

*Paper presented at the 2nd International Conference
on Human Dimensions during Military Deployments
The Future of Warfare: Sustaining Military Performance in
an Environment of High Operations Tempo
Pavillon at the Patrick Henry Village - Heidelberg
5th-7th September 2000*

***“If the Army would have wanted you to have a wife ...
it would have issued you one”***

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THE SYSTEMIC COST OF DEPLOYMENT
Cohesion in Peacekeepers' Families

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SUMMARY

In this paper the typical marital or family problems, occurring during the emotional and operational stages of long-term deployment, are analyzed by using various key-concepts of the systems theory and the pragmatic communication theoryⁱ.

The aim is to present a model for psychosocial support which includes pre-, peri- and postdeployment care for postmodern veterans and their most significant others, based upon action-oriented and psycho-educational counselling sessions for couples, at the critical stages prior-to, during and after the deployment period. This innovative approach, which is less based on pure symptomatic intervention and merely providing basic information on how to cope with deployment, as seen in most of the other intervention models, allows peacekeepers and their partners (or family members) to increase their relational competences and their coping skills before, during and after the separation. It also consists of a series of counselling sessions, both prior-to and after deployment, of "new peacekeepers" by "veterans".

First, we will bring the well-known (emotional) stages of deploymentⁱⁱ ⁱⁱⁱ along with the so-called operational stages of deployment^{iv} into focus. Secondly, the basic concepts of the systems theory and the axioms of pragmatic communication, needed to select relevant work-items for psycho-educational counselling, will be discussed. In a third part, we will introduce the conceptual framework for systemic psychosocial support; it will be formulated in terms of learning to go away, learning to be away, and learning to come back. Finally, the most important support activities will be placed on a time axis and explained in the construct of a structural model.

Introduction

Since 1991 Belgian troops have been deployed on regular basis in several out-of-area operations, peace support operations, creating a unique situation of psychosocial family trauma for the concerned soldiers and their significant others.

First there was little to no concern at all about the potentially high risks of cumulative family stress, due to the repetitious deployments, on the peacekeepers' families and their quality of life. Initially, it seemed that neither the soldiers nor their family-members or relatives had the right to "complain" about the repetitious long-term deployments. After all, didn't they make the choice for such a life? ...

It seemed as if fifty years of (relative) peace during the cold-war period, had figurally paralyzed the military leaders' good sense about the importance of professional psychosocial coaching and counselling of both the deployed soldiers and their families. In most families, there is the very normal presence of some kind of natural social support - coming from family members, relatives and friends living in the same private environment - but in many cases

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more is needed to maintain a sufficient level of (mental) readiness and morale within deployed soldiers. The minimalistic activities aiming at a practical family support during mass reunions of several hundreds of people, during the first years of peacekeeping and organized by the rear-detachment of the deployed units, soon proved to be insufficient. More and more, significant others of deployed servicemen began - sometimes through confronting statements in press articles or television magazines - to claim a more serious psychosocial intervention from the armed forces. These attempts were mostly overtly supported by (military) psychologists, mental health workers and sociologists, but lacked by many battalion commanders. In the meanwhile, several scientific studies (Wauters, 1997; the Leman Report, 1998) and a handful of recent large scale military crisis situations (Operation Restore Hope in Somalia, the Rwanda crisis, the Hercules Crash in Eindhoven, NL, the abuse and norms transgression stories in press, etc) revealed the necessity of a quick elaboration of a real support programme to assist Belgian peacekeepers and their families.

After nearly a decennium of operational experience in the postmodern African and Balkan conflicts, our military and civilian authorities began to understand that the forementioned deployments and especially the overwhelming rhythm at which couples and families were confronted, again and again, with long-term separation, created unique family stressors beyond those experienced during peacetime exercises and training periods. In the beginning of 1998, after the decision of the Belgian Minister of Defence to divide the psychosocial support of deployed soldiers and their families over both the Social Service and the military leaders (each on their own level)², the project of Counselors in Mental Readiness was launched by the Chief of Staff of the Belgian Army. However, this paper will not further explore this project nor explain its core issues which are still being discussed at this very moment.

The author's several years of practical clinical experience, with peacekeepers and their partners, both in the operation zone and on the homefront (within *the Center for Military Family Action*, CMFA, Royal Military Academy), learned that it is most important to provide marital and family counselling prior-to, during and after long term deployment to prevent serious problems or dysfunction of the deployed family member on the one hand, and his family on the other hand. Although the current support measures concerning the various meetings of families and/or spouses, aimed at providing basic information and social support, are very important, they do not seem to be preventive with regard to severe marital or relational problems. The soldiers and their spouses are often, even after a second or third deployment, in search of a language to share mutual experiences and to explain how they really felt about the long term separation imposed by the armed forces. Even the children of peacekeepers continue to experience problems to understand what really happened to their family and why one of their parents, or both, seem to have changed.

² Due to this decision (of the former Minister of Defence) the Social Service became in charge of the psychosocial support of the families of deployed soldiers, while the "psychosocial stability" of the soldiers themselves was officially seen as a matter for the military leaders. Unfortunately, this decision splitted up the whole subject of psychosocial support of operational deployment, both in the operation zone and on the homefront, while a better decision could have been to highlight the importance of a more holistic approach in which the principle of centrality is respected.

