



Military Life

Introduction

Military life has more rules to it than does civilian life. The two modes of living have many parallels such as ID cards and driver's licenses for identification, housing officials and code enforcement officers for minding your Ps and Qs in residential neighborhoods, and city police and military police for general law enforcement. The difference is that life close to the military is more tightly controlled. Installations closely document the registry of large personal belongings such as cars or motorcycles, restricted areas take up more space, and 'gate-keepers' check more often to make sure you are 'authorized.' It seems as if 'the military' controls your life, and, for active-duty, Reserve or National Guard members, 'the military' does control their lives. But is this true for family members?

This part, of the chapters on the military-specific life of homeschooling parents, lays the groundwork for the chapter on military authority over the families of servicemembers. I want to draw a rough picture of what it means to live alongside a

servicemember so that I can more easily explain my view of who is in charge of whom, and why, and lay out the relationship between civilian family members and military authorities. Some readers here will be new to military life and may have an idea that, because they are married to a servicemember, their husband's chain of command has legal authority over the family.

Overview of life alongside one of the military services

When a person (statistically a woman¹) marries a servicemember, and remains in a committed relationship with that servicemember, the marriage entwines her life with most things military.

Military wives have gone from being called 'camp followers' (often a euphemism for 'prostitute') to being accorded seats on military councils and accepted as members of conferences. Military children are still (usually) affectionately called Brats (or Juniors by some Navy families) but they have also been elevated in esteem from being considered hindrances forbidden to soldiers², to being a part of the military equation. Defense appropriations bills in Congress that fund child-care facilities and schools acknowledge the children's importance. Small changes in the status of family members accrued through the centuries. DoD allowed official recognition of enlisted families only as recently as 1942³. DoD slowly added social services to the benefits given to the families of servicemembers, and DoD established support services in the 1950s and 1960s.

The changes in how the military hierarchies see families have taken hundreds of years, but despite the improved tolerance, military families still find the life to be a mix of the best and worst times.

During the Vietnam war, the decline in military retention rates forced military planners to recognize that families were affected by the same differences seen today between military and civilian families: frequent moves and family separations, a desire for adequate housing, and pay that allows those defending the nation to enjoy many of the same small luxuries as their civilian countrymen.

In some cases, the servicemember's wife (or husband) does not want a close relationship with the military job and arranges their life together so that the military influence is minimal. The family may live away from the military installation and may shop exclusively on 'the economy.' The children's activities may be centered

in the local town where the family lives rather than with the installation youth center. Family friendships may be exclusively neighbors or school-friends. Some families go so far as to live separately with the mother and the children 'homesteading' in one place, and the servicemember traveling, and living, wherever the service sends him.

The (seeming) majority of families are more closely associated with the military aspect of the servicemember's military side. These families live on the installation in government quarters, shop in the PX/BX/NEX and commissary, and arrange for the children's summer activities through the youth center.

The one area in which the two styles of family/military interaction meet is health care. The way I came to this conclusion was by considering what thing, if any, would a child of a military parent retain if the child's parents divorced and the child went to live with his civilian parent. The non-servicemember parent would lose ID/exchange/commissary and health privileges (alimony and child care is servicemember-specific, not service specific). Even in the event of the divorced servicemember's death, the child of divorced parents would still retain health care privileges until the cutoff age (about which I won't speculate since right now it is subject to legislative change). All the other benefits are up for grabs, and are dependent on location and benefit availability.



A spouse's perspective

Despite the improvements in the treatment of families, the reality of marriage to a service-member requires the spouse to dig deeply for the strength to adjust to all the changes. In this case, husbands of active duty wives may find less support than wives of active duty husbands. Even for former Brats and prior-military personnel, the role of military spouse takes getting used to. Military spouses who have children must be ready at any time to become a single parent for a week, a month, or a year. They must be willing to leave family and friends repeatedly, they must be willing to live in whatever accommodations they may find waiting for them, and they must be willing to perhaps endure arctic cold or subtropical heat. Their new home may be in a megalopolis, a desert or a foreign country. Each service-member's career is unique. Because of all this, 'one size fits all' guidelines is impossible other than saying, "It won't be boring."

