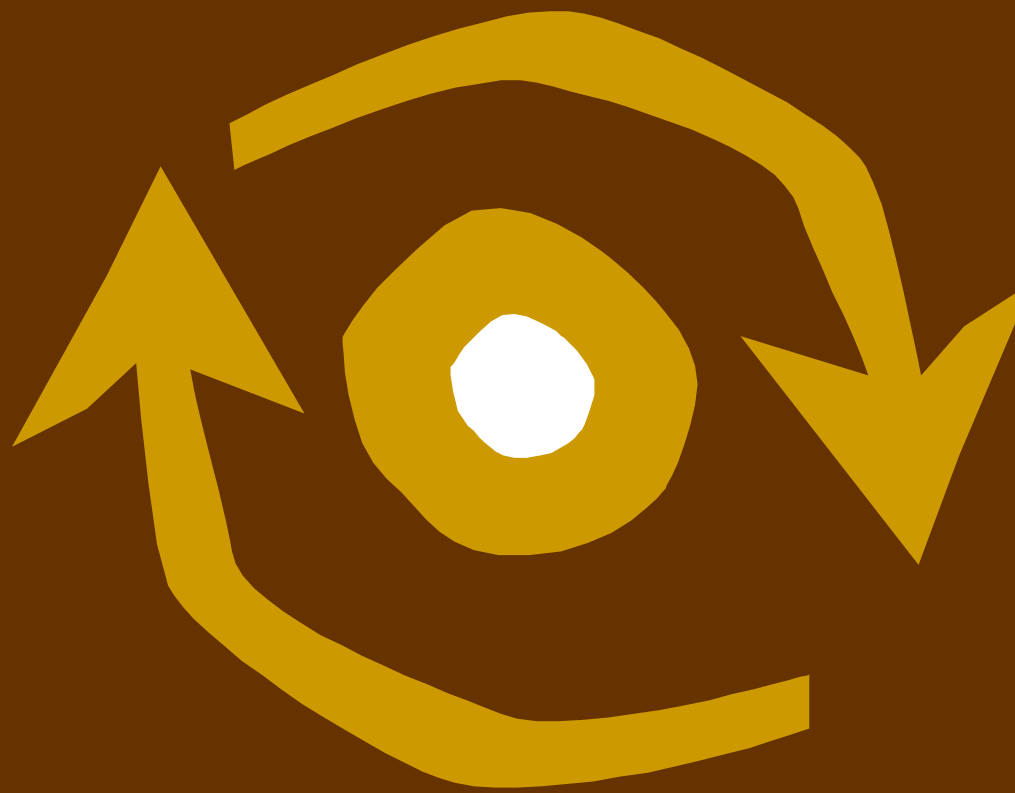


# ***Finding #3: Marital Transitions***

## **Re-entering Marriage**

- **New expectations -- Partners must 'train' each other back to the marriage, re-learning how to depend upon and accommodate each other.**
- **New power structures – Power disputes drive many of the marital negotiations following return from deployment.**
- **New language – Members must reduce bluntness and use of military terms, and increase emotional content and sensitivity (e.g., adjusting to children's developmental status).**
- **New routines – Members may feel displaced and need to find new ways to participate in family routines and rituals.**
- **New responsibilities – Family work must be re-allocated, and work tasks may also be new.**
- **New leisure – Each partner may experience weakening of friendships that were very important during deployment. Each partner must adjust to different access to privacy than that experienced during deployment. Partners must begin to create a new shared history.**
- **New stresses – Physical and psychological consequences of combat deployment present challenges to members and partners.**





## ***Finding #3: Marital Transitions***

- ❖ **A year following return, reserve families reported that the most difficult aspect of the reunion experience was re-learning how to be interdependent with their spouse**
- ❖ **It took several weeks following return for spouses to consider one another a source of social support.**
- ❖ **The end of the ‘honeymoon’ came at different times for members and spouses – it was an individual, not a joint, experience.**



