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Coming Home: Reunion Experiences on Joint Base Lewis-McChord

Summer Steenberg

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Abstract
Military life demands that families continuously navigate between long distance (LDRR) and close proximity relationships. Following our entrance into the War on Terror, OIF/OEF, the Army has seen a rise in the number of high op-tempo bases. With increased deployments and ways around the required stabilization time, military families are experiencing repeated, elongated separations. As a rapid deployment instillation, Joint Base Lewis McChord (JBLM) deployed a record number of their troops during 2008-2009. Utilizing qualitative research methods including participant observation, personal interviews and focus groups, this study seeks to understand how JBLM spouses navigate between single and dual adult households. An emphasis is placed upon how individuals create an identity as a military spouse, utilize coping mechanisms, use behavioral modeling and reinvent roles.

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Coming Home
Reunion Experiences on Joint Base Lewis-McChord
Summer Steenberg

Presented to the Sociology and Anthropology Department in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for a B.A. in Anthropology

Supervised by Dr Cheleen Mahar

Pacific University
Forest Grove, OR
2011
Abstract

Military life demands that families continuously navigate between long distance (LDRR) and close proximity relationships. Following our entrance into the War on Terror, OIF/OEF, the Army has seen a rise in the number of high op-tempo bases. With increased deployments and ways around the required stabilization time, military families are experiencing repeated, elongated separations. As a rapid deployment instillation, Joint Base Lewis McChord (JBLM) deployed a record number of their troops during 2008 - 2009. Utilizing qualitative research methods including participant observation, personal interviews and focus groups, this study seeks to understand how JBLM spouses navigate between single and dual adult households. An emphasis is placed upon how individuals create an identity as a military spouse, utilize coping mechanisms, use behavioral modeling and reinvent roles.
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Forward

Before beginning, it seems appropriate to equip the reader with some basic background. As it exists side by side with the civilian world and its members possess no marks that truly distinguish them, there is the temptation for us to dismiss the world of military families as almost identical to our own. While it does not seem exotic, it is none the less very different from our lives as civilians. There are different rules, different hierarchies, and an entirely different language. In much the same way that an anthropologist must pay attention to cultural norms within ethnic subgroups, one must take heed of those regulating life within the military environment. While this forward will not be all encompassing, it will equip the reader with a little necessary knowledge before throwing them into the thick of things. A glossary is attached at the end for further reference.

Structure

Rank

The military structure is much more ridged than that of civilian life. Rank permeates every aspect of the culture, from the soldiers who wear their rank on their chests to the spouses who utilize it as symbolic capital within their own hierarchy. The importance of rank cannot be understated. For soldiers, rank is a ladder that they can climb through a combination of time, testing and accomplishment. In order for a soldier to be promoted to the next rank, they must have enough points and there must be an open space for them at the next rank. The number of points necessary is determined by their job or Mission Occupational Specialty (MOS). At higher ranks, they must also appear before a panel. Rank governs who must listen to whom, who gives orders and where respect must be shown. As rank is usually correlated with pay grade, it also reflects salary. In fundamental ways, it is an important measurement of social capital. As higher
rank determines control of greater numbers of individuals and increased respect, it also allots an individual an amount of pride and recognition. Higher ranking individuals are allowed increased group privileges including recognition of job experience, justification of aggressive behavior (in upper enlisted personnel) and working beyond questioning by laymen. An excellent example of this can be seen in the *Gaining Access* section of this thesis.

Rank division is also important as it divides officers and enlisted soldiers. Beyond the different career progression that each side has, individuals within them are understood to possess intrinsic characteristics. Enlisted personnel are described as more “hands on” and “hard core.” Upper Enlisted, Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) are understood to be rougher, more direct, and more in touch with the enlisted soldiers than their officers counterparts. Green-to-Gold (meaning enlisted who later become officer) soldiers and their spouses are quick to point out their previous enlisted status. Pride is taken in having belonged to the more rough-and-tumble side of the chain and enlisted personnel often refer to new officers by the derogatory title “butter bars.” Officers, on the other hand, are perceived as being more educated/refined than their enlisted counterparts, more paperwork oriented (and therefore “softer”), and of higher status than enlisted soldiers. While an upper enlisted (NCO) is expected to be loud and straightforward, officers are expected to behave in a more refined manner. For example, it would be common place to see an NCO yelling (and often cursing) at soldiers. In a very different way, one knows they are in a briefing with officers by the way in which they fold their hands behind their heads as they wait for the event to begin. Generally, throughout military life, the two sides are strictly separated and those of higher rank on either side tend to be more advanced in the chain of command.
The notion of rank is taken-up by spouses and government service (GS) employees as well. While this rank is not worn on a small patch on their chest as soldiers do, it is none-the-less as apparent to other community members as if it were. Recognition of an individual’s position in the hierarchy of either system (i.e. their rank), is instrumental in navigating social and business interactions. Due to its direct relation to the material concerned within this study, spouses’ utilization of rank and its implications will be discussed later in this project. More information can be found in the sections titled *Gaining Access* and *Analysis*.

Units

It is important for those seeking a deeper understanding of military culture to have an accurate conceptualization of what it means to be deployed. Contrary to what many civilians believe, not all deployed soldiers ride constantly across the desert in Humvees, exchanging hostile fire and breaking into buildings. Rather, the type of work done in Theater (deployed) is dependent upon a soldier’s MOS (job), unit and the deployment’s purpose. This means that while there are soldiers running caravans across the desert (Transport units), there are different soldiers breaking in doors and engaging in heavy combat (Stryker, Ranger, and Infantry units), and equally many soldiers who will remain on the Forward Operating Base (FOB) maintaining equipment, working on computers and manning equipment such as radar. Even individuals from a single unit will have vastly different jobs (leading missions versus repairing machinery).

Understanding that deployment experiences are extraordinarily different both between individual soldiers and between individuals deployments is instrumental in our attempt to understand experiences and outcomes. Such differences are also crucial in interpreting the varied mentalities, levels of pride and conceptualization of group identity within different unit types. More will be discussed on this topic in the *Analysis Section*.
Population

The population within the military subculture is constantly fluctuating. While levels of involvement vary greatly between couples\(^1\), all soldiers who sign a contract tie their families to the Army. Members are anchored to this group for at least 4 years, barring dishonorable discharge, pregnancy, or serious injury. However, following this period, they are free to leave. There is no quitting because of discomfort, but after a single term, many choose to leave the Army life. As people exit, new families continually come in. Many are young, recently married and have limited experience living on their own.

Challenges

It is equally important to understand that military families face a different set of challenges than do civilian families. A significant reason for is caused by Permanent Change of Station (PCS) moves. Within the Army, spouses disclose an average two to four year space between moves (Survey of the Army 2005). This means changing bases (and more often than not states) every two to four years. For families with children, it includes switching schools and friends. For working spouses, finding new employment. Furthermore, soldiers do not necessarily have much control over their next station. This holds especially true for younger, enlisted soldiers. Newly married spouses may therefore move out of their parents’ home for the first time to join their soldier in a state half-way across the country. For instance, a young spouse of eighteen discussed how much being alone in Washington contrasted with her parents’ home that she had left behind in Massachusetts. Spending the first few months without venturing beyond on-base housing, she finally realized that the loneliness and boredom were getting to her.

Without a driver’s license or previous applied job skills, she was unsure of how to proceed.

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\(^1\) military spouses may choose levels of involvement from immersion (taking up volunteer positions with the unit, jobs on base, etc) to minimal (taking on civilian, off-base employment and keeping civilian friends) to resistant (including staying in the home state, refusing involvement with the unit, etc).
Furthermore, her new husband received deployment orders for two months later, and she decided to return home for the six months he would be gone. She had failed to connect to the Army community and removal from the area had dampened any need to get involved.

Deployments, unaccompanied tours and extended Temporary Duty (TDY) Assignments create additional challenges for military families. Deployments (ranging from four to fifteen months) separate families for extended periods of time. Their frequency, which depends greatly upon the branch of service, MOS (job type), base and assignment, can range from seldom to the more commonly voiced every other or every two years. Select units, including Special Forces and the resident unit 180th SOAR, can experience more frequent, shorter deployments. Forty-five to ninety day separations can add up to more than eight months of total deployment while constantly forcing families to switch between being together and apart. In addition to deployments, unaccompanied tours send a soldier to a location such as Korea to serve a year while the family remains at home. A spouse in her early twenties explained how her husband left for Korea immediately after AIT (Advanced Individual Training). After a year apart, they moved to their new assignment only to have the soldier deploy months later.

While the above points represent challenges that military couples face, they should not be seen as necessarily negative occurrences. For instance, both of the above mentioned spouses were not miserable. Yes, the separations were not viewed as happy occasions, but neither were they seen as catastrophic events. PCS moves, especially, can be seen as positive events by members of the community. A spouse who had lived at five bases informed me that living in so many different areas (including overseas and continental locations) was an experience few people had the privilege of knowing. To be able to travel and have it paid for was, for her, a perk.
Looking Forward

Readers should keep in mind that this summary is not complete. As a short and simple introduction, it is meant to create a foundation on which to build and to complement the deeper exploration of themes within military culture as explored within this thesis. Please utilize this section as well as the glossary for reference. If you have any questions on my research or experience, do not hesitate to contact me. Sources detailing more information on military life and the culture it creates are listed in the bibliography attached at the end of this paper. Thank you and here we go!
“Never before in the history of our Army have we asked so much of our Families. They are serving side-by-side with our soldiers, enduring their hardships and providing the unconditional love and support that truly make our Army strong.”

– General Casey (Chief of Staff of the Army)

Introduction

At its base, the Army is a fighting force. Its mission, to fight and win our nation’s wars, demands both flexibility and allegiance from its all-volunteer force. To procure efficiency, retention must be maximized in order to minimize retraining, and readiness is an overriding necessity. Above all else, mission success is a unit’s priority. Yet, these demands are not simple. In order to maximize efficiency and readiness, the mission dictates where soldiers live, when they must leave home for training or combat operations and what they are doing day to day. In the past, the Army operated primarily upon the assumption that Mission Readiness depended solely upon soldier readiness. To this extent, training, resources and focus were geared exclusively towards those in uniform. Families were very much an afterthought.

After Desert Storm, the Army began to reprioritize. Hard lessons learned during the conflict indicated that soldier readiness and retention was firmly grounded in family readiness. Thus, mission relied on soldiers, but is relied equally upon families. Program such as Family Readiness Groups (then called Family Support Groups) and Army Family Team Building (AFTB) were created to fulfill the perceived gap between the demands of the Mission and families’ ability to cope with these requirements. Such progressive changes helped to distinguish what spouses repeatedly refer to as “Old Army” versus the Army today. These lessons have not been forgotten. In 2007, the Army Family Covenant was signed. Promising to better support and care for Army families, the Covenant is a step forward in preparing families for the challenges of
continuous deployments. With the United States’ entrance into the Global War on Terror (2001), OEF and OIF, the Army has seen an exponential increase in troop deployments. Longer deployments and shorter stabilization periods mean that military families are subjected to increased time apart and more frequent separations. These challenges are not simple and while much research has done on deployments themselves, much less is understood concerning what happens upon a soldier’s return.

This pilot study explores how spouses navigate the reunion process and how success is both defined and observed. Secondary observations were recorded on spousal relationships, definitions of self and the roles that expectations play within the course of a soldier’s reintegration.

Review of the Field

As mentioned previously, today’s Army is overwhelmingly concerned with readiness and retention. Whereas in previous times readiness focused upon the idea of individual fitness, unit training and group cohesion, the new Army must cater to more than simply the service member. As found by RAND, the majority of service members today are married and the bulk of those married have children (Booth, Segal and Bell 2007). With increasing numbers of civilian spouses in the work force, realignments in family structure and increased OPTEMPO are demanding changes within the Army’s handling of families (Booth et al 2007). A functional Army used to simply rely upon a happy soldier. Now, however, they must provide for a happy family as well.

Family wellness has likewise been repeatedly linked to overall retention and unit readiness (Booth et al 2007). Marital satisfaction, spousal contentment, perceptions of the Army as supportive of families and leadership support of families are all associated with fewer job
difficulties and increased personal readiness (Booth et al 2007; Burrell, Durand and Fortado 2003). It follows that the same factors have been correlated with high retention rates and morale as well as overall recruitment (Burnman, Meredith, Sherbourne, Valdez and Vernez 1992; Burrell et al 2003). This is vital in the Army’s preparation for, during, and after the deployment cycle. As found by Dimiceli, Steinhardt, and Smith, the vast majority (85%) of spouses list deployment as the most stressful military situation they experience (2009: 358). During the most challenging of times, it is critical that spouses perceive the Army as supportive and helpful if family wellness and satisfaction are to be maintained.

Yet another call for command support of families is reflected in Burrell, Durand, and Fortado’s finding that family integration into the military community has a positive correlation with family’s supportiveness (2003). Essentially, a family who is well integrated with their community is more accommodating and supportive of their soldier’s career and the Army’s demands (Burrell et al 2003). While the idea that community ties are a booster for morale and a swaying force in how spouses conceptualize the Army’s requirements is not shocking, the depth at which it is embedded is interesting. In a study of Guard and Reserve Families, RAND found that spouses included having a known support network as a key ingredient in deployment readiness and cited family, neighbors, friends and church as extremely important resources for support (Castaneda, Harrell, Varda, Hall, Beckett and Stern 2008). The study itself recommends that the Army nurture these networks and look for ways to combine resources with local and community based services (Castanenda et al 2008).

This sense of community is especially important in dealing with differences between civilian and military life. Carlson and Carlson found that the vast majority of spouses they interviewed had primarily friends who were also tied to the service (1984). Fostering this
connection between spouses is critical when applying Burrel, Durand and Fortado’s discovery that spouses of deployed soldiers are almost twice as likely to utilize a fellow spouse as a resource than a formal service such as ACS or an FRG (2003). If the Army is to assure resiliency within their families, and thereby provide for morale and readiness, it is critical that attention is paid to the factors that influence family wellness and the methods that families employ.

In order to provide for families, however, there are distinct difficulties for which the Army must compensate. The average Army family moves once every two and a half years, is subject to extended separations and is not assigned to a post of preference (Vernez and Zellman 1987). According to the “Survey of Army Families 2005”, over a three year period fifty percent of military families have undergone a total separation due to deployment of ten to nineteen months, while nearly one hundred percent have undergone a deployment of more than a month (2005). Furthermore, emphasis on the service member’s career and the Army’s demands limit the opportunities available to the civilian spouse (Vernez and Zellman 1987; Segal 1986).