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Therefore a psychosocial support model should include proactive activities aimed at enhancing the communication and negotiation skills of both partners of a relationship, to teach them to cope with long term separation and its effects on the family system. Our armies should understand that long term deployment affects a couple or a family in a permanent and profound way. The last years many children grew up in a single-parent household for nearly most of the time. Giving peacekeepers and their partners the illusion that after a long term deployment everything remains the same is hiding the truth: some relationships will never recover from the psychosocial scars that deeply damaged their life. This will become clear in the next paragraphs in which we will analyze some of the occurring mechanisms, responsible for driving the partners of a relationship away from each other. If military leaders do not take these mechanisms as serious they will, sooner or later, be confronted with a total burnout of the personnel of combat units, overwhelmed by repetitious deployment and deep family wounds from which they will only recover very slowly or never.

We will first take a closer look at both the emotional and operational stages of deployment.

The Emotional Stages of Deployment

The emotional stages of (peacetime) deployment, as described by Peebles-Kleiger & Kleiger (1994), were used to describe the cyclic experiences of peacekeepers and their partners; prior-to, during and after deployment. In this paper we will focus on normal relationships in which, as in most cases, there are no premorbid marital or family problems.

We could distinguish two different versions of the present emotional cycle. The first version describes seven phases of adjustment, from the anticipation of the loss (being the departure of the soldier) to the final re-integration and stabilization of relationships within the family upon reunion. The second version, which we will name the *grief model*, describes the four emotional stages of adjustment based on the stages of grief after bereavement (Kübler-Ross, 1969); those stages of grief being (1) anger/protest; (2) sadness/despair; (3) coping/detachment; and (4) return/reunion.

Since the two versions are similar in thrust, Peebles-Kleiger & Kleiger (1994) integrated the two in a composite description which we will briefly discuss below.

Table 1. The Emotional Stages of Deployment

Stage 1: Initial Shock (Anger/Protest/Emotional Numbing)
Stage 2: Departure (Detachment/Withdrawal)
Stage 3: Emotional Disorganization (Depression/Anxiety)
Stage 4: Recovery & Stabilization (Coping/Detachment)
Stage 5: Anticipation of the Homecoming (Confusion/Mixed Feelings)
Stage 6: Reunion (Euphoria)
Stage 7: Reintegration & Stabilization (Working Through Process)

2.1. Stage of Initial Shock

Both versions of the above model describe a one to two weeks period of tension, protest and anger as the news of the impending deployment is released and the family begins making preparations for the separation. People are described as being “*on edge*” and “*slight irritations can grow to major proportions*”. This can be compared to the “Anger/Protest” stage in the grief model.

Clinical experiences indicate that early warning for deployment (sometimes 8 months before departure) can raise the family stress considerably (soldiers testing the problem solving capacities of their families or partners, partners beginning to live by “last times”, sharing “last special moments”, etc...). Peacekeepers spouses’ and/or family members should learn to understand that “going away for several months” initiates a specific emotional separation process: partners do not need to focus on this one moment, during which they have to find the right words to say goodbye; saying goodbye to each other ... can take several weeks! This insight is important and should lead to specific support activities to learn peacekeepers and their families to go away.

2.2. Stage of Departure

The final few days before the departure bring the second stage of “Detachment/Withdrawal”, in which members, frightened by the impending loss, typically distance from each other.

Clinical experiences indicate the ‘marital or relational threats’ of the ‘emotional numbing’ which occurs during this stage. Therefore, it is important to inform both partners in a relationship that absence of expressed emotions is not equal to absence of emotions, nor a signal of an absence of caring. It is quite the contrary, the stronger the numbing, the stronger the underlying emotion.

Peebles-Kleiger & Kleiger (1994) stated, in this context, that the absence of time to prepare for the separation, coupled with the intensity of fear and uncertainty, can trip a sort of “emotional circuit breaker” in the mind, cutting off all feelings, so that the person does not get overwhelmed and sequently paralyzed.

2.3. Stage of Emotional Disorganization

Beginning at the time of departure itself, *as the buses are pulling out or the plane is taking off*, is the phase of “Emotional Disorganization” or “Sadness/Despair”. In this phase, tension and/or detachment are replaced by sadness and loss. Partners of departing soldiers sometimes cry a whole weekend. It is when the practical things have been completed, and a few weeks have passed, demonstrating that this is not simply a “bad dream” or an ordinary separation, that the intensity of feelings of emotional disorganization and sadness/despair can hit.

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Symptoms of depression can set in, with problems sleeping, periods of tearfulness, and difficulty eating. This period is described as lasting about two to 6 weeks.

In the same context, we like the description given by Norwood, Fullerton & Hagen^v: *“The extended absence of a spouse creates new stressors and opportunities for the individual left behind. Responsibilities and decisions related to managing the household that normally are shared, must now reside with the husband or wife remaining at home. If there are children in the family, the parent left behind temporarily becomes a “single” parent. He or she must assume all the responsibilities of caring for the children while the other parent is away. During the deployment, the stay-behind spouse often experiences emotional confusion that can last for several months. The initial experience of the separation is frequently characterized by feelings of abandonment, loss, pain, and disorganization. Frequently, the spouse will report mild and transient depressive symptoms of tearfulness and loss of sleep or appetite. Generally, these feelings subside as the family settles into a new routine. Often, the spouse at home will develop greater confidence as he or she negotiates the activities of daily life as a temporarily “single” person or parent. Ideally, the couple stay abreast of each other’s experiences through phone calls and frequent letters”*.

