

Farewell Again

How military families are coping with multiple deployments.

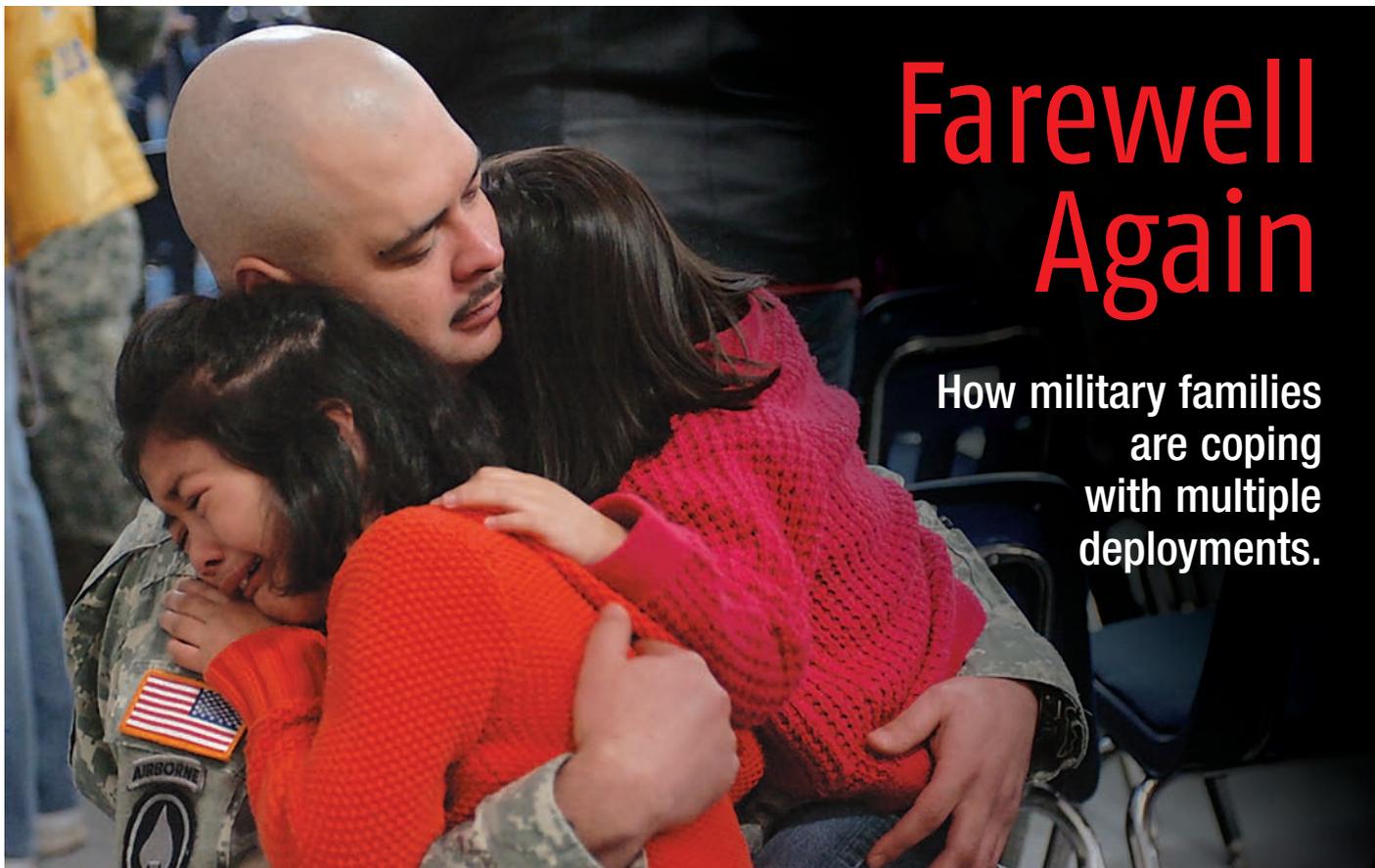


Photo by Sgt. 1st Class A.J. Coyne, Virginia Guard Public Affairs

By Janine Boldrin

Recurring deployments take their toll on the home front as well as overseas. But as more military families face multiple deployments, both military and civilian community organizations step up to the task of supporting spouses and children of service members.

Families of service members react in different ways to multiple deployments. For some deployment coping skills get easier with subsequent deployments. For others, they become more difficult. Military spouses and professional counselors agree on the need for family members to join or start groups with other people in similar situations.

Deployment, stress and the military family

"You want to keep things as normal as possible for your kids," said Allison Allen, an Army spouse whose active duty husband is on his fourth deployment. But she admits that being the sole caregiver can throw a wrench into a normal routine.

"Multiple deployments just make families tired," Allen said "And it reaches out in every direction."

A January 2010 study by The Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College concluded that Army children may

experience stress with a parent's deployment, but there are factors that policy makers, leaders, and parents can influence to increase a child's ability to cope with a lifestyle of repeated deployments.

The study found that high participation levels in activities like sports or clubs, a strong family and the belief that America supports the war best lowered levels of stress in adolescents during a deployment.

Surprisingly, the cumulative number of previous deployments did not show a significant impact on the child's level of deployment stress. However, the stress the non-deployed parent experiences also contributes to increased challenges the child must face.

"While we certainly might learn from our past experience about good coping skills and how to be better prepared, it doesn't necessarily mean the next deployment will be easier," said Karen Pavlicin, author of the books *Surviving Deployment* and *Life After Deployment*. "I've seen some spouses feel more confident in their subsequent deployments. But I've also seen multiple deployments take their toll on their energy level and optimism."

Meeting psychological health needs

"As the duration and frequency of military deployments increase, service members and their families are increasingly faced with the challenges associated with deployment and combat," said Air Force Lt. Col. Christopher Robinson, Senior Executive Director

for Psychological Health for the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury (DCoE).