With all of the challenges that Army families face, the military has implemented a wide variety of services to provide support and aid. Many of these are branch specific, but others, including Military One Source and the MFLCs aid different services. Despite the apparent plethora of available resources, utilization is lacking. According to the Survey of the Army 2005, sixty-eight percent of spouses utilize Army Community Services while less than half use other Army provided resources (2005). Depicting a disturbing underuse of Army funded resources, the study also indicates a lack of perceived effectiveness by spouses. At the time of the survey, for spouses who were approaching redeployment, only twenty-five percent of those who used reunion services found them very helpful (SAF V 2005). Note that this figure does not account for the percentage that chose not to use the services at all. These short-comings spill into
assessments of the FRG. Only twenty-five percent of spouses utilize FRGs and less than half of those involved found them to be beneficial (Drummet et al 2003: 282).

Despite the lackluster use of resources, spouses appear to be doing well. As found by the Survey of Army Families, the majority of spouses are able to adjust to their reunion within three weeks (SAF V 2005). After an extended time (thirteen weeks), only sixteen percent of spouses felt that they still had major adjustment issues (SAF V 2005). Wood, Scarville, and Gravino found similar results and concluded that many more female spouses were able to readjust than were not (Wood et al 1995).

If Army provided resources are not the primary coping tools, as could be inferred from the Survey of Army Families, it would be assumed that spouses are utilizing other methods. While spouses within a deployed unit may be experiencing many of the same stressors and newfound difficulties, their coping strategies can be radically different. In Navy Marriages and Deployment, Carlson and Carlson discuss one partitioning of coping styles which they term Internalization, Substitution and Replacement, in relation to disengagement theory and activity theory (1984).

Internalization, or the acceptance of disruption and subsequent implementation of interpersonal coping methods, is used by spouses attempting to retain a 'normal life' during the deployment (Carlson & Carlson 1984). This type of personal coping runs parallel to (but is distinct from) disengagement theory in which a person cuts ties and abandons former roles in an acceptance of what is happening to them (1984). Carlson and Carlson relate this to a wife putting her life on hold during a deployment, just attempting to get through until her husband returns (Carlson & Carlson 1984: 65). Coping strategies that fall within this style include acceptance or prayer and are among the most utilized by spouses according to Dimiceli (2009). Role
abandonment and disconnection, the key components of disengagement theory, were not identified as popular strategies (Dimiceli et al. 2009: 362).

In fact, both studies found that increased involvement, whether social or work related, was an extremely popular method of coping (Dimiceli et al. 2009: 362; Carlson & Carlson 1984). This strategy falls under activity theory which hypothesizes that effective transition requires the deliberate adoption of an active lifestyle (Carlson & Carlson 1984). If these activities were taken on as to occupy the time previously taken up by the spouse, it is labeled Substitution, whereas seeking to replace the purposefulness given by the deployed spouse constitutes Replacement (Carlson & Carlson 1984: 63 – 66). Such actions can include increased social interaction, self-distraction, and the undertaking of new roles in work or volunteering (Dimiceli et al. 2009; Carlson & Carlson 1984). It is important to note that activity theory encompasses both individual distractions such as shopping or TV watching and social interactions.

While Dimiceli found high usages of self-distraction through individual means, Carlson discovered an emphasis on increased social contact (Dimiceli et al. 2009; Carlson & Carlson 1984). Such interactions included involvement in wives’ clubs, community social institutions, socializing with friends and neighbors, renewed contact with relatives, and increased involvement with volunteering or work (Carlson & Carlson 1984; Wood et al. 1995). Social capital and the connections an individual had or created were also seen by Spera to be an important implement for coping during deployment (Spera 2008). Such an emphasis on social ties and networking can be seen in the purposeful design of the FRG (Dimiceli et al. 2009).

These strategies are important when investigating both resource usage and reunions. How individuals cope during the deployment dictates how they return to a family unit when the soldier redeploy. As discussed by Carlson and Carlson, a waiting wife who has disengaged will
have an easier readjustment than a spouse who has adopted new roles and will be forced through additional changes at the reunion (1984). Furthermore, the methods their spouses use to cope dictate the resources they utilize and the approaches that will reach them.

As discussed by Drummet and Doyle and Peterson, a deployment dictates boundary renegotiation, role reassignment, and new responsibilities as well as the necessity for new types of relationship maintenance (2003; 2005: 369). Prior to redeployment, Wood, Scarville and Gravino found that spouses took pride in their survival, grew nervous at renegotiating roles, and felt a sense of failure at goals that were not met (1995: 225). This is reflected by the discussion of spouses’ nervousness at the unknown and anxiousness or embarrassment in the face of perceived failures during the deployment (Drummet et al 2003: 282).

In almost all research concerning reunions, the rejoining itself is organized as a festive and exciting time. Wood, Scarville, and Gravino found the build up to be optimistic and euphoric while Carlson and Carlson describe the ritualized process of sign making and parties that accompany returning service members (1995: 225; 1984: 88). Drummet, however, discusses how such jubilation may create a blind, hiding potential concerns in the weeks and months following the redeployment (2003). Calling it the Honeymoon effect, Drummet felt that the joyousness of coming back together could cause couples to overlook initial difficulties (2003).

This same phenomenon is noted by Wood, Scarville, and Gravino. Their study observed that as the novelty faded, problems began to emerge (1995). Expectations (which will be discussed later) were not met, roles and responsibilities were confused, and daily life brought its own difficulties (1995: 226). These difficulties are reflected by Drummet, Coleman and Cable, who argued that potential concerns included how boundaries previously set by the spouse would need to accommodate the returning service member, that roles (including discipline of children)

One example of the stresses incurred during transitioning comes from the handing over of new found independence. As mentioned by Wood, Scarville and Gravino, many spouses gain a sense of increased independence and autonomy during the deployment (1995). Upon the return of a spouse’s service member, some independence is relinquished during the reallocation of roles. Carlson and Carlson found this voiced by several interviewees, one of whom expressed the difficulty in transitioning from independence: “I had to tone it down a little. I had to play my role now that he was back. I had to compromise again… that’s a little difficult to do after doing things my way” (1984: 91). While such a small yielding might seem pale in comparison to the glory of reunion, not acknowledging the need for such sacrifices makes individuals feel overrun and creates underlying kinks within relationships. Such mistakes can also lead to unmet expectations.

Expectations hold enormous amounts of power, shaping one’s perception of a reunion as well as the reactions that follow it. As discussed in “When Long-Distance Dating Partners Become Geographically Close,” expectations create an image of what should be, as well as a benchmark by which to judge the actual occurrence (Stafford, Merolla and Castle 2006). While expectations are necessary for an everyday navigation of society, they can create dangerous dichotomies in which anything other than the expected is perceived as a negative.

These difficulties are especially prevalent within the discussion of reunions. The parallels between LDRR (long distance romantic relationships) and military induced separations allow for
some comparison between theories. Expectations formed during separation can create undue pressure if they are not met upon reunion (Stafford et al. 2006). The formation of expectations that may not be realistic and are idealized is nursed by what Stafford and Merolla identify to be a lack of face-to-face communication and day-to-day topics (2006). Idealization also occurs concerning the reunion (Stafford and Merolla 2007). The idea that “things will be so much easier once he/she is back,” anticipation and the conceptualization of the reunion as a joyous, problem free end to the deployment can easily lead to a glossing over of potential difficulties (Stafford et al. 2006). Such expectations may lead to let down, difficulties in adjustment, or as mentioned by Sahlstein, undue pressure to make the time together special (2004).

By ignoring difficulties, simple solutions are missed. Idealizations also disregard the complications that spouses may have in readjusting to their returned soldier. In her study on LDRR, Sahlstein found that separated partners had a strong sense of autonomy and segmentation (Sahlstein 2004). By transitioning from living together apart (LTA) to proximal relationships (PR) individuals had to re-navigate boundaries, redefine roles, and adjust their schedules to meet another’s needs (Sahlstein 2004). This resulted in a loss of individual freedoms. Furthermore, Stafford and Merolla found that couples in long distance relationships perceived their communication to be of a higher quality while separated than after they were united (2006). If these types of difficulties are overlooked due to idealized perceptions or intense anticipation, they can create difficulties in adaptation and “set the stage for encountering a “stranger” with reunion” (Stafford & Merolla 2006).

For military spouses, this transition from LTA and PR occurs between each deployment. The difficulties mentioned above are reflected in the Survey of Army Families 2005, with forty-five percent of respondents stating that changes in their partner had made the reunion difficult.
and thirty-five percent having challenges reestablishing roles and responsibilities (2005). Difficulties do not exist solely between partners either. With regard to the entire household, thirty-seven percent of spouses reported that children’s readjustment had been a major issue (Survey of the Army 2005). With the high OPTEMPO mandated by the Global War on Terrorism, this transition must be repeatedly navigated.

As demonstrated by the sources utilized in this review, the majority of work done concerning Army families has been completed using quantitative methods. As surveys are versatile, flexible, and cheap they seem to be the primary method for garnering information concerning our service members. Although many organizations have taken an interest in the military, RAND is by the far the primary number generator. Polling thousands of military families, RAND has succeeded in generating some of the largest data sets available. Many independent researchers have followed RAND’s method of survey utilization, using the gathered data to draw conclusions concerning family perception and their navigation of the deployment cycle. Although RAND’s work gives researchers a large quantity of available data, their methods miss the more subtle aspects of interactions. Reunions within the military are intimate occasions, and much of what is to be found cannot be written on a forty-five minute survey or stated during a one-time interview with a stranger. Ethnographic methods permit researchers to observe the things people may not discuss and the time to wait for what their informants may be willing to share. With this in mind, I focus on qualitative methods for my study. By employing ethnographic methods and triangulating between techniques, my thesis seeks an in-depth exploration of army reunions.
Methods

I made preliminary contact in August 2009 with the Volunteer Coordinator of Ft. Lewis and was referred to Mobilization and Deployment. After meeting with the woman who would become my primary gate keeper, Tasha, I was granted permission to attend “briefings” and “training sessions” with the program. During the sessions, I was introduced as an intern who was studying how the deployment process worked. This was easily accepted by participants who seemed to find my presence unremarkable despite my open note taking.

Participant observations were recorded over the course of twelve months. Settings included Pre-Deployment, Deployment with Children, Dealing with Deployment, Long Distance Communication, Battlemind, and Reunion group sessions, Mod 0 Trainings, Army Family Team Building Classes, and Family Readiness Group meetings (FRG). Information on these trainings can be found in the appendix. Most sessions were officially called briefings; however the majority consisted of small focus groups of four to sixteen participants. Participants responded to questions having to do with what concerns they had, discussed solutions, stresses, successes and hardships. During sessions, I was introduced to the group and took notes openly. Further observations were recorded during the Army Family Action Plan conference (AFAP), during casual discussions, and at ACS trainings. My notes included no names.

The location of Mob/Dep allowed me an introduction to Army Family Team Building (AFTB), Employment Readiness (ERP), and the military Family Life Consultants (MFLCs). The design of the building, which incorporates a large open central hub with offices around the perimeter, created an excellent way to meet individuals and to observe interactions. Army Family Team Building operates under ACS, educating individuals on Army life. Classes include soldiers, families and DoD civilians. More interestingly, at least from an anthropological perspective, is how AFTB functions as a hub for social interaction and networking. Run entirely
by volunteers, AFTB draws spouses who serve as instructors, organizers and office assistants. Time spent with AFTB provided me with contacts to a variety of spouses, many of whom were involved with FRGs or who served as Family Readiness Support Assistants (FRSAs).

Information was also gathered through surveys and interviews. This section of the study was distributed through the FRSAs. By avoiding the FRG, I hoped to bypass the negative feelings that some spouses associate with it. The FRSA provided a more neutral channel and it was hoped, a more precise one. All e-mails were sent out through the family services coordinator and down through the Brigade then Battalion FRSAs. Surveys were administered in 4 sections: 3 months prior, 1 month prior, 1 month after, and 3 months after the reunion. In the end, 16 spouses were followed from 3 months prior to redeployment to 3 months post-redeployment. Many spouses withdrew during the process and were not included in this number. In addition, 10 spouses were formally interviewed and a small focus group for FRG leaders was also organized. Interviews took place at a local, neutral location such as a coffee shop and were semi-structured.

All field notes and interviews were transcribed. Common themes were identified and then the surveys were examined for complementing or contradictory themes. Follow up, informal interviews were held in order to establish the validity of findings. In the analysis section, identified themes were compared to the literature provided to spouses and to the conclusions of past cross-professional studies of military culture.

**Entering the Field**

Gaining entrance to the cohort I wished to study was a challenge. Access to base is extremely restricted for non-military and can only be gained once contact has been made with
someone on the inside. Essentially, one must have a sponsor before they ever step foot on the
base. I was persistent (and lucky) enough to end up in direct contact with an individual who
could do just that, a practitioner Tasha. Even with luck, however, it took me over a month to
even step foot on Post.

Face time with these individuals was instrumental in my ability to build credibility.
Without acceptance from the group, access to personal information or other contacts was
impossible. It is worth noting that several times, past experiences with outside ‘researchers’ were
brought up by informants. These past investigators were described as having come to Post, done
a quick interview or two, and then left. While these hit and run encounters probably provided
the researchers with important data, they were perceived as invasive and spouses stated that such
sessions were a waste of time for participants. Participants also felt insulted by and weary of
those who did not take time to understand the military lifestyle, including the language and
practices. Thus, it was difficult for me to gain a close rapport with my informants until I
established myself as trustworthy.

For this reason, I believe my extended time at JBLM was necessary. Although interviews
with participants might have been solicited through external means, it would have been
impossible to accomplish my fieldwork without first understanding both the language utilized
and the cultural norms that governed the conversations. Furthermore, credibility within my
network of gatekeepers was only established after my presence had been shown consistent and
began to be taken for granted. As my time at JBLM continued, I was made aware of the
importance of the Chain of Command. Not only did such a chain exist within the world of the
green suitor (soldier), but within spousal contexts, and the information system as well. Contact
could only flow downward and your message only went as far as the circuit of those below you.
Thus, it was extremely important that I was able to gain access to individuals who maintained a high ranking position within the chain.

This is yet another reason that I was extremely fortunate to have fallen first into the lap of Mobilization/Deployment. Having the right connection was instrumental. The position gave me a transitive respect through perceived connection, and allowed me to be taken seriously. Essentially, individuals understood Tasha's adoption of me to be an indicator of my worth. Her support in addition to the contacts I made through the briefings I attended allowed me to establish a reputation as well as to "give names" when I needed to earn acceptance. Although people initially found it amusing that I was interested in study them and their lives ("We aren't that interesting"), the connections I made allowed me to at least get my study off the ground.