Our clinical experiences confirm the existence of a ‘cry-weekend’: the partner who stays behind cries nearly a whole weekend, feelings of loss and sadness/despair can become overwhelming during those first days. Furthermore, we believe that certain families are more vulnerable to emotional disorganization than others. The last years we considered the following group as being a “risk-group”: 1) the age of the stay-behind spouse is 25 to 30 years; 2) the age of the children did not reach 5 years; 3) the age of the relationship is less than 5 years; and, 4) the servicemember is fulfilling his 2nd or 3rd deployment.

Using the concept of ‘risk group’ means that the degree in which families correspond to the profile of the forementioned group seems to correlate with the adjustment/ emotional recovery of the family system.

2.4. Stage of Recovery and Stabilization

At about the sixth week, the phase of “Recovery and Stabilization” or “Coping/Detachment” begins. The sadness drifts away, and what supplants it is “a state of relative calm and confidence in handling day-to-day living”.

Although the occurrence of a major crisis can temporarily upset the psychological equilibrium, for the most part the calm is described as lasting the bulk of the deployment. This phase involves settling into a comfortable routine, making community and group connections and maintaining communication with the deployed service member.

*Our clinical findings indicate that the recovery and stabilization sets in as a function of what Peebles-Kleiger & Kleiger (1994) call the **media roller coaster**. The emotional and psychological equilibrium seems to be function of the quality of the contact and the communication (postal service, telephone, internet availability, press, television, rumors, ...)*

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with the deployed member(s). At this stage one can claim a same reality with respect to the deployed soldiers: morale shuts rapidly down when contacts with the homefront deteriorate.

For example, many families still don't have any idea about where in the Former-Yugoslavia, or Kosovo, their family member is deployed. Panic and anxiety arises when TV images of other "near-by" conflicts reach the homefront.

The result of this combination of fear of death, lack of hard knowledge, and rapidly oscillating media news spills is that the mood and courage of the stay-behind family members is rather fragile and permanently oscillates between hope and despair, up and down, like a YoYo.

2.5. Stage of Anticipation of the Homecoming

About 6 weeks before deployment ends, "anticipation of homecoming" begins. Activity, tension, and even despair emerges again as the families rush to prepare themselves and their home for the return of the deployed service member. Fears and hopes run high as the family's conflicting expectations of reunion vs. change, and fulfilling vs. disappointment, are stirred. The deployment nears an end and expectations about the reunion grow high. There is a sense of excitement about being together again but also some apprehension about how everything will have changed. All kinds of activities, aimed at making the re-union even better - such as last-minute diets, new cloths and/or underwear, house-cleaning, etc - only raise the reunion stress on both sides of the relationship. It is certain that is better to leave surprises behind, on both sides of the relationship!

Our clinical experiences indicate that this period is to compare to the stage of the short timers syndrom on the side of the deployed servicemen. Navy officers talk of 'Channel Fever' : when their ships are at some two weeks of the end-of-mission or homecoming, stress on board of the ship reaches a top level and created numerous conflicts.

Soldiers and their families start thinking of 'normal' life again and desinvest psychological energy from the deployment situation, especially from unpleasant but necessary routine activities. This creates a lot of tension among the military personnel.

2.6. Stage of the Reunion

The actual stage of "reunion" is described as beginning on the reunion day and lasting about 6 weeks for 'low intensity deployments' (i.e. the UNPROFOR & UNTAES- missions in Eastern-Slavonia, Croatia) and up to 6 to 9 months for 'high intensity deployments' (i.e. the RESTORE HOPE-mission in Somalia).

The combination of emotional overwhelming and estrangement make the returning spouse seem "different" to those who welcome him/her. When couples or families are reunited after the deployment, their readjustment stage begins. In this stage the family tries to become a family again, to get re-acquainted and re-accustomed to each other, to negotiate changes in old roles and *territorial* changes, and to respond to the specific changes in each other. The marital

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couple works to re-establish intimacy, and children and parents work to reestablish familiarity and connectedness.

We agree with Norwood, Fullerton, & Hagen (1996) on the fact that the high expectations about the reunion are a source of considerable problems. The reality of reunion often does not live up to these fantasies. Reunion begins with a “honeymoon” phase that lasts until the first major argument. As the couple reestablishes intimacy, there are commonly feelings of euphoria and excitement. However, the couple will soon have to cope with a difficult readjustment period which can easily last up to 8 weeks. The relationship and the roles in it, as well as in the household, have to be redefined and renegotiated.

Our clinical experiences indicate some special problems. Among others we have the specific problems of “the loners”: servicemen with poor education, weak family ties and/or without a partner relation. After deployment they start living in social isolation and want to be deployed again as soon as possible: they just want to find back the (well-paid) social situation of emotional sharing and friendship they experienced during the mission, sometimes for the first time of their life. Their readjustment risks to be very slow or not to exist at all. In some cases they become totally isolated and can be considered as a special risk group with respect to long term psychological sequelae.

Other typical reunion problems consist of what could be called “emotional numbing behavior”, detachment, non-comprehension of the enormous importance of the repetitious rehearsals between what could be called “the group of companions in fate” (which consist of the servicemen who were deployed together in a small group) and a diversity of relational problems among which the fears (and possibly the consequences) of “marital infidelity” within both partners.

The rapid re-entry and feelings of (unchanneled) aggression between family members and/or partners (“You shouldn’t have let me/us down so long”, “Don’t think you can just come back and start taking things over again”, etc...) will influence the period of reintegration and stabilization in a negative way.