# ***Finding #3: Marital Transitions***

## **Family Issues**

- Many spouses returned to their families while members were deployed (both CONUS and OCONUS). This concerned providers because it isolated them from many forms of assistance, but spouses faced reduced resources during deployment if they stayed. Spouses sometimes were trying to coordinate with an expected PCS.**



## ***Finding #4: Extended family***

- ❖ **Despite geographic separation, extended families remained major sources of support for both married and unmarried members in both the active and reserve participants in these studies.**
- ❖ **For a variety of reasons, extended family members received little support or assistance from military service providers.**



# *Finding #4: Extended family*



# *Finding #5: Children*

- ❖ **Deployment puts family members in the role of managing service members' relationships with their children. Family members 'stage-set' to promote relationships and 'gate-keep' to inhibit relationships.**
- ❖ **Family members worked harder to promote female than male reservists' relationships with their children during deployment.**
- ❖ **Ex-spouses in reservist study imposed intentional barriers to relationships with children during deployment, even though this was not the case prior to deployment.**
- ❖ **Active duty families reported insufficient supports for children during deployment.**





# *Finding #6: Communication*

- ❖ **Members' access to communication has improved, but remains limited, unpredictable, and sometimes expensive – especially for sailors. In many instances, rank determines access to communication.**
- ❖ **Members were ambivalent about learning about problems at home when they could not take action. Lack of communication appeared to be even more stressful, however, provoking anxiety and spiking rumors among both service members and family members.**
- ❖ **Ability to sustain relationships with children during deployment may depend especially heavily on access to communication. Members reported that being better informed during deployment eased return because they were not 'out of the loop' of their children's lives. Members found it stressful to discover that important information had been withheld during deployment.**
- ❖ **New communication tools and programs were positively evaluated, such as exchanges of videotaped stories for children, videoconferencing, and email access. Families used diverse forms of communication including letters, unit websites, and personal cell phones. Care packages from the public were also appreciated. Technology augmented -- but did not substitute for -- personal contact.**

# ***Finding #6: Communication***

- ❖ **Communication skills were key throughout the stages of deployment**
  - **To leaders treating military members with respect**
  - **To leaders keeping families well-informed**
  - **To family members communicating effectively during deployment**
  - **To marital partners' re-negotiation of their marriage at the beginning and end of every deployment**
  - **To members' ability to communicate with friends and family**



## ***Finding #7: Transition from War***

- ❖ **Members and providers described physical, psychological, and social challenges associated with the transition from war.**
- ❖ **Physical challenges included adjusting to diet, healing from injuries, and dealing with chronic conditions, fatigue and sleep disturbances.**
- ❖ **Psychological challenges included emotional detachment, hypervigilance, hyperstimulation, adjusting to the routine of everyday life, mood swings, substance use, and survivor guilt.**
- ❖ **Social challenges included adjusting to the loss of unit cohesion and the complexity of 'normal' life.**

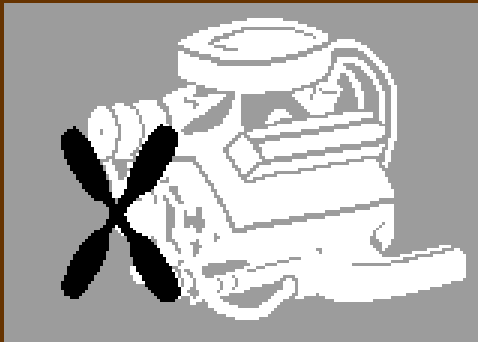


## ***Finding #8: Truncated Recovery***

- ❖ **There appeared to be little time for recovery from deployment that was uncontaminated by new pressures, such as heavy workloads or work perceived as unnecessary.**
- ❖ **Between combat deployments, families experienced numerous shorter separations.**
- ❖ **The pressure of impending (re)deployments shortened recovery time to the post-deployment leave and increased distress and detachment for some members.**
- ❖ **Providers favored a gradual reintegration to work and family, rather than an immediate and lengthy leave followed by high-pressure work duties.**