Adjustments

Adjustment did not come immediately or easily. The terms, language, and topics were just a part of the adjustment. Etiquette was quite another. Having lived the previous two and a half years on a liberal arts college campus, I was not prepared for the plethora of unspoken rules. I remember one of my primary mistakes quite well. I had accompanied my gate keeper to an information fair on North Fort. The man in charge, a colonel who talked for long after his time frame, had finished introducing everyone. My gatekeeper spoke about the program, but she was hurried and did not get through even two minutes of what she had wanted to say. I stood up to add something (it seemed to be a semi-informal event), and was immediately shushed and pulled back down. I felt like a whipped child. Her scolding was serious and I could tell that I had made a huge mistake. Obviously, the dictated order was not to be broken. Furthermore, although some individuals did go over their time, almost all of the participants stuck to their allotted time
frames. Although the Colonel had vastly overrun his time slot, I learned that this was to be expected. High rank was given an authority that could be joked about but not officially questioned. Those who opened ceremonies, briefings or meetings were expected to run over their allotted time frames and that all those following would make up the difference. This seems much opposed to the military idea of strict time, but helped to emphasize an individual’s importance. Comments such as “He’s a Colonel, it’s what they do” or “What are you going to do, tell the Sargent Major to sit down?” demonstrated both a reference of rank’s authority and an acknowledgement of the pedestal it provided. Going over the allotted time appeared almost as a demonstration of such authority.

I made numerous other breaches during my time at JBLM. I walked into an official briefing late, skipped a rung on the ladder when asking for a favor, and called a private sir. However, I also learned, and quickly. In fact, much of it I do not remember consciously figuring out. At what point did I learn that you should sit at the table with participants if they are spouses but not if it is in a soldiers’ meeting? Or, how to recognize an individual’s importance by the casualness of how they were addressing others? That it is good to introduce yourself to a normal spouse, but a senior spouse is better met through a third person introduction (and unspoken assurance)? Or even, how to distinguish between an NCO and officer? In the beginning, I know it was fear that kept me quiet. I am honestly quite thankful for that. The Lord only knows how many mistakes of etiquette I would have made. In reality, silence was probably the best way to enter.

In the beginning, no one appeared concerned by my presence. I was a sort of invisible creature, following mobilization and deployment around. Once I was introduced, I might as well have left the building. As time progressed, I was acknowledged, but the reality wasn’t much
Those who were of around the same status as my gatekeeper had accepted that I would be lurking about, but they perceived me almost as if I were my gatekeeper’s little pet. Yes, I was present, yes, I had a habit of turning up at everything. But no, I was not an actual person. It took me over five months to break through this.

I was advised not to take it personally or as an insult. It was during this time that I became truly aware of how much the idea of rank had bled into the civilian side of the equation. Everywhere I went, life was saturated with it. While spouses may not have been wearing the uniform, they seemed both aware and party to its presence within their peer circles. Here, “rank” could be understood to appear from several possible indicators. Leadership positions in the FRG, employment positions (for example in ACS or as FRSAs), being a senior spouse and their soldier’s rank all gave spouses a system in which to organize and order themselves. Possessing the position of a senior spouse seemed to be one of the clearest primary indicators of status. Almost every spouse that I spoke to both recognized and internalized the status that such a position brought. While those holding the position could be spoken of in negative terms, they were universally understood to possess certain advantages, status and cultural capital. The doxic acceptance of this system of symbolic power was also clear in the behavior of employees on JBLM. My inability to be recognized was a direct result of my lack of capital. As my gate keeper introduced me to other individuals, I was given a sort of social acceptance. Those who I interacted with regularly during briefings were enough above me that I did not warrant direct interaction. As was later described to me, I was not on their chain of command. As my interactions with people spread, however, I was received by more individuals who granted me acceptance and who would vouch for me on par. It often seemed that the individual who introduced me was the key to gaining yet another layer of access. My ability to gain entrance into
groups of higher status in the chain of cultural capital seemed to rely upon my ability to “know” another individual of the same, higher or in some cases, slightly lower status.

Like every other community, it was also filled with cliques and small group dynamics. For this reason, it was critical that I keep track of those battles that I was aware of for fear of being associated with the wrong individual and thus, isolated from contacts. This was especially important in the first months of my time on base. Luckily, my association with mobilization/deployment and my gatekeeper allowed me to circumvent much of this.

Data and Analysis

For the purpose of flow and ease of understanding, this section will be organized utilizing the chronological progression of the deployment cycle and separated into five sections. As we seek to understand the reunion and reintegration processes, the mobilization and deployment phases will be skipped\(^2\). We will open with a critical discussion of the prevalent themes and their applications to the reunion process. These will include the appearance of ‘military Spouse’ as a primary identity and the redefining of ‘togetherness’. These ideas will provide insight into the undercurrents operating throughout this research and add depth to the following discussions.

The second section will begin our exploration of the deployment cycle by examining how spouses navigate the final months of the deployment and gear up for redeployment. From there, section three will discuss the immediate reunion itself. In section four, the reintegration phase and subsequent reconstitution will be explored. The fifth section will detail final themes and the theories behind them. Included within this section will be an examination of Segal’s claim of a

\(^2\) The deployment cycle begins with the ‘gearing up’ and mobilization of troops. This is a time of training exercises and week-long separations from the family. The deployment follows. At this time, the soldiers leave home for their destination. The reunion or de-mobilization comes at the end of the deployment. For more information see Appendix
"Greedy Institution” and an assessment of Long Distant Romantic Relationships in relation to military induced separations! Readers are encouraged to reference the appendix for clarification on unit structure or acronyms.

Section One: Underlying Themes

Togetherness

In order to examine military relationships, it is critical that we set aside our understanding of what it means for individuals to be in a relationship. In American civilian life, our understanding of relationships gravitates around the idea of togetherness. More often than not, this idea of togetherness is interpreted to mean desired physical proximity. By and large, individuals who are engaged in a relationship tend to reside in relative proximity to one another. For those who do not, it is expected that they will one day do so and that they desire this type of connection. Not living in the same area must be justified by a hardship such as job requirements, schooling or children’s needs. If a couple were to simply decide to live a distance apart, it would be interpreted as brought on by relationship difficulties.

Military couples are not immune to this narrative. While they have voluntarily chosen the Army lifestyle, the majority do not express positive feeling about induced separations. In order to navigate the idea of togetherness without physical proximity, they must redefine what it means for a couple to be together. This theme appears in two very different discussions.
Alone Together

“We are just so use to just not being together that being together is not much more together”

-Sarah

The first of these can be found within the idea of being together while separate. Here, spouses routinely pointed out advances in technology as a means by which togetherness is preserved during extended separations. For those who were routinely located on the station (FOB), internet access was available and phone calls were also easily placed. Although physical proximity might be lacking, mechanisms such as Skype, Instant Messaging and Teleconferencing have allowed the day to day ‘presence’ of deployed soldiers within the household. This ‘presence’ is comprised of multiple forms of communications including live-time visual interactions, auditory/vocal exchanges and type based replies. The ability to see their soldier, as well as speak to them, was seen as an extraordinary advantage by spouses.

Frequent communications allowed for the day-to-day sharing of activities, resulting in a feeling of closer connections within the household. As one spouse stated “We talked pretty much every day that he was deployed so, I don't know. It was like he was there but he wasn't the whole time. So it was then, like, then he was back and I was talking to him in person and not on the computer.” Here, while physical proximity was impossible, increased verbal communication and visible connections allowed for an improved sense of togetherness.

Another spouse explained the confusions within togetherness by depicting an event that occurred during her husband’s deployment. They had been chatting online for a few hours (which they had been able to do almost daily),

“There was one day that we'd been talking for a very long time on the computer and like I noticed a picture in the dining room that was crooked. Like, I had gone to get a drink and the computer was still in the bedroom and for a second… I
thought about going back and asking him to fix the picture frame... and I was like, he's not here.”

As she explained to me, it had been as if he was literally there. This intertwining of the togetherness brought on by communication and that by physical proximity is further tied up in the multiple separations that military couples endure. This section begins with a quote from a military spouse of two deployments and multiple extended TDYs. She explains, “we are just so use to just not being together that being together is not much more together.” As each deployment demands a switching of roles, taking on of new responsibilities and a change in the way day to day life is managed, it should not surprise us that such behavior becomes a part of relationships for those who undergo multiple separations.

Desire for proximity

“When we heard he wasn’t deploying, we were like ‘Wait, what?!’”

-Terry

A second instance of friction within this narrative comes from a select collection of individuals. As mentioned previously, the desire to eventually be physically together or in relatively close proximity is instrumental in our perceptions of relationships. If you love someone, desire someone, you want to be with them. During my time on JBLM, I was witness to several individuals who did not embrace this idea. Rather, as one wife put it, the deployments and separations were an important part of their relationship. While these couples readily identify their relationships as healthy, and push the idea that they love each other in the same manner that other couples do, the separations were not only good things, they were looked forward to.

In order to support this, many couples within this class gave different ‘justifications’ for their reasoning. During deployments, soldiers receive additional pay and financial gain was
repeatedly brought up as a line of reasoning. However, while there are defiantly couples who are in need of the extra funding, many of these pairings more readily embraced other reasons for their acceptance of separations. As one couple explained, they got along better while they were separated. The civilian wife indicated better communication and an appreciation of their individual freedoms that accompanied the deployment. Furthermore, as was said repeatedly, the weeks following the honeymoon period only brought about fighting and a sense of the soldier “getting in my hair.” At the same time, these couples were adamant that their relationships were ‘healthy’ and that they loved each other. To consider the desire for physical separation as an indicator of problems in their marriage was insulting. This was simply how their relationship functioned.

One couple, who had gone through over seven deployments, did not claim to belong to this group. However, soon after the soldier returned home, the spouse took a job in another state, initiating yet another elongated separation. When speaking about her reasoning, she was quick to point to financial gains. On closer examination, however, it was clear that the job she had taken produced very little, if any, additional funding. Despite this, her reasoning did not change. Currently, she visits her soldier approximately every five weeks or so. This places their relationship in an almost liminal state in which their proximal reactions last around four days. As she herself described, this allowed for the sense of newness to be present at every meeting. By recreating the honeymoon period during each of their interactions, she is able to balance the proximity that our notion of togetherness mandates with her comfort with the ‘togetherness’ that she has developed during the deployments. In order to fulfill the requirements of both ideals, however, she must constantly reassure others that her reasoning for their separation is financial security, an acceptable reason within our own American narrative.
Section Two: Pre-Redeployment

The months prior to redeployment signaled a change in the attitudes of spouses. The majority of spouses I observed and spoke to noted a certain amount of adaptation that had occurred by the final months of the deployment. Those who self-identified as having done well, or at least neutrally, during the deployment expressed increased self-confidence and independence while looking forward to the reunion. Many had taken on new roles, both at home and in the community. At the same time, a good number of spouses were reluctant at first to admit that they had changed. When first asked about personal changes, many answered to the tune of “Um... Not really...” Upon additional questioning or after another spouse opened with their own changes, individuals were more open to discussing their personal adjustments. Those who self-identified as having not done as well as hoped or poorly did not view themselves as having become more independent as often as their ‘successful’ counterparts. During the final months, these individuals were more focused on the day their spouse would be home. They spoke about the deployment in more negative terms and spoke about personal changes.

The general observations listed above offer a surface layer evaluation. This section examines several deeper themes that emerged during the months and weeks prior to redeployment. We begin with an investigation into the coping mechanisms utilized by spouses and the methods behind them. This ties into a discussion of the normalization of the military lifestyle and induced separations. In the following subsection we will look at the development and utilization of community during the deployment process. Finally, the structure and purpose of FRG/unit based meetings will be examined as providing various functions. These include an exploration of meetings as rituals and illuminators of pathways as well as facilitating the process.
of role modeling. A fuller discussion of role modeling completes the section and transitions the reader into the third section.

Coping

For simplification, we classify the observed coping mechanisms into four broad categories: pride, stigmatization, logistical focus, and over-exertion. These topics are not all inclusive and every spouse did not demonstrate each of them. Yet, they were continually exhibited and surfaced during conversations with a variety of spouses. Therefore, we explore them as principal methods of coping.

Perhaps most apparent was the exuberance with which many military wives/husbands represented their connection to the military. My first week on the installation and exploring the area around it, I was impressed by the plethora of bumper stickers, flags, license plate holders and tee-shirts proclaiming membership in the Army family. For many spouses, their affiliation was mentioned in introductions (along with their soldier’s unit) and appeared front and center on their Facebook/MySpace pages. It also warranted a level of pride, even for spouses who did not necessarily like the lifestyle. Spouses were stronger and more independent, simply for being Army wives/husbands. Being an Army spouse wasn’t for everyone; as one spouse stated, “Only those who were strong enough, independent enough, can do it.” Such a sense of pride allowed for a sort of small justification and benefit from the additional difficulties that Army life created. By instilling meaning in the label and developing group recognition of the characteristics that deployments forced spouses to develop, spouses were able to create a sense of accomplishment and glossiness over their difficulties. Being a military spouse took a certain type of person.

Furthermore, two critical themes, the development of independence and the growth of community, have been left out. These will be discussed in the following section.
At the same time, the instilling of pride in group membership allows for the distinguishing between successful and unsuccessful members. There appeared to be a widely accepted stigma that limited the amount of difficulties a spouse could admit to before being seen as drowning. When spouses observed another individual expressing problems openly and persistently, they were seen as “unfit” for Army life and “not made for this...” By creating a deviant labeling for the continual expression of difficulties, spouses were permitted to mourn but limited in their ability to do so publicly. It is important to note that the seeking of resources on one’s own was not viewed as deviant but rather empowering and motivated. Inactive voicing of difficulties to outside peers, repeatedly seeking aid from the FRG leader, calling the rear detachment, or having fights with your soldier made known publicly were all deviant acts. Certain circumstances, such as difficulties reported to the FRG/RD by an outsider or emergency notification of problems by the individual, were rationalized by blaming the soldier’s failure to connect his/her spouse to resources or to pass on information. However, once a spouse had been introduced to the process, they were expected to put forth effort in their own adaptation.

By categorizing the behaviors of other spouses into either successful or failing, spouses were able to differentiate themselves in a way that was positive. Such intragroup comparisons allowed spouses to classify specific areas in which they functioned better than those performing deviant acts, thereby creating a positive perception of the self. This is exemplified by one informant who stated: “[It’s] not for all spouses... Some spouses are very clingy and they spend nine months out of the year crying when their spouse is gone. But I was more independent prior to our marriage...” In this way, spouses can express difficulties while avoiding stigmatization; while they may be suffering in one way, they are still better then Spouse X in another category. Most commonly, spouses attributed an age bias to those in the negative category. That is,
younger spouses (especially first term, teen to early twenties) were seen as the most likely to do poorly or to have difficulties with Army life.