2.7. Stage of Reintegration and Stabilization

Finally, about 6 to 12 weeks after reunion, “*reintegration and stabilization*” set in, with the family resuming their coherence as a functioning system again (with new borders between the different subsystems). Some relational “after-shocks” still remain possible, but generally most problems disappear. Unfortunately, the concerning couple or family soon tries to “forget” the bad experiences coupled to the deployment. As soon as possible, they (try to) start again to behave as before the long term separation, as if nothing happened. In fact, as a marital or family system, they didn’t learn much nor did they take the time to really integrate this challenging period into their life cycle. In many cases this “non-learning behavior” will be the source of severe problems prior-to, during or after later deployments or family crises. This problem will become clear further in this text, when explaining the different kinds of changes in family structure (i.e. first vs. second order changes).

3. The Operational Stages of Deployment

In 1992, we started talking about the *Operational Stages of Deployment* when trying to find a way to describe the different stages through which the soldiers themselves live prior-to, during and after their deployment. In many ways these stages look equal to those described in the earlier models concerning the *Emotional Stages of Deployment*. In fact, the idea was to merely focus on the experiences on the side of the soldiers who are sometimes struck between the military constraints of a peace support operation on the one side, and the needs of their families on the other side. The greedy way in which the military expects absolute loyalty and blind obedience from the side of the soldier is in many cases in perfect contradiction with the postmodern reality of our society in which the family is perhaps one of the only remaining values. Therefore, repetitious deployment in peace support operations seems more and more to become a problem with which our armies will have to actively cope very soon.

Before explaining a few important key-concepts of the systems theory more in detail, we will inventorize the *Operational Stages of Deployment* and discuss them only succinctly. Since there is a considerable overlap between those stages and the fore-mentioned emotional stages of deployment, we will explain the further detail of the operational stages in this text.

Table 2. The Operational Stages of Deployment

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Preparation Stage (Work Overload)2. Departure Stage (Psychic Numbing)3. Habituation Stage (Culture Shock)4. Routine Stage (Increased Stress Resistance)5. Half Time Stage (Homesickness/Depression)6. Anticipation Stage (Anticipation of the Homecoming/Short Timers' Syndrom)7. Reunion Stage (Existential Shock & Psychosocial Readjustment)8. Reintegration & Stabilization Stage (Occasional After Shocks) |
|---|

3.1. Preparation Stage

At this moment, there is a special 3 to 4 month training for military units which will take part in a peace support operation. In this way, it is wrong to consider only the 4 to 6 month deployment as being a difficult period to cope with for the families of the soldiers who will be deployed. Most of them are already taking part in numerous training activities and special courses before being deployed. Thus, these soldiers and their families experience a lot of problems to really prepare for a long term deployment. The preparation stage prior-to deployment is typically an emotionally confusing period which can be characterized by both a practical (i.e. preparing for a temporarily single-parent household) and professional (i.e. the specific military training) work overload. Few time is left for preventive action through psychosocial counselling and psycho-education.

3.2. Departure Stage

The departure stage is to compare with the corresponding stage in the emotional cycle of deployment seen from the point of view of the families. One of the problems, in addition to the *emotional numbing-like state* in which most the soldiers leave their families, is the method which is applied by the military unit to let the departure happen. The only good method is a kind of *quick leave method* in which the departure moment itself is kept short and intense instead of long and painful. The wrong departure ritual starts very early in the morning (mostly around 0500 AM) with a last breakfast, followed by a long painful waiting period during which the soldiers do not really know what is left to say to their partners and their children, and which ends by a *sudden-all-rise-moment* during which the deployed soldiers have to escape, on command, from their crying families to leave their quarters or the airport facilities. It is a bad sign when on both sides there is this feeling of leaving “too much things to say” behind.

3.3. Habituation Stage

The first days in the operation theatre are mostly difficult and challenging. There is the problem of culture shock; the magnitude of this possible culture shock will be proportionally equal to the margin of difference between the original cultural identity of the deployed soldiers and the local culture in which the operation takes place. Beside being confronted with a possible culture shock, soldiers have to find a new rhythm, to reach some kind of operational routine in which an optimal personal and professional equilibrium (mental readiness) is reached and in which they found a way to actively cope with the different emotional stressors (i.e. family and friends on the homefront, personal resiliency, personal identification with the misery of the stricken local population, etc).

3.4. Routine Stage

The routine stage is to compare with the resistance stage in the general adaptation syndrom described by Selye (1936) in which there is first an *alarm stage* (activation after being stressed), followed by a *resistance stage* (during which there is an active coping with the different stressors), and in some cases the adaptation process ends up in the *exhaustion stage* (when both the physiological and psychological resources of the stressed individual are exhausted). The routine has to be reached with respect to the different aspects of the deployment; there is the pure professional and military aspect coupled to the more personal problems such as idiosyncratic psychological strength, psychosocial stability (the stability on the homefront included) and role or function related issues.

The aim is to train and prepare soldiers so that they can reach this routine stage as soon as possible and avoid to enter the exhaustion stage during the deployment. This issue will be influenced, throughout the whole deployment, by both cumulative and acute stress stressors.

3.5. Half Time Stage

In many cases the half time period presents some special problems. The deployed soldiers already lived through half of the deployment period, and they perfectly know how long this takes, and there they are before another period of the same length. In some recent missions, the period was also coupled to some specific duty-off or vacation issues in which it is very difficult to find one solution which suits for every individual case.

3.6. Anticipation Stage

The anticipation stage starts some 2 to 3 weeks before the homecoming. In fact, what happens is the opposite from the adaptation process which took place in the habituation stage. The soldier starts to think again, more and more, of his family and all the things left behind on the homefront. There seems to be less energy and attention left for operational tasks. This period appears to be very dangerous from an operational point of view – risky missions should be avoided in this stage ! – and conflictuous with respect to military discipline and group cohesion.