Former Brats who marry servicemembers are familiar with the terminology and atmosphere but didn't share in the adult responsibilities of military life with their parents. Pervasive reminders of those responsibilities are probably part of every Brat's childhood memories: "Stay out of trouble because it'll be my head on the chopping block." "Set a good example for the rest of the children." "Do not embarrass me on this installation." Whether your parent was high in the chain of command or lower down, there was always the pressure to behave in public. Someone was always watching.

Dependency

Although political correctness has shuffled the word ‘dependent’ out of sight in favor of ‘family member,’ much of life with the military centers on the word ‘dependent.’ All of a family member’s privileges are dependent on the person’s relationship to the servicemember, and dependent on good behavior. Many privileges are dependent on where the family lives. Exchange and commissary privileges are not a perk guaranteed regardless of where the servicemember is stationed, but are offered only in places where the combined size of the local military contingent makes such privileges a worthwhile investment on the part of the services.

Some of the privileges extended to a servicemember are dependent on the makeup of the family, as in number of bedrooms authorized in family quarters depending on the number of children in the family, and depending on whether the children are boys or girls, or boys and girls. The kind of housing extended to the servicemember – family housing or a barracks – is dependent on the very existence of a family, a condition that, understandably, irks many unmarried servicemembers. People have been known to marry, or become a parent, to escape the barracks⁴.

‘Dependent’ responsibilities accompany ‘dependent’ privileges. In order to use the exchange or commissary, all authorized personnel are required to pay for the goods they receive: ie, no theft or bad checks. In order to use one of the Morale, Welfare and Recreation (MWR) services facilities such as the library, pool, crafts shop, auto hobby shop, youth center, or gym, patrons must mind their Ps and Qs. In order to live in quarters on an installation, residents must maintain the appearance and cleanliness of the area for which they are responsible.

‘Dependency’ connects to homeschooling-while-military, but to fit it in here would be to derail the topic of military life. The connection between homeschooling oversight and the military will be the focus of Military Jurisdiction over the Family.



Wives who are former-military

Former military personnel who marry servicemembers learn to take a back seat to the career. The difference in dealing with mission supremacy over everything depends on whether you're the person going out to do the mission while leaving behind a vomiting child in the capable hands of a spouse, or if you're the spouse attached to the capable hands.

It is said (probably by wives) that the hardest job in the military is that of a military wife. That sentiment, plus a dollar, will get you a cup of coffee at the food court. In addition to being a rear-echelon mother, the hierarchy can brush off the wife. You have little authority and possess no 'need-to-know.'

For wives who are former active duty, changing from a person in-the-know to one who is precluded from knowing can be a bitter pill, even if the rationale for the preclusion is understood and accepted. More than one former-military wife has discovered how far down the pole she has slid when an emergency arises during a separation from her husband and some of the people she needs to work with ignore the power of attorney she holds.

Wives who grew up as civilians

For a person who has grown up civilian and is accustomed to being dealt with as an individual whose cash is as green as the next person's, the insularity of active-duty personnel and the perpetual undercurrent of suspicion (no, it's not just you) must be quite a hurdle to jump. On top of that indignity, you can pile strange customs and arcane terminology. Within American society, military culture can seem like another world.

Military life is a separate culture within the greater American society. The services draw their members from cities and towns, farms and ranches, apartments, row houses and Cape Cods, and these people bring their opinions with them. But service with 'the military' carries differences such as legal relief in areas such as voting, taxes and licensing that separates it from civilian society. 'The military' provides housing segregated from civilian areas. 'The military' provides special shopping facilities. People in 'the military' wear special clothing. A job in 'the military' has little to do with the area surrounding an installation, and 'the job' (aka, mission) is practically everything.

Despite all these differences from civilian life 'the military' acknowledges the importance of the family. A satisfied family makes for a satisfied servicemember and that satisfied servicemember is more likely to be focused on, and committed to, the mission. Each servicemember's dedication to completing the current assignment has a direct effect on force readiness, as well as providing the retention in the service of experienced personnel.