## A 'repair' model of recovery



## A 'maintenance' model of recovery

# *Finding #9: Special Populations*

- ❖ **Family care arrangements were very difficult to make and execute in time for deployment for dual-military and single-parent families posted overseas. Sometimes forced a choice between military career and family.**
- ❖ **Supervising children during deployment was complicated not only by the absence of a parent but also by limited availability and accessibility of programs for children. Each deployment involved multiple transition for children, sometimes including relocation.**
- ❖ **Individual augmentees and their families were often 'orphaned' during the deployment cycle, overlooked for reintegration training, welcome home ceremonies, and quality of life supports.**
- ❖ **Young spouses in new marriages, spouses living overseas, and foreign spouses were seen as at high risk for isolation and poor functioning during deployment.**
- ❖ **Single service members experienced difficulty maintaining social relationships and receiving reliable logistical assistance during deployment. They felt ambivalent about welcome home ceremonies. When not on deployment, restrictions on their movement made friendships difficult to maintain.**

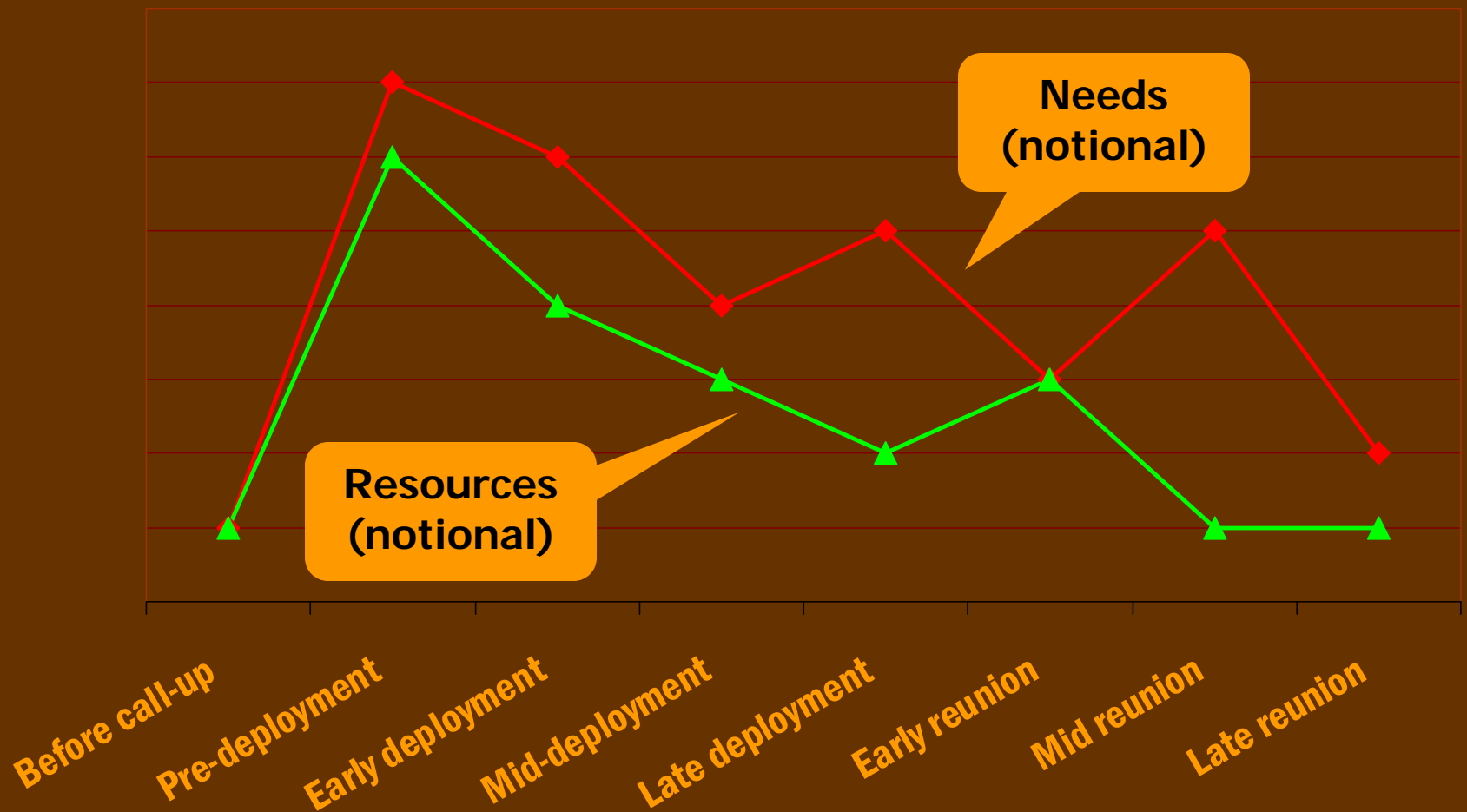


# *Finding #10: Mismatches*

- ❖ **Services available to active component families were noticeably reduced during deployments; reserve families in this study had limited access at all times.**
- ❖ **Child care needs for some families rose during deployments, but the supply for active duty families fell.**
- ❖ **During deployment, when both the active and reserve components are on active duty, the disparities in support systems are striking (even at the reduced levels experienced by the active component)**
  - **Physical facilities**
  - **Access to technology – video telephones**
  - **Ease of access to services – FRG, counselors, chaplains, health care**



# *(Mis)match Between Needs and Resources*





# *Finding #10: Mismatches*

- ❖ **FSG leader for reserve unit favorably evaluated by members and families, but experienced many difficulties in accessing resources**
  - **State liaison was not responsive**