The coping mechanism that was most prevalent within my informants and observations came from logistical tendencies. When speaking with individuals three months prior to the reunion, many were already planning the subsequent block leave. Similarly, spouses who were set to PCS following the reunion extensively planned their moves, including house shopping, transportation, etc. Furthermore, informants focused primarily on the logistical aspects of the reunion when asked about any of its features. For instance, “How are you getting yourself ready for the reunion?” and “What do you think about your upcoming reunion?” were answered almost entirely with tales of house cleaning. More personal questions about feelings and expectations were likewise answered. When talking about whether she worried over a four month long separation that would almost immediately follow the reunion, a spouse stated “Sometimes... when I think about it not from a logistical sense... I tend to be like that ... just overall in life... I'm a big planner. So, I don't know.” Such a logistical perspective appeared to allow for three separate advantages. First, it allowed spouses to override emotional concerns by focusing solely on the tasks at hand. Second, it created a focus on the future and a time when the separation would be over. By speaking of the future, spouses did not need to recognize or dwell as much on present difficulties. Third, it allowed for the illusion of control within an environment that provides almost none. While the Army may dictate when a soldier is home, where he/she lives and when they come back, a spouse can exercise perceived control over their environment by planning the details.

Overexertion was a third coping mechanism commonly employed. Spouses who are perceived as highly successful and well adapted tended to be involved in a myriad of different
activities. These included volunteering, being involved in the Family Readiness Group, holding employment, participating in various family activities, etc. While some spouses stated that it was their personalities that drove them to be so highly involved, many mentioned that their levels of involvement had grown exponentially since their entry into the military life. A spouse attempted to explain this by stating,

_I'm on all these different committees. Why? Because I have to be busy, because that is my learned behavior, over the years of having to deal with (pause) the military life style. I have to be busy. I have to be active. I have to... I guess (pause) more things for me to control. I don't know if that is the reason why._

In accordance with activity theory, the adoption of an active role in community organizations allows for easier transitioning into the new environment, i.e. throughout the deployment cycle. Furthermore, for many, spousal proximity accounts for a large amount of social interaction. The absence of a significant other from the household for a large period of time leaves a social gap whose importance should not be underestimated. As one spouse stated, “When I first got to Ft Lewis is was like 6 months before I found something to do and friends... I was scared... and I didn't have anywhere to go, so I would just sit in the apartment, by myself with the cat...”. The same spouse goes on to speak of how she suffered through the isolation for the first portion of the deployment before finding a volunteer position in the community:

_I felt that I got more into it while he was gone (pause) because it was just me and the cat (pause) so i was lonely at home (pause) so I was just kind of like, I'll spend all day at ACS. I looked online for volunteer things and there was something up for an office assistant and I was like, oh, maybe that will help me get a real job. And then I went and Sam, Sam was like, ‘Why don't you take classes?’ And I was like, okay. I think it helped me just cuz, I didn't have friends, and it helped me make friends._

By creating new social ties, spouses can help compensate for the amount of social interaction lost during the deployment and help time pass faster. It appeared that for many, getting involved or
“staying busy” dictated the difference between living for the deployment to be over and living during the deployment.

Community

“It’s a family... the Army Family”

-Cheryl

As discussed previously, spouses turn to the community for various reasons during the deployment. These include coping through social interaction, filling up empty time with volunteering and creating new friends through outside work. In this way, community growth is critical during the deployment process. Furthermore, spouses differentiated between involvement with other Army individuals and civilians. A female spouse explained that she had begun to attend church more frequently, but was irritated by the pity and patriotism that was reflected onto her husband’s deployment. Another spouse added that getting involved on base made more sense than getting involved with people in her apartment complex, “It was people who understood... like... what was happening... as opposed to what? Like a civilian that’s never dealt with a deployment? They may be able to emphasize, but they don't know.” Many FRG leaders and older spouses explained this through the analogy of a family. I was repeatedly told that being in the Army gave you membership into the “Army Family,” a community of people going through the same things that could watch out for and assist each other. While this was voiced not as often by younger spouses, and almost never by those who reported many difficulties with the deployment, it did constitute an overriding theme within the recorded observations. Spouses, regardless of perceived success, tended to voice at least a minimal connection with other military spouses and an awareness of the benefits that being with the Army granted them. Furthermore,
those who chose to be actively involved in the community reported benefiting from it and becoming active was viewed as both self-helping and a proactive.  

FRG/Unit Hosted Meetings and Their Functions

As the reunion draws closer, most FRGs and units will host various reunion activities at their meetings. These activities range from entirely social to completely information based. While the FRG leader oversees the planning and execution of the meetings, as the reunion grows closer a member of the Rear Detachment will usually attend to give a quick ‘update’ on the reunion process. This can include anything from narrowing the arrival date to within a two week range (called the two week notification), to information on the reunion location and expected times. As mentioned previously, this information is also given out through e-mail and phone calls and is therefore not exclusive to FRG events.

Aside from providing information and social interactions, these meetings appeared to signal the transition towards the end of the deployment. That is, the meetings themselves were utilized to describe and mark the passage of time. For instance, when asked about preparing for the reunion, an FRG leader explained that the unit first had the chaplain brief the FRG, then they started planning the ceremony and then they made banners, etc. This progression appeared to formulate a set of boxes which were checked as the group went through the various activities and briefings. In this way, the meetings served as markers of a pathway through the final months of the deployment. By congregating and accomplishing set tasks, the group was steadily progressing towards the reunion.

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4 Spouses who had outside employment were the only population to view community involvement as neutral, and such a view was not held by the entire cohort. This does not take into account FRG involvement, which was stigmatized by a modest percent of the entire population.
I argue that these meetings constitute rituals in which the group performs certain symbolic tasks such as banner making to give order and to mark the steps in a process that might otherwise have led spouses to a deep feeling of anomie. Many spouses cited analogous preparations and order to their own participation in these events. Having finished certain tasks such as completing briefings or certain projects was described as accomplishments that allowed spouses to feel closer and better prepared for their reunion. As one spouse explained when asked about her preparations for the reunion, Mob/Dep had already spoken to the unit, they were scheduling a Strong Bonds retreat and the FRG would be making banners in a few weeks. She just had to clean the house and get her legs waxed, then she would be ready.

From my observations and from speaking to different FRG leaders (both current and past), I propose that FRG meeting activities fall into three categories: Social, Information Based, and Soldier Based. These were not completely distinct. Rather, social activities tended to also facilitate the flow of information, information was exchanged through peer interactions at social meetings and soldiers were always discussed. Yet, these three themes did direct attention to particular topics and held largely different purposes. Social meetings encouraged interactions through games, food or crafts. During these meetings, planning for future unit based events was discussed as well as FRG functions. Spouses who consciously chose not to be active in the FRG cited this type of meeting as one of the reasons for their disinterest. As one woman who worked off base explained, she did not have the time to be “crafty” and “gossipy.” Her desire for information-based interactions thus isolated her from the group’s social functions.

Soldier-based meetings consisted of activities designed to support the soldiers. These included banner making, constructing Christmas stockings for soldiers, planning the set-up of the

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Strong Bonds is an individual/couples growth retreat that is religiously oriented and held only for military members. It is enormously popular.
dorms for returning soldiers, creating photo collages for the unit, etc. While these were explained as ways in which spouses could show support for their soldier, the activities took on a much more primary function. By “creating” for their soldier, spouses were able to instill a sense of actively participating in the process rather than being swept along by it. FRG leaders reinforced this conclusion by explaining how participating allowed spouses to “get involved.” Such feelings allowed for a sense of ownership in the process and an increased connection to the group. Furthermore, by creating an atmosphere of support, these meetings helped to reinforce spouses’ connections to their military identities and swell the pride induced by membership.

For information-based meetings, the FRG would typically bring in an outside speaker. This could be an MFLC, chaplain, or ACS practitioner such as Financial Readiness or Mobilization. After an introduction, the invitee would give a brief informational session on a topic such as preparing for reunions or handling finances. During these meetings, spouses could ask questions and receive feedback. In general, there were positive responses to these types of meetings (although it depended upon the invited speaker’s personality). Spouses were split on whether there was new information passed on by the invited speaker, yet even those who did not hear “anything [they] didn’t already know” often expressed a positive feeling about the meeting if the group discussion had flowed well. This highlights the idea that group interaction may well be as significant as the invited speaker’s actual dialogue.

While the main purpose of information based meetings did appear to be the spread of knowledge, there was a secondary purpose that emerged early on and established itself through its frequent appearances. During these meetings, the audience often took on active roles in the discussions. Most often during briefings held by MFLCs, chaplains or Mob/Dep, these sessions would alternate frequently between leader run instruction and focus group dialogue. Such
participation allowed for spouses to ask questions, voice concerns and receive feedback from both the instructor and their peers, prompting a community based model. Although this created an effective means for information to flow and a (mostly) approachable dialogue, it served two secondary purposes. Firstly, it allowed for the normalization of behaviors and concerns through open dialogue, peer agreement and reinforcement. Secondly, it created an opportunity for role modeling and behavioral appropriation.

As discussed previously, normalization of military induced separations and moves is a key coping mechanism. The ability to reestablish what constitutes normal situations is instrumental in a spouse’s perceptions of the deployment and his or herself. During information based meetings and briefings, spouses are subjected to an array of different scenarios and instructions. Aside from providing examples of possible outcomes, these relayed behaviors or scenarios presented spouses with an opportunity to internalize different behaviors and to reinforce their comfort with their own. During meetings, spouses would voice concerns or difficulties they were having with the reunion process. The invited speaker would address the individual and the group would add in additional comments. More often than not, as the single spouse spoke, other group members would nod their heads, utter phrases of agreement or support (“Oh yeah...” or “Oh honey...”), or bring up their own stories. Seeing their peers voice similar, private concerns or dilemmas allows for the normalization of such behavior during intragroup sharing. Essentially, it provides spouses with the message that they are not alone. Similarly, it offered a chance for member comparison in which individuals could reflect on their perception of themselves against the plights of others, that is, vis-à-vis. By noting that other individuals were less ‘successful’ than themselves, spouses were able to better justify their own struggles.
Role modeling is another extremely important aspect of these meetings and briefings. Unlike soldiers, who receive training on military situations as well as the appropriate ways to act and react during these occurrences, spouses must simply carry their civilian bearing or adopt new behavioral practices as they go. Their dispositions are then either learned through personal experience based adaptation (that is, fall and learn to get up) or adopted through educational experiences such as role modeling (learning how it is done). In this way informants re-shaped their personal habitus; the military life necessitating personal change. Information based meetings allowed for this type of modeling through both peer and resource interactions.

A key example of this can be seen in the children’s materials that are often passed out during briefings. Handouts provided by FOCUS shows a young child questioning how he or she will feel when their parent comes home. It depicts anxieties (will they remember me, will they be happy to see me, will things change) as well as reassurances that things will be good and that the reunion will be happy. Furthermore, the depiction allows justification for both anxieties and behaviors that might otherwise be given negative connotations such as ‘Ralphie not wanting to be with Daddy right away’.

This same type of behavioral reinforcement can be seen in the way spouses receive the information given directly and indirectly during the end of the deployment. Although they can no longer receive the support they need from messy sketches and simple sentences, the same type of reinforcement can and is used in reintegration trainings. Tasha, an ACS practitioner, employed such behavioral modeling by invoking her past experience as a military spouse to build rapport and sprinkling in personal comments during her informational talk. Such actions allowed the spouses to identify both with her and with her message. Furthermore, by balancing the use of

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6 Army One Source has put out a graphic novel style booklet detailing relationship difficulties in an effort to make it more accessible to soldiers. Its grittiness seeks to establish a connection based on both common culture and pop culture themes.
different modes of speech, she was repeatedly able to establish behavioral patterns as normalized and encourage group discussion without obvious baiting.

She utilized the second person when speaking on issues pertaining to the reunion itself, thus personalizing them while implicitly normalizing behavior and feelings. For example, when discussing protectiveness in child rearing roles after the reunion, she would say, “Your mama bear claws come out,” a phrase that implicitly both normalized the action (it happens!) and personalizes it (to you). The first person combined with humor was utilized to dismiss misconceptions and to normalize certain mistakes without attributing them to anyone in the audience. Whereas ‘you’ may imply that the spouses have or would make the mistakes, by creating ownership of them through the first person, Tasha was able to establish them as occurring, direct spouses away from them, and personalize the message without attributing.

In this way, role modeling is utilized to demonstrate to spouses that certain situations may materialize and how they might navigate through them. Depictions of behaviors that are easily identified as negative, such as nonexistent sex drives (you don’t want to get laid after six months?) or wanting time alone (did you not miss them?), can be neutralized by instilling such behaviors with a sense of normality rather than negativity. Role modeling also provides spouses with a way to guide what they are feeling and how they react to it. Depictions of certain feelings or actions, and then the instilment of certain attitudes or secondary reactions, give spouses a type of pre-plowed path. When the event occurs, they have a better opportunity at seeing the path that was depicted during the class or briefing.

Role modeling does not simply occur between the speaker’s position of authority and the spouses or the material and the spouses. Rather, it is also prevalent between the spouses themselves. This occurs in two forms, peer modeling and cross rank role modeling.
Peer interaction and peer induced social referencing both provided necessary methods of social control and learning. Such socializing allows peers to provide behavioral reinforcement by sharing beliefs, difficulties and successes. As one spouse stated, “We were together back at [the last base] and that deployment (pause)... You need someone to cry to, to talk about how hard it is, how much it really sucks. We’ve [Stella and I] been through that now. We’re there for each other. You need that.” The term “battle buddy” was commonly used to describe a single close friend that a spouse would have during a deployment. Such interactions allow for support and create the opportunity for peer monitoring. As argued by Lourgy and Tosi, peer monitoring permits deterrence for inappropriate behavior through both interaction and peer policing (Lourgy & Tosi 2008). This is both a negative and positive aspect of peer socialization. While cohort socialization allows for more open communication and interactions, inexperienced spouses paired with only other inexperienced spouses were viewed as suffering more difficulties in adjustments. As one older spouse stated, “The younger girls are the one’s going out, to the clubs, to the bars, drinking and partying, the one’s cheating. It puts a bad name on us... you don’t have to dress nicely, but you give us a bad image.” She further insinuated that young spouses who are paired with other young, risqué spouses would only end up doing poorly. On the other hand, introductions to the right type of individuals would lead to success.

While peer modeling and interaction is extremely important, my research emphasizes the additional power of cross-rank role modeling. Research has shown that mentoring relationships hold vast amounts of influence in terms of aiding in adjustment, demonstrating new techniques and empowering an individual in a new setting. The majority of my young informants agreed with this. One explained,

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7 This term is used by soldiers. It was appropriated by spouses and feeds into the idea that while the soldier is literally at war downrange, the spouse is figuratively at war with the deployment itself.
I think a large part of that was due to having Terry readily available. Just because... (pause) well it was her 8th separation, and her husband has been in longer then I’ve been alive, and she pretty much knows everything available and if I had a problem, she would be like, go see these people. Opposed to having to figure it out on my own.

