

A Wife's Perspective

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My experience as a service wife qualifies under the term of the olden days of the seventies and eighties. I'm glad that the world has moved on, but I'm also glad that I knew a time when life was simpler, more reliant on self, when values were clear-cut, a time before our techno revolution.

The world before the techno revolution has become entirely irrelevant to our 'new age' Australians. Where the freedom they enjoy to do 'their thing' came from, is not part of their understanding. What is happening NOW is the only reality. The paradox of our time is that wider information has led to a narrower viewpoint; more qualification has led to less common sense; more possessions have led to a diminished values base.

The result of the rapidity of the technological onslaught, with its focus on now, has been two-fold. Firstly, it has resulted in a generational induced memory loss, a dismissal of history and its lessons as irreverent. Secondly, it has resulted in a disenfranchisement of the older generation. In short, the 'new age' thinkers have consigned the 'old brigade', their values and their contribution to Australia, to the scrapheap of a history, where it is easy to forget. For the first time in Australia's history, the country is led by a government with the 'new age' attitude.

Most of the Australian community consider Military life an honourable one, but they also consider that service personnel are well paid for their service. They assume that service personnel will be well 'looked after' by a Government who is always talking about 'our brave soldiers'. As society enjoys the results of the lifestyle the defence force has won for the country, it finds it easy to rationalise and ignore the exact nature of that service, its implications, and any obligations owing to those who gave it. Society sees what is there to see NOW; it has dismissed what went before. This is the major reason there has been a shift of assumptions and a change of attitude towards the nature of military service, and by implication, the attitude to the family life of military personnel.

Today, military family life looks similar to family life in the wider society, and unfortunately, this is the similarity that an increasing section of our Government embraces. Those who serve now and the present crop of advisors to the Government, have no idea about the changes in service life, the vast differences in pay and conditions from those who served only a short fifteen to twenty years ago. Unless they came from a military family, they can have no idea how great the impact of service life can be on a family. No matter what Military family life looks on the outside, its unique nature with its underlying differences and issues remain the same as they have ever been.

When I first became a 'service wife, of the Naval variety, I accepted that I was buying the whole package, man and service. It was a package based on the assumption of mutual obligation. In return for the service of defending the country and being at the government's disposal, and all that that implied; the government would honour its obligations to the ongoing consequences of that service. The problem with the contract was that the military personnel and their family's involvement, was up front. The Government's commitment, often only manifest after active service, is far less freely given. Military families are the ones dealing with the consequences of service and military families are dealing with the reticence of the Government to honour its contract.

The terms and conditions of service were solely predicated on the needs of the Government of the day. The families were expected to fit in; after all, the families had survived a world war without much help. I don't assume that the Government was deliberately callous, but it certainly lacked an understanding of the contribution of families, and it used up the goodwill and values of the time by the spade loads. Then, it was called the 'service ethic' .

Today society attitudes and values have changed. Most of the changes are positive and for the better. The role of the family in military life is now acknowledged as making a valuable contribution to the wellbeing of the Services as a whole. That value however, is very difficult to quantify, as the years of neglect to do so, testify. It is still an inescapable truth that those who marry into military life, must recognize that the life is different and that it must be so.

In the olden days, some Naval deployments were up to year, sometimes longer. Long-term separation, in an isolating world, with little support and consideration from anyone was the challenge. Keeping relationships viable was hard. Developing the fierce self-reliance and independence needed to survive, often led to conflicts when partners returned looking to take over the nest again, or when a partner returned changed by the experience of his service. Vietnam and its effect still loom large. Each deployment became harder and the lack of family support really mattered. The support offered by other service wives was often all you had to rely on.