3.7. Reunion Stage

When the peacekeepers come back home after a long-term deployment, they live through an existential shock due to the confrontation with their previous way of living and their rather high standard living conditions. The families who stayed on the homefront do not notice these changes immediately, but the returning young veterans can be – especially during the first moments back home – very disrupted when being confronted again with the values, norms and life priorities typical for our Western society. The reunion therefore consists of three elements: the return, the readjustment and the reintegration. In some of the following statements the very difficult task of this reunion becomes clear:

“Any ‘union’ that involves people entails two human beings who are growing and changing and who, after separation, may not fit neatly back together again as a couple. This should come as no surprise, since couples may not even stay together neatly without separation”

“The ‘warriors’ must leave behind the mental state that was used for survival, grieve whatever losses has been suffered, or readjust to the life they once knew. Even the manners of the field and of shipboard life must be left behind lest the warrior ask a bemused family to ‘pass the f---ing salt’ at the dinner table (...)”

“It is sage advice for everyone during this period to ‘size up’ the situation before taking any action. Time is an ally. It takes time to remove oneself from one context and put oneself into another. The returning individual must first recognize those habits and frames of mind that must be ‘killed’ so that he or she can reveal his or her ‘true’ self again in family relationships. Returning individuals must understand that partners and family may not ‘see’

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them as they believe themselves to be. Partner and family usually expect to ‘see’ the person that was there before separation (...)”

Mateczun & Holmes, 1996, Return, Readjustment, and Reintegration. The Three R’s of Family Reunion. In: Emotional Aftermath of the Persian Gulf War. Veterans, Families, Communities, and Nations (Ursano, R.J., & Norwood, A.E.; Eds.).

“(...) The returning veteran cannot help but be affected by the experience of going to war and contemplating and witnessing death and misery. Similarly, the process of working with men and women from different cultures and sharing hardships with others who previously were viewed as different, inferior, or dangerous influences the veteran’s understanding of the world and challenged the lessons learned in the past through family and community. These life experiences can result in the assignment of new priorities and attitudes that counter those previously held. The returning veteran may have difficulty adjusting to a family, and community that has also changed. The empathic bonds of family, friends, and community that were established before deployment may not be easily reestablished before with the “changed” veteran. The veteran, likewise, may be unable to understand his or her community and family.”

Yerkes, S.A., & Holloway, H.C., 1996, War and Homecomings: The Stressors of War and Returning from War, In: Emotional Aftermath of the Persian Gulf War. Veterans, Families, Communities, and Nations (Ursano, R.J. & Norwood, A.E.; Eds.)

3.8. Reintegration & Stabilization Stage

The reintegration and stabilization period, following the homecoming after a long term deployment, will be disturbed on regular basis by what we could call ‘occasional after shocks’. Some situations or stimuli will (re)activate conflict situations between family members or spouses, or remind one of both sides in a partner relation of difficult moments which were prototypical for severe psychosocial (adaptation) problems. Certain unresolved problems will arise back on the surface and need stable solutions. Families or spouses will – sometimes literally – “fight” to establish a new family pattern with a new consistency and determined by a new interrelationship (between it’s composing elements). Many relational and/or marital problems are due to the conflicts concerning the determination of new relational boundaries (in time, menaing and space), or new rules (which in systemic terms mean ‘redundancy’ in families or relations).

These relational and/or family changes are only possible through second order changes (cf. infra). In many cases, the pre-existing relation or family can grow to a more mature and functional entity. The Chinese concept of ‘crisis’, for example, stands for the combination of the two symbols “wei” and “ji”, where the one stands for danger (for a total loss), and the other for unique chance or opportunity; meaning that individuals and the systems from which they are a part, can grow through crisis (cf. the concept of traumatic growth).

It is a noble task for our military mental health workers to educate deployed soldiers, their leaders and their families, in such a way that they can work through their most difficult emotional moments and grow through the crisis and tough (relational) challenges imposed by a long term deployment.

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Table 3. Goals of Psychosocial Support of Long Term Missions

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Educate the 'military' couples & families on deployment adjustment: prior-to (pre), during (peri) and postdeployment (post)2. Reach out and make the availability of professional support known to the families left behind3. Provide a training to enable both partners of a relationship to cope with the critical stages of the deployment: prior-to departure, departure plus two weeks, half time, homecoming minus two weeks and postdeployment.4. Provide a permanent counselling and/or therapeutic support for both the military families and the rear unit command5. Provide a permanent counselling for typical child problems during a father/mother separation |
|--|

4. The General Systems Theory

*Plus que ça change, plus que ça reste la même chose
(Mony Elkaïm)*

The most general definition of a system - coming from the Greek 'systema', a composite thing - is the ordered composition of (material or mental) elements into a unified whole.

The 'General Systems Theory', like cybernetics, concerns itself with the functions and structural rules valid for all systems, irrespective of their material constitution.

The premises of systems theory are based on the insight that a system as a whole is qualitatively different, and "behaves" differently, from the sum of the system's individual elements.

In the framework of systemic family therapy, the application of the term "system" is identical to its application in the field of cybernetics. The military family, like every other family, can be considered as a composition in which the whole is indeed more and "behaves" differently than the sum of the individual elements. Military families tend to show much more loyalty toward the (greedy) military institution and its values, than common families of a normal population. It seems as if military spouses also show more resiliency and fate in their way of accepting the new destination of Western armies and in their way of handling the typical problems which arise from this whole new situation. Family members, friends and neighbors keep asking: "Why are you accepting this way of living". They often receive the very simple answer: "Just, because I made the choice of sharing my life with a soldier" ...