  - **In the short period between call-up and departure, could not arrange for experts to come to help, except for a chaplain**
  - **Denied access to a conference**
  - **Learned about OneSource from someone left behind on medical hold**
  - **Re-deployment briefing delivered by visiting 'expert' was perfunctory and poorly presented (based on researcher observation)**



# *Finding #10: Mismatches*

- ❖ **Military members becoming more geographically dispersed and father away from installations, but many services still very installation-based**
- ❖ **Local communities may be poorly prepared to offer high-tech communication to military families during deployment, or military-savvy support services during reunion**



# *Finding #11: Low participation*

## **Low Participation in Support Services: Provider Perspectives**

### **Unit Leaders don't request/seek/attend because:**

- Press of operational duties
- Hard to give priority unless there is an identified problem – hard to give priority to prevention

### **Military Members don't request/seek/attend because:**

- They perceive the content as 'old news'
- They don't think they need it
- Individual augments feel isolated

### **Military Spouses don't request/seek/attend because:**

- Seasoned spouses perceive content as 'old news'
- Junior spouses don't think they need it
- They perceive it as intrusive or an invasion of privacy
- Some members instruct or prevent spouses from seeking help (e.g., by taking their id cards)
- Lack of child care, transportation or other resources



# ***Finding #11: Low participation***

- ❖ **Although there is a widespread sense that there are individual members or spouses who need help and do not seek it, there is little consensus about the characteristics of these people.**
- ❖ **Providers feel stretched by deployment demands – more needs to meet with fewer resources.**
- ❖ **Some providers identify shortcomings in their own outreach efforts.**



# *The Many Faces of Stigma*

## **– Members reported:**

- I'm scared to go to mental health
- I didn't fill out the PDHA honestly because I didn't want anything in my record
- I sought help and got grounded because I was depressed – I feel punished