The direct passing on of information is just one way in which cross-rank interaction benefits younger spouses. A secondary result coming from informal interactions was the sharing of experience. This was most productive when sharing occurred between both individuals and allowed younger spouses a view into the actual experience rather than the idealized version. Furthermore, younger spouses were able to appropriate select actions and reactions as well as expectations that were modeled by spouses higher up on the hierarchy. In this way, role modeling and cross rank socialization allows for the pedagogic reinforcement of military appropriate habitus.

Cross-rank role modeling failed, however, if the younger spouse did not recognize the cultural capital (rank or age) or symbolic capital (number of deployments) held by the other spouse. Difficulties also occurred when the upper spouse displayed their capital in a deviant manner, utilized experience in a demeaning way, or called their experiences into the conversation too often.

Section Three: The Immediate Reunion

For the purpose of this paper, the immediate reunion spans the week prior to the soldier’s return through the first night of their arrival. This time period is marked by substantial changes for all of those involved and was viewed as a “high stress” time frame. We will begin by giving the reader a quick walk through of the reunion process. This will be followed by a discussion of the preparation process, both emotionally and logistically, that is undertaken by spouses. The
role of flexibility in planning and coping will augment this section. From there, we delve into the idealization of the reunion. Finally, the first night home is discussed and the role that expectations and role modeling play into the perceived success of immediate reconnection.

The Process

Although it is an exciting phase, reunions are also an extremely uncertain time. The spouses at home are given a “two week” notice about six weeks before the reunion, an announcement that gives them a two-week window for the return of their soldier. After this time, the exact date of arrival is bound to change even through the week of the soldier’s arrival. Many informants reported the day of arrival changing a few days before the return or even the night prior. Time changes are likewise extremely unpredictable. One FRG leader commented, “I tell them to bring things for their children... because it’s going to be a long day! We might arrive very early, five in the morning, and they might not touch down until eight at night.” On the day of the arrival, spouses gather and wait in one of the gyms on base. There, banners are hung and flags set up. The plane arrives on the McChord airstrip and as soldiers unload, the process is broadcast on a large screen in the gym. The soldiers must then unload and check in their gear before bussing over to the reunion location. At that time, they march in and stand at attention while a short speech is given. The families remain in the bleachers until the soldiers are released and then greet them on the floor. The process ends as the married soldiers accompany their family members home and the single soldiers return to the dorms. Spouses were split on what would follow the reunion. Some planned to go out to dinner while the majority indicated they were headed straight home.
Preparations

As mentioned previously, spouses spoke most often of logistics when questioned about their preparations for the upcoming reunion and emotional references were largely neglected. Planning involving the household was the most commonly spoken of process. For instance when questioned about how she prepared herself, one spouse stated, “[I] cleaned the house. I vacuumed. I cleaned the car. Bought some more food, um. I bought decorations, like those individual cut out letters that said ‘Welcome Home’ and some balloons.” Although these preparations may seem frivolous, they appeared to serve an important purpose in the reunion process. This was exemplified by spouses who were unable, for one reason or another, to participate in these types of rituals. Such individuals expressed uneasiness with the reunion process and an overall feeling of being unsettled before their soldier arrived. As one spouse explained, “I think it’s been more difficult to adjust this time. As we weren’t... as I didn’t have everything set up and in a comfortable place.” For these individuals, logistical preparations allowed for perceived control and a way to declare readiness. Although most spouses admitted that their returning soldier would not be overly concerned with the carpet, its cleanliness was none-the-less extremely important. The process of organizing and cleaning the house allowed spouses to ready what they knew how. Whereas the emotional landscape presents unforeseen difficulties and possible pitfalls, logistical arrangements are a straightforward way for spouses to create a sense of preparedness and readiness.

What I Do vs. How I Feel

Nervousness, excitement and happiness were the emotions voiced most often by spouses approaching a reunion. Excitement and happiness were by far the most anticipated emotions. If a
spouse’s soldier was coming home, they were approached with comments such as “Aren’t you excited?” and “That’s so exciting!” Spouses were thus expected to look forward to their soldier’s return.

Nervousness was voiced by a large number of spouses during briefings, interviews and observed conversations. These feelings centered on a wide range of concerns including personal and family situations. Some female spouses with young children focused on their soldier’s ability to deal with the new family member. As one spouse explained, her soldier was “scared of the baby” and he was not “going to know how to deal with it, hold it.” Those with older children foresaw difficulties in their children’s acceptance of their soldier. A mother of two stated that the deployment “made me man up on disciplining the kids” and that she didn’t know how they would take to their father stepping back in. Nervousness also arose from changes that had occurred during the deployment. For instance, some spouses who had lost weight, made changes within their routines or altered their house expressed concern over their soldier’s acceptance of these changes.

Some spouses voiced concern over the deployment coming to an end. “Is it wrong? (pause) I feel bad about this, but I’m not ready for him to come back yet” explained a more seasoned spouse. These feelings were mirrored by a variety of other individuals and arose from many different conditions. Spouses who experienced doubt along these lines expressed guilt about having such feelings. The majority felt that something must be wrong with themselves personally or the relationship to induce emotions other than excitement. For this reason, such feelings were not spoken of openly and even spouses who experienced them often held them to be deviant.  

Interestingly, spouses demonstrated contrasting behavior when speaking to individuals without military connections and to in-laws. For instance, a spouse stated that her mother-in-law could not understand why she...
The majority of spouses who stated they were unready for the deployment to end or that they desired a little more time before their soldier came home felt that there were goals that they needed to finish before their soldier returned. These goals included weight loss, a new hobby, work needing to be done around the house, and financial planning. Failure to accomplish these goals (often set in the early stages of deployment) often hindered spouses' views of their "successfulness." However, spouses who felt they had coped well, developed increased independence or become more active in the community were not as heavily affected by failure to achieve one or more goals.

Relief and a sense of accomplishment were also widely voiced by spouses. During briefings and in observed personal interactions, spouses' whose soldiers were almost home were often congratulated and told "You're almost done!" or "You got through it!" Furthermore, spouses often expressed the idea of having only x weeks left or being so close to done. The use of such language allowed spouses to portray the deployment in two different lights. First, the time apart was a battle with the deployment threatening his or her sanity and marriage. In this case, the spouse had to actively fight to get through the deployment and utilize various methods to battle the loneliness and difficulties that it created. This type of language was used mainly by practitioners in the early stages of the deployment (or predeployment). The principal themes, yes, it will be hard, it will cause difficulties, but you can combat it by stocking up on resources, and creating survival plans, depict a spouse poised against the deployment. Second, the time apart could be portrayed as an overriding difficulty that the spouse must simply ride out. This was

would be anything other than ecstatic upon her husband's return. To civilian friends, spouses were observed and self-reported stating that they were excited, relieved, etc about the reunion. In this way, spouses portrayed mainly positive notions during discussions involving outsiders. I believe that this stems from spouses' perceptions that outsiders cannot understand what military lives are like; that they will be less understanding of doubt, fear or anxiety as they are exposed only to extremely idealized versions of military reunions such as the show Coming Home and possess no personal experience with the matter.
utilized often by practitioners and during peer interactions. Spouses were encouraged to **distract** themselves, do **what they could** to get out of the house, and **take care** of themselves, all coping mechanisms characteristic of Internalization as defined by Carlson and Carlson (1984). Such wording creates a gentler view of the activeness taken by spouses during the deployment.

Together, these two themes create a sense of accomplishment around the reunion. As the separation ends, spouses are perceived as having made it through a trial of both self and marriage. During briefings and personal conversations, I repeatedly observed analogies in which spouses were told they were survivors. As described by an FRG leader, the end of the deployment facilitated a sense of accomplishment, of internal reflection on “what we have been through.” By creating an image of a finished deployment as an accomplishment, spouses allowed for the translation of deployments into symbolic capital. This connection is discussed in Section Five.

**Idealization**

“They think it’s going to be rainbows and sunshine and glitter... it’s not”

-a senior spouse on the reunion process

“Especially the young ones, they all think it’s going to be the hallmark picture thing or what you see on the news ... how the spouses run into the soldier’s arms and it’s just bliss... you might have that for a second... but then, they are hot, they’re sweaty, they’ve been traveling for days...” – a spouse on the reunion

Almost all of spouses I interviewed expressed an awareness of the honeymoon period and the primary excitement that would follow the immediate reunion. This time was often described by expectant spouses who had previously gone through a deployment as “like dating again” and possessing the excitement of re-discovery. Spouses who had never been through a reunion appeared to visualize it with more nervousness but also more heightened excitement. All spouses
spoke of the reunion ceremony in the same structural frame work: The plane would land. The bus would bring them over. Someone would talk. Then they would run out of the bleachers to the soldier. For the majority, the occasion climaxed as they reached their soldier’s arms. Plans from this point deviated; some went home, some to eat, etc. However, the emphasis was always put on the process leading up to the moment that they would touch their soldier again. After that moment, explanations became sparser and less directed. While no spouse ever stated that the stars would fall or the earth would shake, the implications of the moment were portrayed in the voices and depictions given. No spouse ever portrayed negative expectations for this moment. Although spouses recognized that they might be tired or frustrated from the wait, the actual reunion with the soldier was a purely positive occasion.

On an interesting note, I learned that many units outfit extra dorm rooms on the reunion night. At a reunion briefing one evening, the Rear Detachment announced, “There will be two cool off rooms for married soldiers who don’t want to go home for those first few nights. There’s always one or two...” These occurrences were never brought up by spouses or soldiers in my presence. However, if directly asked about the possibility of such things happening, most spouses were willing to share stories of such occasions. This clearly constituted gossip and those within the stories were othered by way of the narrator beginning the depiction with a portrayal of the deviant acts leading up to it. In this way, these occurrences existed as fringe experiences and spouses could acknowledge them without allowing for the possibility of such themes in their own reunions.
Flexibility/Planning

Flexibility was a common theme during participant observations and interviews. This was especially true in discussions involving the week prior to the reunion. During this period, alterations were frequently made to the original schedule. Thus, the ceremony time would change or even the day of the reunion itself. A spouse whose soldier’s return had already been bumped forward a month explained these complications,

[On their return] they ended up getting stuck in Maine... like that day... like they had already told us that homecoming was at such and such time and they had to call back and tell us... that they’re not coming home till tomorrow... it was like three hours before we were supposed to be at the gym that the call went out.... I felt really bad for the kid that was calling me and he called at it was like seven am... and then he called back because there was a change in time and then he called back to say they weren’t coming home.

Such changes created complications within schedules and family plans. Those who held outside employment voiced frustration with being able to get time off of work and those with out of state family had concerns about planning visits. The frustration, however, appeared more deeply rooted in the principal of the time changes. Once again their small claim to control, planning and executing the reunion, was being taken from their hands. Spouses also discussed these alterations as building anticipation and prolonging anxieties. They had waited long enough for their soldiers to come home. Younger spouses and those with fewer community ties had more difficulties with these adjustments. By the time the reunion had passed, however, most spouses explained that they recognized such changes were inevitable and although they expressed irritation, did not feel that the changes in scheduling vastly impacted their reunions.
Expectations

Spouses were hesitant, even unwilling, to voice expectations. The majority depicted expectations in a negative light and as a limiting force. “I know not to expect anything,” a spouse with several deployments behind her told me. In this light, spouses initially depicted expectations as hopes that were unreachable or unrealistic. Furthermore, expectations were seen to be opposing the flexibility that spouses saw the reunion to demand.

Once they got talking, however, spouses began to admit that they foresaw certain things happening during the reunion. These were rarely referred to as expectations, a labeling that maintained a negative light. Commonly expected behaviors including the soldier spending time with the family, children reacting well to their returning parent, improvements in the closeness of the couple, and help around the house. The majority of spouses saw themselves getting back into a daily routine with their soldier within two weeks. By and large, spouses anticipated some rockiness during the reunion. These predictions ranged from believing that the soldier would refuse to pick up after themselves to spouses who foresaw readjustment issues brought on by combat stress. During briefings and within observed settings, potential issues with children and in-laws were brought up more commonly than difficulties between the couple.

The majority of spouses, however, minimized potential difficulties when initially discussing the reunion publically. During personal conversations and interviews, spouses of higher ranking soldiers were less inclined to bring up personal struggles or potential difficulties than their mostly younger counterparts. This generalization does not hold, however, in the case of personal struggles being overcome. For instance, a senior spouse explained that although her husband had held a leadership role down range and witnessed things that were difficult to deal with, they would overcome this together as a couple. In this way, she admitted to expecting
difficulties for the two of them when he returned, but only within a context that portrayed her as being victorious and therefore still empowered.

The most commonly voiced expectation was sex. During reunion briefings, spouses were asked to write down their top three expectations. If they were comfortable doing so, they then shared them with the group. Without fail, by the third individual, a spouse would look at his/her sheet of paper, look back up and say “Well, sex.” The rest of the group would nod, laugh or add in comments. These ranged from declarations, “It’s been awhile!” to affirmations, “Hell yes!” to more risqué descriptions. In smaller groups where spouses knew each other, sex would often become a sticking point in discussion. Once it was out in the room, it was expected that spouses would have it on their list. Furthermore, it was understood that everyone in the room was waiting for it. In this way, sex was a required expectation. Surely, after six months, you wanted to get laid. This discussion would create a build-up that combined with the American narrative of sexuality and desire formed a lasting expectation for what would happen the night of the reunion. Being intimate was therefore not an option, a decision created through a group driven narrative rather than between the couple themselves. This paired with the idealized reunion and the romanticism that was build around it created an unrealistic view of what the first night together should entail.

Spouses who were exposed to cross rank influence either through FRGs, volunteering or friends were subjected to the experiences of more seasoned spouses. Many spouses who had gone through deployments in the past were quick to poke fun at the idealized night. “You’re expecting the marathon and all he can do is the sprint,” one stated while another explained, “I made him shower first... he stunk. That wasn’t going on my clean bed.” In reality, it seemed, the first night together was anything but candles and petals. The soldiers had often been on and off
planes for the past twenty four hours, not sleeping or showering. These realities, however, were distant from the repeatedly reinforced expectations brought up during group discussions.

The consequences of such expectations are immediate. Although seasoned spouses have more experience within the deployment cycle and view themselves as better prepared for its challenges, they are not immune to expectations. When discussing her reunion, such a spouse was expressing her disappointment that it had not gone as planned. Continuing, she rested her chin in her hand and explained, “I mean... we didn’t even have sex.” Her tone implied that this, here, was the ultimate failure and indicator. Of all else that might not have gone perfectly, it was this that capped it all off. Not engaging in sex on the night of the reunion or immediately following it was in this way associated with guilt and a sense of failure. Another spouse expressed a similar experience, saying:

You’re thinking, you know, we could go in the back of the car, we’re ready to go kind of thing (pause) and then you are so revved up and so stressed out, that you don’t give a shit... and then you think, well, I’m not meeting his expectations, the guy hasn’t had any in God knows how long and you know... you’ve let yourself down, you feel like shit.