4.1. Interrelationship, Patterns & Consistency in Families

The notion of pattern, one of the most fundamental concepts in theories of family systems, implies an ordered sequence or correction of events.

It refers to a functional entity whose parts can be differentiated from one another. Its meaning overlaps with that of other concepts such as structure and gestalt.

Patterns (according to Bateson, 1979) should not be seen as static but as "patterns in time", i.e. "stories" which lead to rules.

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Long term deployment deeply changes the family pattern, leads to the development of other epistemological structures, and shows the need for the development of new rules.

4.2. (Family) Homeostasis

Homeostasis - from the Greek 'homois', similar, and 'stasis', stand still - is the relatively steady internal state of a system that is maintained through self-regulation (cf. the regulation of body temperature).

Families or couples, like certain systems, are capable of compensating for certain changes in the environment while maintaining relative stability in their own structures.

There also exist mechanisms in which equilibrium is maintained because a new equilibrium is achieved. For this we will take a short but close look at first and second order changes.

Families can be seen as rule-governed systems where rules are not regarded as intrinsic to the system's function, but as homeostatic mechanisms imposed on the system.

Long term deployment creates a rupture in the family homeostasis, and therefore changes the rules which govern the system. To really (re-)adapt, the family system necessitates second order changes.

The long-term deployment can be seen as a crisis for the military family. In a crisis (Greek krisis, a turning point) situation, the internal and external adaptation (therefore a family needs a certain amount of adapt-ability) of an individual or a system is disturbed.

When previously successful adaptive mechanisms are insufficient to preserve stability or balances, new skills and a corresponding internal restructuring became necessary.

In his "crisis theory", Lindemann (1944) distinguished two types of disturbance of adaptation: emergency and crisis. One can cope with emergency situations by using accustomed methods; a crisis requires new patterns of behavior.

For example, a spouse soon finds out that long-term deployment will need other coping skills than in the case of the much shorter and more frequent training periods the soldier has gone through in the past.

From a cybernetic point of view, an emergency is regarded as an adaptation disturbance that can be mastered by **first order change**; a crisis can only be overcome via **second order change**. Real evolution can thus be seen as the succession of crisis situations to which an individual, or the systems in which this individual lives, adapted (cf. Erikson's theories on human development through the experience of growth crisis).

When change occurs in one family member, this inevitably leads to change in the ecosystem of all family members. Minuchin & Barcai (1972) stated with regard to this theory: " (...) if

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therapists are able to induce a crisis, they create conditions for change within the family. The solution of such a crisis is only possible through discontinuous and sudden second-order change”.

“The second order type of change in systems occurs with changes in the body of rules governing their internal structure or internal order. Second order change is change of change”

(Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974).

Other related and typical systemic notions in the same context are **Territorial Boundaries, Rules & Redundancy, and (Error activated) Feedback in Family Systems.**

These terms will not be explained in detail in this contribution but are part of the core theoretical concepts of the systems theory (cf. Simon, Stierlin, & Wynne, 1985).

5. Communication Theory

The Basic Axioms of Human Communication

*Information is a difference that makes a difference
(Gregory Bateson)*

In this paper, communication is seen as each possible form of information exchange between humans and the conditions or variations in which this exchange happens. The contemporary information theory relevant to marital and/or family therapy has its foundations in the pragmatic communication theory, first systematically outlined by Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson in 1967, and in the two-volume edition of *Human Communication*^{vi} (Jackson, 1968). The authors integrated clinical data with the ideas, observations, and investigations of the double bind hypothesis of Bateson et al.^{vii} (1956). The posited principle, or five “pragmatic axioms”, which they believed could elucidate all forms of functional, interpersonal communication. Teaching these axioms to soldiers and their significant others, and coaching them to apply these axioms prior-to, during, and after deployment seems to be essential in the prevention of marital and/or family problems.

In what follows the original definitions of the five axioms, literally taken from Watzlawick et al. (1967), will be printed in italics. We will try to explain in our own words what they really mean.

5.1. “One cannot not communicate” ...

Axiom 1: In an interpersonal context “one cannot not communicate” (p51). Every behavior thus contains a message. Hence the paradoxical situation that a person who is not attempting to communicate will still communicate; noncommunication itself is a form of communication.

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Example. When a soldier is ready to leave his home, after a 3 to 4 month special training period, and during the last moments he appears to be very silent, this means 'something'. He can be either way glad to finally leave (after such a long preparation period) or be afraid about what the deployment will mean for him and his family (how damaged his family will be after the deployment).

In this case, just the silence between both partners is meaningful: not speaking is to be considered here as a special kind of communication of emotions.

5.2. "You always speak double words"

Axiom 2: "Every communication has a content and relationship aspect such that the latter classifies the former and is therefore a metacommunication" (p54).

Example. When the returning veteran asks his partner about the money she spent during his absence, this can mean different things. There is this simple question, just a matter of contents: "how much money did you spend?". But there is also the connotation: how much money did you spend without my permission? Defining the relation by saying: "You are my woman and you need to ask me if it's OK to spend the additional money I EARNED ! ". Depending on what message really has to be understood from the above, the relation is defined in some way by the returning veteran.

5.3. "Everyone has his own truth"

Axiom 3: This relates to punctuation phenomena and states that the nature of a relationship between two partners is determined by the manner in which they punctuate the communication between them.