The 'dance' between the services, the servicemembers and service families is complex, and removing a piece of the puzzle weakens the whole. We are all part of the military team although, of course, the real world more quickly feels the effects of the actions of some parts, while the effects of others' actions may only surface over the long term.

The military services recruit individuals but nowadays, for the most part, retains families. The days of bachelor soldiers fighting their way up and down the career ladder is a thing of the past.

Legal Authority

As for who has legal authority over whom, the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ)⁵ applies only to servicemembers. The UCMJ is the source for legal terms such as “Article 15”⁶ and “court-martial.”⁷ Persons who use military facilities, but are not members of one of the services (most usually, family members), are under the administrative control of military authorities, but not the UCMJ. “Administrative control” means that these authorities control access administratively, via issuing ID cards, access stickers, ration cards, special entry badges and overseeing the use of specific installation facilities. The one benefit that military authorities cannot withhold from a person holding a dependent ID card, or a person who is authorized dependent privileges, is health care.

The crux of the control by military authorities of a family member during normal times, e.g., not during martial law or an emergency, is through denial of privileges if the family member abuses a privilege. By receiving an ID card, an overseas ration card or residency in government quarters, the family member tacitly agrees to use the privilege properly. That is the expectation, and, usually, the authorities apply rules and restrictions equally to everyone, although, heaven knows ‘exceptions have been made;’ we all have at least one story of favoritism.



A child's perspective

The particular reality of military life for children is of being the new kid. Over and over again.

The general reality is that from the end of WWII onward, DoD did address a specifically familial concern: the need for schools for the children of military personnel stationed overseas. After the 1970s change to allow women as well as men to be parents while on active duty, the services have also provided a system of child care facilities.

Since World War II, educational services overseas for children progressed from the need for elementary-aged schoolchildren to ride local trains to host nation schools, to a school system that spanned the globe when the Cold War was in full swing. Unfortunately, for many kids, the advances in school availability never compensated for the shock of being the 'new kid.' Repeatedly. An expanded number of classes in a school does not compensate a child for curricular dissonance caused by having to change textbooks in midyear because of a parent's transfer. A large gym and cafeteria can't make you popular. A gifted teacher won't ease homesickness.

Military children develop a veneer of sophistication and an ability to land on their feet, but it comes at a price.

No person's life is free of the scarring from disappointment, rejection or pain. "Into every life a little rain must fall." "Variety is the spice of life." "That which doesn't kill you makes you stronger." If you're a child, platitudes don't help that much.

For many children the 'raining spice that doesn't kill you' results in the skipping of skills taught at varying times among all the different schools. Children talented in an area of study may skim over the gap with ease, filling in the missing information through native talent. Children for whom the area of study is not their strong suit may not suffer a visible trauma but may have to get through the rest of school with only a general idea of how to do something, such as multiply fractions, never mind why anyone would want to multiply them. Of course, this feeling is not unique to military children but the opportunities for such situations are so much greater because of their parent's choice of career. The United States may have abolished the drafting of adults for military service but children are still conscripted into military life by their parents' choices of job, just as we are all impressed into Life itself. In any case, nobody asked us.

Military brats are cultural citizens of nowhere with childhood memories of everywhere. Military brats learn geographic differences early, such as the young child with first memories of birdsong and an abundance of European rain, who wonders where all the trees went as she sits under a cloudless ultramarine blue Midwestern sky in a sandbox filled with sand almost too hot to touch. Dissonance and adjustment are the Brat's constant companions. She lives the life of the perpetual stranger who shares memories of far away places only (it seems) with her immediate family. The maxim about blooming where you are planted works best after you grow roots.

Despite the drawbacks of dissonance and adjustment, and having to try to put down roots in tan clay, then desert sand, then red clay, then ocean sand, the military childhood has its benefits. The best one may be that if the bully next door doesn't move away, chances are that you will. The flip side is that this also applies to your best friend. Another benefit of this vagabond life is exotic vacations or, even better, living in an exotic land. Stay-at-home Cousins-Who-Took-French can't easily replicate learning a foreign language from conversations with native speakers on their home turf. Not all military assignments are travel-poster-beautiful, but at least the poorer assignments get shared around. Also luckily, 'one man's trash is another man's treasure.' The military life is one of variety and novelty, an adventure for the young who still have endurance and good knees. Armchair travels can wait 'til later.