While these expectations (whether admitted or not) are powerful, they are not entirely controlling. Cross rank role modeling and attendance at briefings or meetings allowed spouses to develop a sense of reality within what they expected. This was done through the use of humor by practitioners (“Save the lace for a few days down the road!”) and other spouses (“All he’s had over there was himself...”), thereby relaxing the issue in an approachable way. It is through this process that spouses can normalize their experiences despite cultural narratives and peer influences.
Section Four: Post-Reunion and Reconstitution

Informants frequently told me that the immediate reunion was the easiest part of the process. It was the following weeks that brought challenges. Roles had to be reassigned, intimacy build back up and lives reordered. Furthermore, the weeks and months after the reunion constitute extremely liminal times for Army families. It is during this time period that soldiers frequently receive orders for a new duty station, switch units and/or retrain. These alterations add to the readjustments already facing families. We begin this section with a summarization of the post-redeployment process. We then enter into a discussion on the handing over of independence and the subsequent reallocation of roles between spouses. This is followed by an examination of spouses’ lessening of community ties. From there, we delve into the reestablishment of intimacy within the relationship and its complement, the need for self and space. The section is wrapped up by a view of the future and spouses’ perceptions of past and upcoming separations.

The Process

Following the reunion, soldiers are released to their families for the following day before returning to the unit on the second day back. If the reunion occurs on a Thursday, units sometimes relax this, allowing soldiers to spend the weekend at home before returning on Monday. At this point, the soldiers begin to work half days. They must attend approximately eight days of reintegration activities including health screenings, processing through the Soldier Readiness Processing (SRP) Center, and briefings. After their reintegration processing is complete, they are released onto block leave. For a yearlong deployment this constitutes up to thirty days of leave while a six month long deployment earns a soldier two weeks of block leave.
Upon return from leave, soldiers report back to work. Although the Army currently holds a ninety day stabilization period for returning soldiers, the regulation does not actually guarantee that the soldier remains home. Rather, it prevents group training. Therefore, under this regulation, soldiers may still be sent to individual training programs or schools during these ninety days. After redeploying, soldiers begin to PCS and new soldiers transfer in to join the unit.

**Fight Against Independence**

As discussed in the prior sections, the majority of spouses who saw themselves as successful during the deployment also perceived themselves as either very independent or having grown more independent during the separation. During the reunion process, many spouses reported experiencing friction between their new-found independence and their returning spouse. These difficulties arose in situations such as spouses creating plans without consulting their soldier, forgetting to inform their soldier where they were headed, and desiring time with outside friends. One spouse explained,

> It’s difficult actually for me, because I am (pause) the control freak... so (pause) I really do have to psych myself that he is coming home in the respect that he is going to mess with my system (pause) it’s nice to have them home, you do have that reunion, you have that honeymoon phase, but now back off, stop touching my crap.

While other spouses were less direct in their depictions, they were none-the-less aware of the need to sacrifice some of their independence in wake of their soldier’s return. Another spouse explained, “We always have to duke things out when he gets home, because he knows he is not needed, whereas in reality, you are not needed, you were gone for a year, I had to do it on my

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9 Although many newer spouses voiced a desire for complete stabilization, many more ‘seasoned’ spouses and career soldiers stated that such a requirement would be ridiculous. They argued that career advancement mandated training and that stabilizing soldiers would stunt their ability to progress in the rank structure.
own.” Here, her independence leaves the soldier feeling that he is unneeded in the household and also, within the relationships. By interrupting the give and take of the relationship, this creates a divide between the couple and disrupts the reunion process.

Perhaps most interesting about this process, aside from the degree to which it occurs, is the amount of spouses who recognize it. The majority of spouses I spoke with mentioned that they would have to turn over tasks and decrease their own independence in order to facilitate their soldier’s return. Furthermore, they recognized that this required not only a vague sense of give and take but a precise hand over of certain tasks.

Re-navigating Roles

The majority of female spouses interviewed and observed indicated that the reunion began a process of re-establishment. They characterized this by readjustments as a couple, to their individual lifestyle and within their family structure. The handing over of household chores and tasks was frequently discussed. The vast majority believed that they had taken on additional responsibilities during the deployment. While some were eager to give these tasks up, many expressed reluctance at the possibility of a complete hand-over. As one spouse stated, “I’m better at it than he was, there is no way he’s doing it again.” Reasoning behind this reluctance took various forms. Spouses felt they were handling the responsibilities better, they enjoyed doing it, or they were empowered by the ability to do it on their own. This pride surfaced frequently when discussing the ability to cope with various difficulties such as frozen pipes, fixing the lawn mower, etc. Despite the desire to retain some gained responsibility, spouses recognized the need to hand-over at least some tasks.
Furthermore, many female spouses related the need to give up certain, gendered tasks in order to give their soldier back his role. This is reflected by a spouse who stated, “He takes over the man jobs... He has to pry that away from me... So yeah, so there is that kind of mindset, mentality where I can do it better than you. But at the same time I have to relinquish some of that so that he feels needed and appreciated.” Here, the female spouse recognizes that her independence and appropriation of certain chores has created a barrier within her relationship. The male soldier, whose occupation embraces and requires the representation of masculine ideals, is isolated from his role as head of the household and provider. As she can now fulfill the roles that provided him with worth within the relationship, he is left feeling unneeded. In this way, many seasoned female spouses voiced the need to allow their soldier to play man within the household. This is portrayed by the same spouse when she states,

> Sometimes, I'll go tell him to work on the shed or go change my oil, little things that I don't mind giving up. But some of the things (pause) like bill paying, I'll sit there over his shoulder, make sure of what he's doing (pause) like (pause) I think it frustrates him. Like sometimes not feeling needed or appreciated; I can do so much (pause) I'm so independent on my own.

In this way, the spouse battles with her independence and her soldier’s role within the household. While she recognizes the need to reincorporate him within a context that allows for a masculine role, she struggles with sacrificing the personal responsibilities gained during the deployment. This behavior was recognized within female spouses of various ranks, all of whom acknowledged the need to reinforce a masculine place within the family structure through a reorganizing of responsibilities. That is, for them to allocate gendered tasks to the soldier, recreating a role for him within the house and a pathway to rebuild a sense of belonging and worth within their day-to-day lives.
Loss of Community

As mentioned previously, the initial return is followed by the emergence of a honeymoon period. Among its other highlights, this period is characterized by a focus on the couple and their relationship. In this way, it often results in a withdrawal from the community. We will address this retreat in respect to both personal friends and the larger social institutions such as the FRG.

During the deployment, many spouses who saw themselves as “successful” related that they had grown their social networks through the creation of new friends or improving older relationships. As one spouse labeled them, these “deployment friends” allowed for increased social interaction and filled some of the gap left by the absent spouse. With the return of the soldier, however, these friends were initially largely abandoned. For those whose soldiers were still deployed, this out-casting was especially difficult to accept. One spouse noted, “When the soldier comes home their best friend is back. They pull away. You have to be ready to lose those friends. For ladies whose husbands are still gone, it’s hard to accept. They were your support networking.” While the reunited spouse no longer perceives the need for an exterior network, their withdrawal from the community robs his or her deployment friends of their established support system.

Upon the return of their soldier, spouses and FRG leaders also noted a decline in community involvement. This occurred on many levels. One of the most obvious was the dispersal of the FRG and lessening of involvement in community based volunteering. During the months immediately following the reunion, spouses overwhelmingly reported a lack of FRG functions, events or information. While some spouses expressed a desire for such information, the lessening itself was not negatively viewed. Rather, spouses appeared to feel that the FRG operated mainly for support during the deployment process.
Similarly, spouses who were participating in community based programs such as ACS, the Red Cross or school volunteering mentioned lowering their hours or completely ending their participation. Due to a lack of data, this pattern could only be generalized among spouses who took on additional volunteering during the deployment. The giving up of involvement could be attributed to many causes. As mentioned in our discussion of deployment friends, the return of the soldier to the household is also the return of a close friend and a key source of social interaction. Thus, the return of their significant other may lessen the level of outside group interaction required by a spouse. If such a need was the purpose behind their involvement, spouses would then be able to decrease the amount of time spent volunteering. Also, spouses routinely spoke of the loneliness and boredom that came with staying home. If this were the motivation behind volunteering, then the reentry of the soldier into the household/schedule could create diversions and lessen the need for outside fulfillment.

While this initial focus on the couple may be necessary for the spouse and soldier to reconnect, the value of its persistence is not as concrete. The loss of community following the reunion could well be problematic for two reasons. First, if spouses lose contact with the FRG immediately upon the return, the flow of information is interrupted. At a time when spouses have severed many social contacts as they relive the honeymoon period and renew their relationship, there are fewer outlets for distress, problem solving or assistance. Such peer interaction is necessary for discussing difficulties and successes, venting and reflection. Furthermore, reunion workshops, retreats and activities all allow for behavioral role modeling, an opportunity for peer recognition and normalization and relationship improvement. Although spouses were largely unconcerned about the lack of FRG involvement, they were none-the-less aware of the
difficulties of the reunion process, expressed a desire for resources following the initial honeymoon period, and were not adverse to the idea of a semi-active FRG.

Secondly, the loss of community could create difficulties following a mass deployment such as JBLM experienced during the previous year through the removal of individuals from the work force. Programs such as the Army Family Team Building, OSC/ESC and unit FRGs all rely almost completely upon volunteers. If many individuals all leave their positions at once, these programs could experience gaps in performance and their ability to provide services. As I raise this concern, however, I note that even during mass deployments, there are still units deploying and returning at different times. Therefore, even when a gap appears, it is usually healed by individuals who appear by way of new units deploying, families PCSing to base, or spouses’ newfound interest.

Re-establishing Proximity (Communication)

Although most spouses described themselves as readjusting quickly to their returned spouse, many felt that their relationship had taken on a new dynamic. This was often described as a sense of newness and was compared to the feeling of dating. Although this was initially seen as a positive during the honeymoon period, it was perceived as uncomfortable if it persisted too long. A spouse explained,

We’re still really separated. We’re not as close as we were before he left. It’s more of a dating relationship instead of the married relationship. It’s different but you know, when someone is gone so long I guess you kind of fall apart with still loving them. And you have to (pause) work the intimacy back up. Yeah, because (pause) you know (pause) you have to go back to building the friendship. You have trust, you have to go by where the line is, where your comfort level is (pause) and so you have to work on the intimacy.

Spouses were especially adamant in desiring Strong Bonds retreats. These were viewed as extremely helpful and spouses who were not able to participate expressed extreme disappointment.
For her, the relationship was stuck in the dating stage and she was unsure of how transition. For spouses who expressed similar situations, communication and trust were the two most important aspects of their relationships. They were also the areas that they felt the couple had to work on. Spouses who experienced this acknowledged that they felt uneasy discussing the situation with other spouses.

**Maintaining Autonomy**

The reintroduction of the soldier back into the household was above all a reason for celebration. The first week after the reunion constituted a period of slowly readapting and getting reacquainted. Initially, spouses voiced a desire to have more time with their soldiers. Many spouses complained of soldiers having to report for half days and to briefings. These attitudes changed, however, with the passage of time, especially if the half day schedule was continued for long after the reunion or for others, following block leave. A spouse whose soldier was on half day shifts for several weeks commented, “He just now went back to work, thank God. I was about to kill him... I was getting so sick of him, always at home, messing things up.” Here, the friction between the spouse’s independence and control and the soldier’s reentry into the family are fully displayed. While their time together is initially precious, the glamour wears off as the days go by. A second spouse reinforced these themes stating, “After the first few days, he started to get on my nerves. I just wanted to yell, ‘Get out of my hair!’” Several times, I overheard spouses describing their soldiers having left for short trainings in the months following the deployment as “a nice break” or “just in time.” These themes run in opposition to the enthusiasm that the reunion is embraced with and therefore provide important insight into the reality and timeline of the redeployment.
Although most spouses expressed a gradual irritation with their returned soldier, their reasons were varied and often appeared minimal. When asked about the difficulties she was having with her soldier, one spouse explained,

Later he asked me if he had changed when he was gone... and I said no why? And he said, “Because you are yelling at me a lot more.” Like, I yelled at him about how he was putting the sheets on the bed (pause) cuz it wasn't how I would do it and it was a year of me just doing it how I did it (pause) and not worrying about anyone else.

While the spouse recognizes the direct cause for the confrontation, we are more interested with its generalized form. As she states, the year apart has allotted significant time for the creation and internalization of a set routine. The return of the soldier marks not only a reuniting of the couple but also a resetting of her day to day life. While the honeymoon period and idealization of the reunion allows for a glorification of the initial period, difficulties arise in minute areas as the gloss fades.

Returning to the weeks before the reunion, we recall how the FRG and unit functions create a pathway for preparation and readiness. As spouses interact and the day grows near, excitement and socializing creates an idealized and expectant view of the reunion. These views and the ceremonious format of the reunion process create a narrative that embraces happiness, nervousness and excitement while creating a deviant view of fear or doubt, forming a potentially idealized view of the reunion. It is after these social influences have waned, facilitated by the loss of deployment friends and withdrawal from community, the excitement of traveling over block leave has passed and the gloss faded that small irritations and potential underlying difficulties surface. It is thus that we see this difficulties arising several weeks to months after the initial reunion.
The Next Time

Spouses were aware that there would be a next deployment. The topic was broached repeatedly in interviews, during briefings and in personal conversations. Aside from being able to conceptualize the idea of another separation, spouses were also aware of the approximant time frame that they had before its occurrence. When I asked if the knowledge that another deployment was unavoidable influenced the way they lived, I was repeatedly told by more seasoned spouses that this was the Army and that was how life worked. One spouse continued, “You don’t come into the Army thinking he won’t get deployed. No one does.” Younger spouses and those with less experience were less comfortable talking about the possibility of a second deployment.