Example. The returning young veteran is seen as distant and silent by his own wife. She asks him why he is so absent and thinks he is just missing the excitement of the operation zone or even worse ... an new girlfriend he met during his deployment.

The veteran sees his wife as compelling and erotomaniac. Both do not understand that their behavior is, at the same time, the origin and a consequence of the other's behavior. It is important that both learn to use the same punctuation. The spouse of the returning veteran has to understand that the silent and distant behavior of her husband could be seen as the consequence of her way of dealing with the homecoming situation, maybe by expecting too much in an early readjustment stage. The veteran has to understand that his wife may be both a little disappointed and anxious about her first attempts to reestablish intimacy.

5.4. "With or without words ..."

"Human beings communicate both digitally and analogically. Digital language has a highly complex and powerful logical syntax but lacks adequate semantics in the field of

***relationship, while analogic language possesses the semantics but has no adequate syntax for unambiguous definition of the nature of relationships”
(pp.66-67)***

Example. It is dangerous to interpret the several types of analogic communication without first testing what is really meant or said. The spouse, waiting on the homefront, may be afraid of the extramarital adventures her husband may undertake during his observers’ mission. In their first contact during the mid-term holiday leave she might react or look suspicious. This can be interpreted by the deployed soldier as an angry reaction toward his decision to participate in the observers’ mission and trigger another angry reaction. Without testing their analogic communication, both partners might never know from each other what was really meant; they can quickly get struck into this communicative trap and both develop an extreme image from one another.

5.5. “Who is the boss?”

Axiom 5: “All communicational interchanges are either symmetrical or complementary, depending on whether they are based on equality or difference” (p.70)

Example. Many peacekeepers leave a dependent spouse back home – soldiers, in many cases to be seen as rather “dominant males”, make a selective partner choice, and choose a dependent partner – but when they return from deployment their spouse turned into an independent women, taking care of the household all by herself. For the returning veteran it can be quite a shock to notice that the relation, he left behind when going on a deployment, dramatically changed. This is not easy to accept. Some of them can not manage this sudden relational changes; they do not fully understand that a lot of relational gains might be the final result.

DISCUSSION

This conceptual framework makes it possible to better understand the highly complicated communication processes, in particular those governing couples’ interaction within the context of “forced temporarily divorce” or long term deployment.

The impossibility of not communicating means that all interpersonal situations are communication situations, and that the very specific situations during the emotional stages of deployment need very specific coping skills before they can be understood as legitimate and normal by both partners of a relationship (instead of giving them the idea that this only happens to them and that they are the only ones having marital or relational problems).

The differentiation between digital and analog modes of communication is very important because analog messages and definition of relationship exhibit a high degree of isomorphism. The ambiguity involved in the simultaneous exchange of messages concerning both the relationship itself and things outside the relationship leads to problems of interpretation and translation, which, if left unclarified, can lead to pathological interaction patterns.

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The concept of punctuation allows the possibility of talking about the reciprocity of human relationships in a manner that is at once different from and more complex than that of the traditional stimulus-response model of behavior. Partners of a relationship - certainly in the context of the tough challenge which a long term deployment is for a couple - should understand that their proper behavior is both origin and consequence of the behavior of their counterpart.

As Simon, Stierlin, & Wynne (1985) state: *“Punctuation refers to the structuring and organization by an observer of a continuous sequence of events and behaviors. Two partners, for example, perceive and organize their ongoing interaction into various sequences, and each subjectively perceives different patterns of cause and effect, or different structures of interaction. Depending on whether the interactional process between A and B is seen from the perspective of A or B, it may seem as if A is reacting to B, or as if B is reacting to A. According to one punctuation, a wife nags because her husband withdraws from her; according to the other, the husband withdraws from his wife because she is constantly nagging him. The manner in which an ongoing communication process and/or interaction sequence is punctuated determines the meaning attributed to it and how each person’s behavior will be evaluated, that is, who is responsible or “guilty”, and how one describes to (re)act”*.^{viii}

Punctuation in the communication between both partners of a relationship will be of major importance in the readjustment process after the deployment period. It is important that the returning veteran does not withdraw from his spouse, and that the spouse on her side does not leave her husband alone with his existential shock after the homecoming, due to unilateral punctuation or context marking.

Finally, the concepts of symmetrical and complementary relationships introduce the important aspects of mutual evaluation and their relativity in interpersonal relationships.

The second axiom in the communication theory, developed by Paul Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967), states that every interpersonal communication is not only an exchange of information about some subject matter, but also concurrently contains a message regarding the relationship between the interactional partners. This aspect of communication belongs to a higher logical type and represents a form of metacommunication.

The difference between content and relational aspects of communication can best be described by the numerous problems couples experience in the critical emotional stages of deployment. Prior-to the deployment, the soldiers’ spouse protests, not only to manifest anger with regard to the upcoming separation but also to react against the complementarity of the relationship, in which the military partner alone is held “responsible” for the difficult period the couple or the family will have to face. Even after deployment, the relational conflicts do not only serve to readjust and work through, but also to (re)define the type of relationship both partners have or want with each other. This relationship can be either complementary or symmetrical. In many cases, both partners of the relationship do not understand this dynamic process in which

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problems or conflicts mostly arise when one of them rejects the definition of the type of relationship provided by the other.

Through psycho-educational training and coaching prior-to deployment, and adequate counselling after deployment, couples can learn to cope with this normal phenomenon and learn to discuss the type of relationship they both want, instead of letting the problem degenerate in an interaction in which both want to have the last word.