## **– Providers reported:**

- Members doubt confidentiality
- Members feel they are letting the country down if they ask for help
- Members believe they will experience repercussions
- Members don't want to appear needy or weak
- Members fear that people will think badly of them
- Members and spouses fear it will hurt member's career
- Senior service members feel they are expected to be able to handle things without help
- Members don't want people knowing their business



# ***Finding #12: What Helps?***

## **❖ Personal strengths**

- Positive attitude**
- Flexibility**
- Ability to compartmentalize**
- Experience with prior deployments**

## **❖ Family strengths**

- Stability of family prior to deployment**
- A sense of shared commitment to the military in the family**
- Having a plan for handling family challenges**
- Experience with prior deployments**

## **❖ Commitment to military life**

- Understanding that deployments are a means to an important end**
- Camaraderie with unit**

## **❖ Support**

- Staff at home to help family with logistics and paperwork**
- Strong sense of community**
- Frequent contact with family**
- Predictability – of return date, communication access**



# ***Finding #12: What Helps?***

- ❖ **There was widespread agreement that families with prior problems and/or poor communication skills were at greatest risk during deployment.**
- ❖ **Social isolation of spouses was a common concern.**
- ❖ **Participants reported desire for more resources for marriage support**
  - **Counselors and therapists**
  - **Chaplains**
  - **Marriage enrichment weekends**
  - **TIME**



# *One Source*

## ❖ **Praise:**

- **Value in isolated locales**
- **Excellence in offering information**
- **24/7 availability and timeliness of responses**
- **Free**
- **Helpful for moving and deployment/reunion issues**
- **Confidential**
- **One-stop shopping**
- **High quality personnel**

## ❖ **Concerns:**

- **Not well advertised**
- **Possible duplication of services**
- **Questionable use of resources**
- **Impersonal**
- **Fears about confidentiality**





# *Supports that are Needed*

- ❖ **Providers had ideas about how to be more proactive in getting information into the hands of members and spouses, but made little mention of persons beyond the installation (e.g., parents of military members).**
- ❖ **Members and providers agreed that more prevention efforts are needed – to better prepare soldiers for deployment, train rear detachment, and to institute community-level prevention efforts. They advocated a CPR model of prevention, where many community members are trained.**
- ❖ **Providers favored gradual reintegration, stabilization of key staff following return, and educational activities that extend farther into the reunion period.**



# ***Finding #13: Family Readiness***

- ❖ **Consider an expanded definition of family readiness:**
  - **Effective communication**
  - **Shared commitment to the military**
  - **Internal stability**
  - **Effective planning**



# *Future Research*

- ❖ **Reservist families reported poor awareness of the services available to them. The Status of Forces Surveys of reservists could be used to assess the degree to which this occurs throughout the reserve component.**
- ❖ **Reservist families reported substantial difficulties accessing installation-based resources. The Status of Forces Surveys of reservists could be used to assess the degree to which this occurs throughout the reserve component.**
- ❖ **The FSG leader of the reserve unit experienced substantial difficulties accessing support services. Surveys or interviews with other reserve component FSG leaders could assess the degree to which these difficulties are common.**
- ❖ **Study the impact of gradual vs. abrupt returns to family and work life. If abrupt transitions and truncated recovery times cause distress, consider phasing in work hours, delaying block leave, and attempting to minimize family separations between combat deployments .**



# *Future Research*

- ❖ **Post-deployment adjustment patterns did not conform to those predicted by the emotional stages of deployment. Research is needed to investigate whether the post-reunion stages of deployment should be modified to include more detail about reunion adjustment.**
- ❖ **Research is needed to investigate whether the stages of deployment should be adapted to acknowledge multiple trajectories, and which trajectories should be acknowledged.**
- ❖ **Ideally, prospective longitudinal research would be needed to fully understand post-deployment adjustment patterns of families over time, but such research would be very expensive and difficult to implement. The MFRI Life History project now underway uses a pragmatic retrospective approach.**





❖ **For additional information:**

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