Living overseas

One of the biggest differences between military life and civilian life, other than the war part, is that military families have more opportunities to live outside the United States than do most American civilian families. Since the post-Cold War drawdown of the 1990s and the recommendations of the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission (BRAC, so-called for the former wording “Base Realignment and Closure”)⁸, these opportunities are not as frequent as before the 1990s. Still, families accompany service-members to Japan, Okinawa, Guam, Turkey and many places in Europe.⁹

Living overseas is complex, so it will have its own chapter. Moving is a pain more often than not, but the opportunity to live in new places and not just visit them is usually worth the hassle.

Conclusion

Like everyone else's lives, the military family's life is one of tradeoffs, although the military version may be extreme. Where a civilian family might have the tradeoff of living either in a higher or lower property-tax area and having more or fewer community services, a military family may have the choice of living in this country or another one. Military families may not have as much money left at the end of the month as some of their civilian peers but we can live in places that, if we were civilians choosing to live there, would need a higher income level. As wives, we may find our soldier, sailor, airman, Marine and Coast Guard husbands put in harm's way but the cold comfort of statistics is that the majority of servicemembers will beat the odds. A usually unmentioned benefit of military life is that during the servicemember's career we can take pride in being an integral, if quiet, part of historic events. Our support of our sponsors enables them to work efficiently and with concentration. Our family efforts help those parts of the team.

Notes:

¹ “Male spouses often overlooked,” undated, Tara Crooks and Starlett Henderson, Army Times
 “When it comes to the term “military spouse,” there’s an immediate assumption that you’re talking about women. But, more than 6 percent of military spouses are men.”
http://www.armytimes.com/community/family/lifelines_married_080225w/

² Fort Baker Parade Ground Walk, PDF-page 14, Golden Gate National Recreation Area, National Park Service

“Before Fort Baker was established, the frontier outposts were predominantly a bachelor society. The army strongly discouraged married junior officers, and soldiers were specifically forbidden to marry (even though many of them did marry). If an officer had a wife and children, they were to be left behind at home. If the families were determined to follow the army made no provisions for them. Several groups of families and servants were often forced to live together in deteriorated, abandoned buildings off-post as makeshift housing.”

<http://www.nps.gov/goga/planyourvisit/upload/sg-foba-army-web.pdf>

³ White Paper 1983, “The Army Family,” Chief of Staff, U.S. Army, page 2 (PDF-page 6), “The early 20th century Army considered families of enlisted men below noncommissioned rank an unwanted burden. In fact, Army regulations, with exceptions, forbade the peacetime enlistment or reenlistment of men with wives and minor children until 1942.”

<http://militaryhomeschooling.files.wordpress.com/2010/05/the-army-family-white-paper-1983.pdf>

⁴ Soldier Move website, 17 Apr 2010, “Why do single soldiers get harrassed (sic) about their barracks rooms when married soldiers aren’t about there (sic) house?”

<http://soldiermove.com/why-do-single-soldiers-get-harrassed-about-their-barracks-rooms-when-married-soldiers-arent-about-there-house>

⁵ Uniform Code of Military Justice

<http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/ucmj.htm>

⁶ Non-judicial punishment

<http://usmilitary.about.com/od/justicelawlegislation/a/article15.htm>

⁷ “court-martial”

“The Armed Forces do not have permanently established trial courts for prosecuting military members. Courts-martial (military criminal trial courts) are convened (established) by commanders possessing the authority to do so, on an “as needed” basis.”

<http://usmilitary.about.com/od/justicelawlegislation/l/aacmartial1.htm>

⁸ BRAC <http://www.brac.gov/>

⁹ Military Installation Guide, Military.com

http://www.benefits.military.com/misc/installations/Browse_WorldMap.jsp