The reality of back to back deployments, however, was more unsettling. Many spouses realized that the stabilization between their separations could be minimal. This was met with an urge to fit more living into less time. A younger spouse explained, “I want to do more stuff, as opposed to hanging out and watching TV, because that is not going to be an option [next year].” Another spouse furthered this, saying, “We need to make more memories with the kids. He’s going to miss another year. You have to have more to remember.” The idea of creating proximal memories pulls into question once again the idea of togetherness. While these spouses were anxious about the idea of another separation, they were not urging their significant others to leave the Army in an attempt to avoid them. Rather, the concern rested upon building up a set of experiences that appeared to serve much like a stockpile for the relationship. These memories would form a positive way to remember how life was together, serve as talking points during the separation and a means to build their relationship leading up to the deployment.
At the same time, spouses expressed an unwillingness to completely unpack between the deployments, both figuratively and literally. The transition between alone and together required that the soldier’s physical positions literally be packed away for their deployment and then unpacked once they arrived home. When the soldier first arrived home, most brought only a duffle bag or two. On the night of the reunion and for many, the immediate days afterwards, spouses stated that these bags were left in the garage or elsewhere, untouched. These symbolically laden actions depicted a unification between the lovers, but an unwillingness to approach the difficulties brought home by the deployment. As the weeks go by, soldiers receive trunks from the deployment that are, once again, taken home to unpack. For families this is both a literal and symbolic revisiting of the deployment. Some spouses voiced this as a simple hassle and mess while others spoke of the difficulties it created for their soldiers. During an interview, a spouse took me down into her basement. Pointing at a corner filled with trunks and a few, large, standing rugs, she began,

See all that shit? That’s from last deployment. All of these trunks, lockers, all this shit, he hasn’t gone through any of it and I don’t know if its avoidance or what. He’s got seven more foot lockers that just came back from this deployment, and seriously. I don’t know if he’s, if he doesn’t want to be reminded. I don’t even want to touch it. This is my reality check; this is my, dude, deal with your life. I think, yeah, it’s one of those things, with back-to-back deployments, he doesn’t have time to deal with his shit. It’s part of the military life (pause) sometimes it just sucks. But as they say, suck it up and drive on. We’re used to it. I don’t know if that’s a sad state of affairs.

While this spouse saw herself as successful during the deployment, she easily admitted that the couple was having some difficulties in reintegrating. There was not time for that. While other spouses admitted that they could not fully adjust to their returned soldier, many did not feel it was necessary due to the short amount of time home. A younger spouse who was facing a
second, quickly approaching separation explained that she foresaw several years of on and off. It would only be after this that they would hopefully be able to fully adjust to being together.

In this way, spouses both recognize their situation and normalize it, further developing an alternate definition of togetherness. The process of repeated transitions becomes a way of living in which ‘fully adjusting’ is neither an option nor entirely necessary, although it may still be desirable. Rather than a linear progression requiring forward into independence during the deployment and then back into a couple with physical proximity, spouses follow a cyclic process in which the physical status and emphasis of the relationship may change but the couple can always move forward.

I do not wish, in any way, to imply that rapid and repeated deployments are healthy for Army couples. The majority of spouses I observed voiced concern over this process and spoke of the inability to adjust as creating distance within their relationships. At the same time, however, we must recognize that many of these couples stay with the Army and that those who are successful must possess a way in which to achieve this success. Therefore, rather than voicing a political perspective, the anthropologist simply seeks the means and methods by which this occurs.

Section Five: Prevalent Themes

Spouses on Resources

Spouses overwhelmingly reported that the Army provided not only enough, but too many resources. Practitioners voiced similar feelings. Not only were there trainings offered for every phase of the deployment, each training was offered by various departments. For instance, the pre-deployment briefings could be done by the MFLCs, Mob/Dep or the chaplains. Stress
management classes were given by AFTB, the Family Advocacy Program, MFLCs and the chaplains. As an observer, I was repeatedly confused by what organization held priority when. Despite the amount of trainings held, extremely few participants showed up to each session. For instance, ACS offers monthly reunion, pre-deployment and reunion classes at the Waller Hall annex. In my time at JBLM, there have been only a handful of times that these classes were not canceled due to lack of registration. Unit hosted functions were more successful, yet participation was still lacking. Non-mandatory trainings rarely drew over twelve spouses despite the size of units.

The majority of spouses appeared aware of the resources available to them and disconnection between the information and the individuals who needed it. One spouse explained,

The Army does provide a lot of resources, but most of the time you have to go to them. They aren't going to come to you, because, like, they don't know if you are having a problem with whatever. This is one of the things that frustrates my life. I think that it might be that the Army provides so much that they [other spouses] expect the Army to do everything, like they don't want to take responsibility for their own stuff, because a lot of stuff is just handed to them, and they want everything handed to them. I don't think there is an easy solution for it because there are people who are not going to find it on their own and they are going to blame the Army and it's the Army's fault and I don't know if there is a way to fix that, if that's just how they are.

As detailed above, many “successful” spouses insinuated that it was the spouse’s own fault if information was not accessed. They perceived resources to be accessible and other spouses to be aware of their presence.

These feelings were full of contradictions. For instance, spouses routinely attributed disruptions in the flow of information to younger soldiers. A spouse I was interviewing referenced the early years of her marriage saying, “He... would never bring home information! I would have questions about everything!” At this moment her husband, now senior enlisted, piped in, “I was a private!” Both laughed, making it clear that such assumptions were doxic
knowledge. Everyone expected a young soldier to fail in passing on critical information to his or her spouse. Further, spouses saw no way in preventing such a disruption.

A second contradiction came in the form of self-assessments. Spouses routinely depicted those who failed to access resources as having poor self-motivation, being immature or uninformed. Yet many expressed frustration with the system themselves and appeared unwilling to use resources. This was especially prevalent in terms of relationship assistance or financial counseling. While spouses would state that such resources were helpful and that other spouses were simply failing to use them, the utilization of such resources was largely absent in their own lives. Not all spouses would have benefited from using the programs they cited as useful. However many identified having difficulties that they had previously identified a certain resource as being helpful for. In this way, there was a sizable disconnect between spouses, their views of resources, and their actual utilization of them. In this way, demonstrating that one knew about resources was used to portray successfulness and adaption. Rather than the actual behavior of using the resource, spouses were able to prove adaptation and glean comfort through displaying that they knew about the system.

Capital

Although spouses do not visibly wear their soldier’s rank, they none-the-less participate in the hierarchy that it creates. During my fieldwork, spouses prioritized and recognized various forms of capital that one could possess in order to gain respect or power within this system. By employing different strategies, spouses both gained and exchanged forms of capital in attempts to gain comfort and navigate power structures. In this way, we discuss the military subculture as a field, utilizing Bourdieu’s conceptualization of field, habitus and capital systems.
In the most primary sense, rank itself serves as a form of institutionalized cultural capital. Spouses continually reference their soldier’s position in the military. When a spouse directly calls attention to their soldier’s position they are said to be “wearing their soldier’s rank.” This is exemplified by a spouse’s description of her new base,

This is a joint community, and it's VERY top heavy... lots of O-5s, O-6s, E-9s and GOs running around...it feels a bit intimidating at times. We're definitely the youngest ones in our stairwell building (by age and rank), and some people like to find subtle ways to "remind" us of the pecking order. That part of living here is thoroughly exhausting.

Although using your soldier’s rank to your advantage is spoken of as deviant, spouse’s none-the-less often participate in these practices at various levels. For most, this is done not through directly discussing the rank or pay grade, but rather through leading language. For instance, a spouse whose soldier is upper enlisted will reference the unit by saying “our soldiers” or “his soldiers,” call attention to the meetings he/she oversees, speak of the officers he/she must interact with, and so on. These references allow for the transitive conclusion that the soldier is of high rank without directly calling this out, a behavior that is seen as crude and deviant. By communicating the rank of his/her soldier, spouses achieve recognition of their social capital.

Rank correlates with other forms of social and cultural capital as well. For instance, spouses who have been married for long periods of time to soldiers of high rank are recognized as possessing more knowledge about the system and its faults. They are therefore perceived as being able to better navigate Army life. As one spouse explained, “She’s gone through so many deployments... that... she knows what is going on, what will happen, everything. If I need to know something, I know I can call her.” The wide recognition of the correlation between rank and knowledge allows the position to be instilled with another form of institutionalized cultural capital.
Social capital was also closely tied to rank and the chain of command. As discussed in the Introduction, connections with informants were easiest made if the meeting was facilitated by an individual of the same or higher authority than the person that I was meeting. This reflects the importance of networking and the creation of social capital through the propagation of one’s personal circle. Interestingly enough, status of those you knew appeared to matter much more than the amount of individuals contained within the circle. Personally knowing individuals on both the soldier and spouse side of the ladder allowed one to ‘pull names’ during a conversation. This was especially true for more seasoned spouses and among those who had lived at multiple installations. It was this cohort that appeared to best recognize and utilize personal networks as a means of social capital.

‘Successful,’ seasoned spouses were often respected for their habitus. The adaption to Army life allows for the reshaping of expectations and behaviors. Spouses who had been involved with the lifestyle for an extended period of time had a better mastery of how to speak Army, who to speak to and how to approach difficulties. This inherited knowledge and internalization of behavior practices created embodied cultural capital. Being able to recognize and utilized acronyms and specialized phrases was especially important. It demonstrated belonging as well as comfort within the environment. In several cases, I witnessed spouses utilizing advance acronyms when they were not necessary as a strategy for demonstrating knowledge. The audience was then either required to ask for clarification, and thereby admit that they were not as knowledgeable about the military culture or pretend like they understood.

It is important to note that capital only works when it is recognized and understood by those around it. For instance, spouses who were seen as too successful or not possessing enough faults were seen as beyond the realm of the field. Therefore, their capital was not recognized.
Similarly, spouses could choose to recognize the capital carried by rank with only some of the power it normally held if they felt the holder expressed their position in a deviant manner. However, the cultural capital allotted by rank could never be completely ignored within the institutionalized setting if the holder acknowledged it. That is, there are certain things a senior spouse can say or do, and certain ways that the spouse of a lower ranking soldier should approach them, which cannot be entirely dismissed. To publically breach these requirements, almost regardless of the reasoning, would constitute a deviant action and reprimand.

During my time on base, a few spouses were pointed out as being “made for the Army.” All of these were female spouses and all held certain, specific characteristics in common. Each had at least one child and had started having children at a fairly young age. Only one held paid employment outside of the home and they were all deeply engaged within the community. Furthermore, they all possessed social circles that contained members of their own age and rank cohorts as well as those from above and below. These women were seen as being the ultimate army spouses. As an observing spouse explained, “She’s just one of those people, it’s her life. She was made to have this lifestyle. She’s an army spouse (pause) and she’s so good at it.” These women were seen as having an instinctive feel for the game. They were able to successfully employ strategies that were understood to benefit themselves, their families and their soldiers. Furthermore, their knowledge of the field allowed other spouses to perceive these women as possessing agency that they themselves lacked.

Institution and Career Implications

Daily life demands participation in a variety of institutions. From familial to work to religion, each institution occupies various sectors of an individual’s life, structuring certain
behaviors and creating distinct demands. For the majority of institutions, a person’s commitment
to that institution is limited in scope and the influence it carries over them is likewise restricted
to various aspects of their life. For instance, a young adult might attend college (an institution of
education) and hold the career of student. However, in the evenings they may work in a hospital
(an economic institution) and hold the career of a middle class nurse. The individual may then
navigate between these two institutions and careers, possessing both and understanding that
although they may intersect at times, neither prevents commitment to the other.

For Army families, however, this division is not as clear cut. As mentioned previously,
the Army dictates where a soldier lives, when they move, when they leave home and for how
long they are gone. While practitioners repeatedly insist that the Army cannot force a spouse to
do anything, these requirements do not impact the soldier alone. Deployment orders tell spouses
when they will be the sole caregivers for their children and when they will be without their
soldier. PCS orders require that spouses leave employment, school and social networks in order
to remain with their soldier. These are both obvious occurrences with underlying difficulties. For
instance, frequent moves often dismiss the opportunity for completing one’s full bachelor degree
at a single school. For this reason, spouses must choose to accept a transfer between schools
(which require increased financial and time commitments), stay behind to complete their
education (and accept an induced separation with their soldier) or seek alternative methods such
as online schooling.

Similarly, spouses frequently expressed difficulties in finding gratifying or stable
employment due to numerous PCS moves. They reported that families’ frequent relocations
made maintaining an economic career nearly impossible. Those with higher level degrees and
other applying for mid-level employment noted that they were overlooked for positions as
businesses were not willing to hire someone who may well be moving two years later. In this way, the soldier’s commitment to a single, economic institution (the Army) strongly influences his or her family members. A spouse’s decision to enlist thus creates a transitive status for others within the family. In the previous sections, one sees that this status (that of an Army spouse) creates various demands, shapes an individual’s habitus, and infringes upon their ability to interact with various other institutions. In this way, being married to a person in the Army dictates a career in the life of the individual in question.

With this in mind, I seek to elaborate upon Segal’s application of Coser’s greedy institutions. As opposed to those that have limited impact on other institutions, a greedy institution envelops increasing large areas of the individual’s life (Abrahamson and Anderson 1984: 372). It may promote or discourage its members’ participation in other institutions or completely estrange outside careers. In this way, such institutions absorb their members. As mentioned in the review of the field, Segal argues that the military is a greedy institution in that it dictates various avenues of an individual’s life (1986).

The findings of this thesis support that claim. As demonstrated previously, an individual’s membership in the military is invasive for both the soldier and the family. Spouses are very much at the will of the Army and perceive themselves as such. Being married to a soldier dictates where they live, where they can find employment, and how often they move. With the increasing number of deployments soldiers participate in and the diminished time between these separations, the Army’s demands on the soldier compete with other institution’s claims to him or her, including the family. Furthermore, if spouses resist the requirements by lessening participation and therefore commitment to the career of army spouse, they risk appearing deviant before the community. For instance, a spouse explained that she couldn’t
understand those who chose to remain behind for work and that if the remaining spouse really loved their soldier, they would have moved with them. Another spouse explained to a younger woman, “You aren’t ready for this, you’re not committed enough. You don’t love him enough to let go,” when it was explained that she would not be following her spouse for another year in order to complete her degree. In this way, resistance to the demands of the institution called into question the validity of an individual’s career.

Conclusions and Implications

As discussed in-depth in Section II, spouses are not inducted into the Army with the same pomp-and-circumstance or retraining that soldiers receive. Yet the situations they encounter at their soldier’s first duty station differ greatly from those they experienced in the civilian world. As they approach such experiences, their behavior is governed by the same habitus that steered them in previous years. Contradictions in expectations, perceived paths for problem solving and familial demands can create difficulties for both the spouse at home and the soldier down range as well as headaches for the Rear Detachment.

Despite these difficulties, spouses are able to appropriate new coping mechanisms, ways of discussing difficulties and a sense of belonging through a variety of methods. FRG involvement, volunteering, and community involvement all expose spouses to a plethora of socializing forces. Here, peer and cross rank role modeling combine with policing, allowing for the development and shaping of new strategies and habitus. During the reunion process, such interactions joined with provided rituals allow spouses to combat perceived anomie and develop a sense of preparedness. As spouses enter the army life development of a central identity as an army spouse allows for instilled pride and for many spouses, a sense of group membership.
Hence, spouses can speak of themselves as a “BAMF Army Wife” or explain that “only the strong can do it.”