CAVE: Soldiers, when being deployed, sometimes leave a dependent spouse who is used to have complementarity in her life. They come back home, after 4 to 6 months, and find out that their spouse turned into a very independent wife: the relationship became a symmetrical one, without a mutual agreement on it.

In such a situation, the relationship that is offered by one partner (“I am superior; you are inferior”) is unacceptable to the other, as is any attempt by either partner to agree upon a symmetrical relationship. Leaving a relationship undefined also leaves unclear what is “real” or “not real” in the relational sphere.

This problem has to be treated during the psycho-educative counselling sessions (for example during preparative partnerweekends): both partners need to learn to negotiate (wanted) changes.

Inventory of Psycho-Educative Action Points

Territorial Training : learning both partners, through special seminars and partner weekends how to concede parts of their relation territorium prior-to or after deployment

Relational Training (Defensive, Offensive): working through relational “wins” and “losses” prior-to and after deployment

Communication Training: learning to use the basic axioms of pragmatic communication within the family and in interrelational contacts

Learning to Negotiate: learning to negotiate relational changes – how to get something I want ? how to concede something to my partner ? at which price ? – intimate negotiation ?

Reporting Relational Irritations & Changes: working through mission-specific irritations ?

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Learning ... to Cope with Peace Support Operations

Learning to go away ...

Primary prevention of relational and/or family problems

*Pre-Mission Briefing Day approx. 2 months prior-to deployment: Aimed at all participants
(on a mandatory basis)*

*Preparative Weekend for Couples approx. 1 month prior-to deployment: Aimed at Special
Risk Groups or Couples with an High OPTEMPO – load (operational burnout risk)
(on a voluntary basis)*

Learning to be away ...

Secondary prevention of relational and/or family problems

Monthly meetings for significant others

Monthly meetings for partners

Children's Activities

Other Significant Activities: CIMIC, special events, etc, ...

Learning to come back ...

Tertiary prevention of relational and/or family problems

*Post-Mission Debriefing: Aimed at all participants in the mission
(on a mandatory basis)*

*Reunion Weekend for Couples: Aimed at special target groups or couples at risk
(on a voluntary basis)*

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1. Support Activities' Time Axis (see Annex A)

Figure 2. Structural Model (see Annex B)

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Conclusions

It takes time for everybody to learn to go away, to learn to be away, and to learn to come back; not only in a physical but also in an emotional way. A new equilibrium or life rhythm can not be established instantly.

Partners and “companions in fate” should communicate about what happened and how they felt in the operation zone with respect to their different social roles: the way of being a soldier, a partner, a husband, a father, etc... changes profoundly.

Spouses and rear unit personnel should also talk about what happened at the homefront: in some cases the partner who stays behind with a family has a more difficult mission than the soldier deployed in the mission area. Soldiers are always specially trained for their mission, families mostly aren't.

However, (pragmatic) communication is a major issue for both the peacekeepers and their significant others and ... they can learn it quickly!

At this moment, still too much precious time is spoiled by criticising each other, being angry when (unclear) messages are misunderstood and trying to hide the deep emotional impact of a long term deployment: in choosing for a job in the army ONE HAS THE RIGHT TO “COMPLAIN “ or TO SPEAK OUT sad feelings. Being paid “FOR IT” has nothing to do with it ...

Soldiers returning from a long term deployment and their families both have a strong desire to talk about their own experiences. Recognizing the existence of recovery and readjustment processes in our loved ones and ourselves, after participation in a wartime deployment, is essential in preventing a long term psychosocial family trauma which becomes most difficult to treat.

The paradigm of the General Systems Theory and Communication Theory appears to be powerful in the further conceptualization of innovative support activities for couples. They deliver numerous action-oriented ways to increase military couples' and/or families' competence to successfully cope with the various effects of repetitious deployments in peace operations.

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Conceptual Framework - Support Activities

V1	: Pre-Mission Briefing & Counselling Day for Peacekeepers & Spouses
W1	: Pre-Mission Preparative Weekend for Couples
D	: Departure (on a 4 to 6 month mission)
P1	: Accommodation Briefing & Counselling Sessions for Peacekeepers
S1	: Accommodation Briefing & Counselling Sessions for Spouses
P1/2	: Mid-Term Briefing & Counselling Sessions for Peacekeepers
S1/2	: Mid-Term Briefing & Counselling Sessions for Spouses
P2	: Homecoming Briefing & Counselling Sessions for Peacekeepers
S2	: Homecoming Briefing & Counselling Sessions for Spouses
H	: Homecoming
H2	: Post-Mission Debriefing & Counselling Day for Peacekeepers & Spouses
W2	: Post-Mission Reunion Weekend for Couples
F1-4	: Monthly Meetings & Information Sessions for Significant Others

Conceptual Framework - Structural Model

Reflection/Planning Level:

Multidisciplinary Workgroup on Psychosocial Support which consists of representatives of army general staff, professionals from care centers, training centers and field workers.

Implementation/Execution Level:

1) field psychologists deployed with the soldiers on battalion level; 2) rear-unit personnel and psychologists from care centers for the spouses and the families (child care units); 3) professionals (psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, etc) for the veterans. Peer-support from 'old-veterans' to 'future-veterans', and from the spouses of veterans to the unexperienced spouses who are facing deployment of their dearest ones. Continuous contacts and interactions between soldiers, families and veterans.

(Scientific) Reflection/Evaluation Level:

Led by the scientific personnel of the Royal Military Academy and the Royal Higher Defence College.