The safety of the deployed family member, the challenge of being a single parent and the sole person responsible for running a household, the emotional well being of their children, as well as maintaining a relationship with a spouse who is physically absent are just some of the concerns non-deployed spouses have voiced.

Service members share some of these concerns in addition to balancing the demands of a military career and their family responsibilities. Both the spouses' and service members' concerns can turn into situations for which they need counseling. With each additional deployment, service members are also at an increased risk of experiencing a psychological health issue.

"Everyone reacts to combat and deployments differently," said Robinson. "What is extremely important is that service members seek treatment and find what works best for them."

For service members, spouses and children, Robinson stresses the importance of reaching out for services as soon as they begin to experience psychological health concerns and not to wait until they are in crisis.

Some military families report that children are able to adapt well and continue to function during a deployment, while others report a more difficult adjustment that includes withdrawal, sleep problems, anxiety and depression.

CONNECTING WITH SERVICES

Armed Services YMCA (www.asymca.org) provides support services to military service members and their families around the world with particular focus on junior enlisted men and women.

The DCoE Outreach Center (866-966-1020) is a confidential, toll-free service that is staffed by health resource consultants to provide answers, tools and resources regarding psychological health and traumatic brain injury.

Hearts Apart offers support by linking together military families who are left behind due to a deployment. Through informal meetings and activities, families can learn about available resources and network with each other. For more information about your local Hearts Apart group, contact your nearest military installation readiness center.

Military OneSource (www.militaryonesource.com) is a virtual extension of military installation services that is available to military members, spouses and families and is available 24/7 on its website, email or phone (1-800-342-9647) to answer any questions or concerns.

Morale, Welfare and Recreation (MWR) provides support to military personnel and their families through recreation and sports, child development and youth programs, and other services. MWR services are offered through all of the branches and can be accessed through your nearest military installation or through their online services.

Real Warriors (www.realwarriors.net) works with service members, veterans and their families to combat the stigma associated with seeking psychological health services.



Robinson said that the largest barrier to treatment within the military community is the stigma that is associated with it. DCoE is working toward dispelling those concerns through its Real Warriors Campaign.

The campaign aims at educating service members, veterans and their families about the resources available for psychological treatment and addresses common concerns. Through the Real Warriors web site at www.realwarriors.net, military families can find out about those families who have successfully reached out for treatment, and locate tools, tips and resources in support of healing the stress that comes with deployment.

Meeting day-to-day needs

"A concern that I have is trying to hold everything together," said Cassandra Price, the spouse of an active duty soldier who is on his second deployment. "There are doctors' visits, my boys play sports, the dog has to go to the vet and of course sending care packages abroad. I just fear forgetting something and someone feeling left out."

Like many other spouses, Price finds support in organized services offered by the military. But because there are so many services available to military families to help them with their day-to-day challenges during a deployment, figuring out which is the best fit may actually seem overwhelming.

Military OneSource is where family members can begin their search for information on the services available to them. Through the use of phone consultants and online resources, family members can ask questions about any topic or concern for which they need answers or assistance.

The support families receive from one another through organized groups, friends and neighbors is often mentioned as to how spouses and families relieve stress and manage through the challenges of a deployment.

"The group Hearts Apart is wonderful because you get to mingle and do projects with other spouses in the same situation," said Price. "It is a very relaxing time."

Price also turned to her Family Readiness Group (FRG) for support and friends who were in the same situation.

"The most important, positive influence is having friends

around who are doing (a deployment) with you," said Allen. "There is more peace, comfort, and relief in that than anything else."

Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation (MWR) services, like free childcare, deployed spouses' events and initiatives like the Army Family Covenant also serve to help families through the day-to-day challenges of deployments.

Local communities, churches and organizations like the YMCA have also banded together to help military families

by providing babysitting, counseling and other services to the members of their communities, which is especially important to National Guard and Reserve families who may live far from military installations.

"Families I've talked with said they found it helpful when they could get support in their local communities and not just at base," said Pavlicin. "When programs were offered through churches, after-school programs and similar community-based programs, these families felt more

▶ **THREE THINGS TO CONSIDER ABOUT TEENAGE FAMILY MEMBERS**

Due to frequent deployments, it's tough for families to plan, and teens may feel sadness, resentment, and confusion about their parent missing important life events.

With modern technology, teens can monitor the news and immediately learn of deaths and injuries, leading youth to worry about their parent's wellbeing.

Teens are often called upon to care for younger siblings in the family, decreasing their time for schoolwork, hanging out with friends, and extracurricular activities.

Provided by Michelle Sherman, Ph.D., author of MY STORY: BLOGS BY FOUR MILITARY TEENS (www.SeedsofHopeBooks.com)

connected to others in their community and felt more support in daily life."

Facing the future

Multiple deployments have become a way of life for many military families. While the list of services available to get through each deployment is extensive, many family members wish the number of deployments would lessen and they would not have to turn to using these programs as often. However, while the deployments continue, services and support for the families left behind is essential.

"The more we can provide safe environments for spouses and couples, and kids, to talk about their questions and to listen to others' experiences," said Pavlicin, "the more comfortable and prepared families feel." 

▶ **SIX COPING STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH DEPLOYMENTS**

1. Take care of yourself
2. Maintain a sense of humor
3. Get help and don't stress about the to-do list
4. Don't constantly watch the news
5. Give yourself permission to have fun - your own time and with your kids.
6. Let your kids be kids too. Deployment shouldn't be depressing - celebrate what you can and make good memories you can share when you are together again.

Provided by Karen Pavlicin, author of the books SURVIVING DEPLOYMENT and LIFE AFTER DEPLOYMENT