The evolution and appropriation of these behaviors, however, was found to be largely linked to community involvement and social ties. Thus, it is critical that the Army nurture these avenues. During my observations, it became clear that the unit’s involvement with spouses was one of the largest factors for spousal participation. Spouses who reported their rear-detachment, FRG and FRSA being active and communicating effectively were more aware of resources available, more likely to attend trainings and expressed stronger feeling of pride and comfort than those who felt the unit was unresponsive. Furthermore, perceived unit encouragement and FRG activities aid the building of community support as well as provide avenues for behavioral learning.

As found within the review of the field and the discussion of resource utilization, I point out that although spouses acknowledged resources they were slow to use them. Furthermore, even spouses who encouraged others to utilize available programs failed to employ such resources when experiencing difficulties of their own. Rather, learned behavior and the normalization of expectations are more easily attributed to socializing forces than information based instruction. This is exemplified in the positive feelings spouses expressed concerning interactive briefings, the social capital awarded spouses of multiple deployments and the emphasis that spouses placed on deployment friends (battle buddies).

For an Army concerned with family wellness recognition of these trends is instrumental. With the perceived excess of army provided resources, this research emphasizes the need for community support and unit encouragement rather than additional programs. Furthermore, such support is necessary in the weeks following the reunion as well as during the deployment itself.
While spouses initially idealize the reunion process, difficulties surface as the gloss fades. As previously discussed in Section IV, such difficulties can be compounded by isolation from deployment friends and a loss of community. While I do not argue that the FRG should be as active following the deployment as it was during or that the unit should intrude on the immediate weeks following the reunion, I do perceive the need for community involvement and optional participation in the weeks after block leave. It is during this time period that spouses experiencing difficulties or uneasy with their relationships felt most isolated and concerned about their perceived failure. Community support and social interaction could allow for the normalization of these behaviors, a method for further referral and a means by which to once again build pride in group membership.

The army is first and foremost concerned with mission. While choosing a career as a soldier dictates various aspects of an individual’s life, it is likewise, first and foremost, a means of employment. For army families, challenges such as deployments are an unavoidable reality. However, this does not mean that spouses must necessarily go through the process empty handed. By seeking a better understanding of army spouses, their behaviors and their expectations, we can better equip resources, units and the garrison to empower families. While the soldier is reliant on the mission, the army is likewise reliant on soldier readiness. Familial support influences retention, a soldier’s view of their job, and their ultimate satisfaction with the process. An empowered army family is thus a ready soldier. A ready soldier is mission essential.
Difficulties in Research

This research should not be considered without taking into account its limitations. There were various difficulties in participant recruitment. Despite attempts at circumventing FRG involvement in volunteer recruitment, the material was passed through the FRSAs and down through the FRG channels. Regardless of good intentions, the FRG label automatically deters certain spouses and reaches only a select group of the entire population. Furthermore, the responding sample is indicative only of individuals who are comfortable expressing themselves and are interested in speaking about the process. The use of observations taken in public areas such as the Waller Hall annex and at briefings serve somewhat to offset this bias. Our data, however, is skewed. Furthermore, informants left the study at various times for different reasons. Following the reunion, spouses withdrew as their soldiers returned in order to conserve time for the reunion. Others stated that their soldier did not wish to participate.

Furthermore, this study accounts for spouses on a single instillation during a limited time frame. Generalizations, therefore, can only be made for similarly large instillations with comparable demographics.

Future Research

As with any research, this thesis opens more questions than it closes. Several themes appeared within my investigation that deserve more in-depth investigation.

The discovery of couples that thrive in the military environment and the creation of an independent notion of togetherness raises the question of transferability. If these couples possess a relationship that functions well in a system that demands liminality and transitions between proximal and distance based togetherness, how do they proceed upon retirement? The military is perhaps unique in its relatively young retirement age. As many soldiers enter the military fairly
young, serving twenty years means one can reach retirement easily by the end of their forties. With the ending of deployments and constant separations, it would be assumed that couples must once again redefine what their relationships entail. Do successful military relationships transfer into equally successful civilian relationships? The research done concerning long distance romantic relationships tell us that couples who function well in extended, long distance relationships experience the highest percentage of break-ups during their initial transfer to close proximity relationships. With the similarities between such relationships and military families, can this be generalized at all to retiring military couples? Future research could aid in our understanding of transitioning couples and help organizations working with exiting families, both retiring and wounded warriors.

As discussed throughout this paper, one’s creation of an identity as a military spouse is instrumental as a coping mechanism and acceptance of the military lifestyle. During observations taken over the summer of 2010 and through various online avenues, I was struck by the transformation spouses and significant others undergo during the months their soldier initially enters training. The self-labeling of one’s self as a military spouse, girlfriend, boyfriend, etc was surprisingly immediate and pride inducing. Group membership was quickly established, although it was largely exhibited in intergroup comparison versus intragroup discussions; for example, through Facebook or MySpace. What methods do these individuals utilizing in adopting and displaying this membership? How do they navigate the complex process of their significant other’s enlistment? Furthermore, how can different branches utilize this initial period to introduce significant other’s to the military life style and processes, thereby facilitating membership and pride in belonging to the military family? Future research could allow us a better understanding of the initiation process from the non-soldier side and allow us to ease the
transition of families into the military lifestyle. Such research is instrumental for the army’s commitment to families and keeping in mind that familial support is a primary factor in soldier readiness and retainment.

Finally, I would like to follow dual units through an entire deployment cycle. The contrasts between combat oriented and FOB based units is immense. While spouses whose soldiers had been involved in combat situations or traumatic events were extremely concerned with combat stress and PTSD, spouses of soldiers situated primarily on the FOB had contrasting concerns. Boredom compounded the separation and many spouses stated that the ability to talk everyday made them run out of things to speak about and sometimes created fights. This added to soldiers’ access to internet (i.e. Facebook, MySpace, etc) created additional suspicions between couples and jealousy issues. Despite these differences, soldiers and spouses go through much of the same deployment and reintegration training. How do these spouses deal with these contrasting experiences? Furthermore, do they utilize the same resources, possess the same claims to identity, speak about their experiences in the same way or view the deployment at all similarly? With the plethora of resources the army offered contrasting with the small percentage of individuals who utilize them, such research would allow for insight into what spouses actually do rather than say and thus, better prioritization and marketing of programs.
Appendix A

Glossary

ACS: Army Community Services
ACS is an enormous program that houses Mob/Dep, Employment Readiness, Family Advocacy, Employment Readiness as well as many others. Each service attempts to expand family support, knowledge and preparedness. ACS utilizes both paid staff and volunteers within their programs.

AFTB: Army Family Team Building
AFTB is a completely volunteer run program that operates under ACS. Instructors teach classes to family member, DoD civilians and soldiers concerning self-empowerment, military life and resources.

Block Leave:
This is the amount of leave given to soldiers after they return from deployment. It is taken usually approximately 2 weeks after redeployment but due to scheduling issues can be later. The amount of time can range from 2 weeks for a 6 month deployment to 30 days for a yearlong one. This leave is a benefit not an entitlement and therefore is not guaranteed. However, there were no cases witnessed of leave not being granted if a soldier desired it.

Chain of Command:
This refers to the way in which information, orders and complaints are distributed through a group of individuals. Recognition of the chain of command is something that must be instilled in individuals, either through instructor or modeling. An easy way to visualize it, is to look at the application in an everyday situation. Take, for example, a university. The flow of information would come from the top and flow down to the bottom: first the University President, then the board of directors, then the dean, then the department head, then the individual teachers, then the students. In the same way, complaints need to be registered the same way. First with the teacher, then the department, then the dean, etc. Bypassing the chain is frowned upon, could result in
stepped on toes and has various other consequences. Understanding the Chain of Command is instrumental in navigating layers of authority. For green suitors, the chain of command must be respected. This means that a question must be brought up on the lowest level that applies to the individual, while authority from the upper ranks must be accepted.

Down Range:
Being Down Range simply means being deployed. This is the same as “In the Sandbox” and “In Theater.” This phrase is used mainly during less formal settings and during briefings by green suitors, spouses, and practitioners. Phrasing includes uses such as “…the guys down range…” or “while they are down range.”

FRG: Family Readiness Group
Family Readiness Groups (formally Family Support Groups) are volunteer run social groups responsible for creating contact between families and the command, social support for family members and distributing current unit information / resources. Units may or may not have active FRGs depending upon volunteer involvement and command support. FRGs can exist at the company and battalion levels. FRGs tend to be most active during deployments and host meetings (usually monthly) in which family members can receive information, participate in activities and socialize. Statistically, over half of all soldiers are married. In a unit with 60 to 130 soldiers, that is somewhere over 30 to 65 spouses. It is interesting to note, then, that the average observed FRG only appeared to have six to twenty people actively participating.

* The FRG is sometimes stigmatized for excessive gossiping/rumors. Some spouses refuse to be active in the FRG or FRG activities for this reason.

FRSA: Family Readiness Support Assistant
The Family Readiness Support Assistant program is fairly new. An FRSA is essentially a paid logistical assistant underneath the command at the Battalion or Brigade level. As such, the FRSA handles spouses’ requests for information, direct requests to the
appropriate resource, does logistical scheduling for the FRG and plans information
briefings depending upon the deployment phase of the unit.
* It became apparent during this study that many FRG leaders feel the FRSA oversteps
their role or does not preform the correct tasks and vice-versa. It is unclear whether this
arises from the paid/volunteer notion of the roles, if the program is unclear, or if another
reason is to blame.

Green Suitor
Another name for a soldier. It is used most commonly by practitioners when talking
about military couples as a way to distinguish between the soldier and the spouse.
Usually, it appeared during conversations between practitioners or practitioners and
soldiers.

MFLC: Military Family Life Consultants
An entirely anonymous counseling system, the MFLCs allow individuals to seek
support/help without fear of retributions. Individual MFLCs are on rotations. This means
that an individual will be “stationed” at a certain base for up to 9 months and then moved
to a different base. MFLCs can also lead briefings or focus groups. Each Brigade hosts
embedded MFLCs and there is a central MFLC office in the ACS annex. Spouses
expressed mixed emotions concerning the service. Some felt that the anonymity that
came with MFLCs impermanence. Many, however, were frustrated by their inability to
see the same person when they desired to. These spouses often appeared timid in their
attempts to seek assistance to begin with. Having lost their previously established
connection, they expressed unwillingness to re-navigate the system. One spouse
explained, “I don’t even know who they are anymore. By the time I find out... they’ll be
gone.”

Mob/Dep: Mobilization and Deployment
A program under ACS that is responsible for preparing soldiers and families for the
deployment cycle. The program has additional duties including preparation for
emergency reception of refugees, etc.
Rank:

I use rank in two contexts within my discussion. The primary way refers to its application for soldiers. Here, rank refers to the level of the soldier and is earned based upon years, promotion points, and service. For instance, Private or Sergeant Major are both examples of rank. A soldier wears his/her rank on their chest and it is an easy way for individuals to navigate respect and authority. As rank correlates to a pay grade (salary), having rank constantly visible means that approximant salary amounts can be instantly detected. Rank also applies to spouses, however. For instance, some spouses are described as wearing their husband/wife’s rank. This depicts how a spouse might look down upon other spouses or purposefully exercise authority based upon their significant other’s position in the military. For a more detailed discussion of this, please reference Section 5 of the Analysis section.

Rear-D: Rear Detachment (RD)

The rear detachment is made up of soldiers who do not deploy with their unit. Their job is to keep the unit functional, maintain the daily tasks and equipment, and provide communication between the deployed unit and family members. As described by the RDC’s (Rear Detachment Commander) handbook: “The RDC’s goal works in tandem with that of the deployed commander to help families solve their problems at the lowest level so that the problems and resulting anxieties do not overflow to the deployed soldier or require the attention of the deployed commander.”

In the Sandbox:

Being in the Sandbox simply means being deployed. It came into use (according to local sources) during the first Gulf War and now applies mainly to deployments in the Middle East, specifically Iraq and Afghanistan. It is used in informal contexts and with sarcasm or to emphasize a point. Phrasing includes “he’s over playing in the sandbox” and “stuck in the sandbox.”
Theater:

Being in Theater simply means being deployed. This is the same as “In the Sandbox” and “Down Range.” This phrase is utilized mainly by professionals talking about Army life and in formal documents/discussions.
Appendix B
Observation Location Summaries

Pre-Deployment: These briefings were led off of a PowerPoint presentation and covered the logistical basics of preparing for the deployment. Participant interaction was limited to questions and final discussions. The chairs were usually set up in rows and participants faced the screen and presenter. Topics included the Family Care Plan (a document detailing what would happen to children in case of emergency), an introduction to ACS and information concerning MFLCs. A section of the talk also deals with the DD 93 and approaches the topic of casualties. Soldiers, especially, were superstitious about discussing death before deployments.

Deployment with Children: These briefings occurred during the deployment and were attended thus by only spouses. Some brought their children, others came without them. I attended briefings of this type that were led by Mob/Dep and others by MFLCs. In these sessions, chairs were most often organized in a circular manner and attending practitioners generally sat rather than stood. These sessions were largely interactive, led without a PowerPoint and tended to be less formally structured.

Long Distance Communication: These briefings were held in small group settings and all individuals were seated in a circle (or open square). The practitioners would sit with the participants in order to facilitate without dictating. Discussion centered on participant based sharing rather than information based instruction. Communication issues were spoken on and spouses discussed the different methods they utilized.

Reunion: The style of sessions relied heavily upon the individual leading them. I witnessed several sessions where the instructor chose to lead with an emphasis on information. However, the majority of these meetings were led in a focus group style. Participants generally sat in a circle (unless the group was large enough to demand rows) and the practitioners would sometimes choose to sit at the tables with them. MFLCs, chaplains and the rear detachment were all frequent attendees. Attendees were encouraged to
participate and the majority of the discussions focused on the spouses concerns. Expectations, preparations and past experiences were all spoken about.

Battlemind: These were the least commonly held briefings during my time at JBLM. Unlike many of the other sessions, Battlemind trainings were strictly guided and everything revolved around the Powerpoint being shown. The training focuses on resiliency within soldiers and families. There was little enthusiasm from practitioners or spouses concerning the materials or lesson plan.

AFAP: The community (garrison) level Army Family Action Plan conference is held every mid-October. During the year, community concerns are gathered through e-mail and paper submissions. Volunteers are then drawn from the community and units are required to send soldiers to participate. Group sessions bring together roughly 15 spouses, soldiers and DoD civilians for discussions on the issues and to rewrite three for further consideration. Essentially, five sets of fifteen volunteers are set in rooms together for two days during which they were forced to prioritize submitted problems and concerns. This provided for intense discussions concerning current issues during sessions and equally interesting conversations during breaks.
Appendix C

Unit Structure

Unit Composition

Brigade = 3 – 5 Battalions
Battalion = 3 -5 Companies
Company = 3 – 4 Platoon
Platoon = 3 – 4 Squads
Squad = 3 to 4 Teams

Figure structure adapted from AFTB 1.3 HO 5 and 6, DA 2005.
References