Today, six to eight months is considered a long deployment. In many ways, it is easier to deal with, especially with the availability of electronic communications. There are many services offered to military families today. The problem lies in the plethora of information and resources available. Each of the multitude of agencies that administer them, has its own set of conditions, often one impacting upon another, and all being impacted by Fringe Benefits Tax and other tax implications. For example, the much vaunted government initiative with medical cover for service families is coming apart due to Fringe Benefits Tax problems. That is just the tip of the iceberg with one hand giving and the other taking. Yes, services are offered, but by the time one condition after another is applied, little useful assistance is achieved. The system of accessing services is confusing and discourages participation. This has turned a potential self-reliant group of people into a group suffering the learned helplessness of technological and bureaucratic overload.

The system needs overhauling and coordination and above all, honesty. Using the Defence Community Organization (DCO) as an overarching point of reference would seem one way to simplify this confusion. DCO would not need to provide all the services just the information about all the programs available, and be able to refer enquiries on to the appropriate source. The ability of service personnel to opt into a scheme to authorize the family e-mail links to be used to disseminate all new information relevant to families could also be a simple way of keeping families updated and involved. Being a voluntary service would circumvent those who have privacy concerns and eliminate the information going to those next of kin who do not need it.

One of the biggest problems today for service families is dealing with their service member being redeployed to a theatre of war, when it is clear to them that the first deployment has already begun to challenge the mental and physical limits of that person. Wives are often the first people to see the cracks. De-briefing personnel from active duty is great and a wonderful start, but de-briefing takes time and follow up, over a prolonged period, should be statutory. A session for the wives on strategies to manage the stress of return would be very welcome and a valuable way to lessen the impacts on family life.

In the olden days, the basic rates of pay and allowances, for all ranks, were low. The military was not a career you entered for money. The pay was predicated on the fact that board and lodging was provided for the serviceman. We certainly struggled to survive on our one income. Pay scales now compare very favourably, to what is considered to be comparative work “outside”. However, the reason for recent massive increase of remuneration for the Military has been more to do with recruitment and retention, than service members’ wellbeing. It is a bandaid measure, and as such will have a short shelf life.

Sea going allowance, in the olden days was a mere pittance. The time spent away did not matter and the years of services mattered not a jot, as no incremental component of the allowance existed. The best we could hope for was a tax rebate.

Now the seagoing allowances are very attractive. Used as an incentive to crew the ships, they have risen even more speedily than wages. Incrementally structured, they range from good to very lucrative. I’m informed by a young naval wife that a mortgage can be sustained on seagoing allowance alone, after 8 or 9 years service at sea. Some overseas service now attracts very beneficial tax benefits too. Society and the Government just see NOW and are all too ready to forget the nature and demands of the life that provides that affluence and the fact that things have not always been as good.

Overseas living allowance for my husband on a six month unaccompanied stint in UK in 1979, was just 88c a day. Try living on that – even then! At a pound sterling a minute, a phone call home was a highlight and a luxury only afforded once or twice during the six months of separation. The family had to wait for the call, as there was no direct number I could use to contact him. Service families learnt the meaning of thrift very quickly. That at least has changed, but again, the change is adding to the idea that service life is no different from that of any other family.

With all this in mind, consider other social aspects. Wives were given no consideration at all, as far as postings went. The fact the wife of a serviceman had to give up her job was of no consequence. The service assumed that the wives would become the social welfare organization for families. Officer’s wives were certainly expected to take leadership in that role, unpaid of course. Getting a job as a service wife was hard as all manner of discrimination was alive and well. An employer could refuse you employment on the grounds of your military connection, saying you were not a good long-term prospect. The awareness of working women’s needs was in its infancy. There was little in the way of childcare facilities and job-sharing and flexi-time was still very much a thing of the future. Developing a professional career path when each state in Australia has different systems of governance, education and health was, and still is, difficult. This disengagement of a generation of service wives from the paid employment market, and the lack of job continuity and promotion prospects has had a profound financial impact. The impact has been far greater than the frugality of the one-income days in which it occurred. It is now that service wives suffer as the result of having little or no superannuation of their own.

Now the ability to job hunt on the internet before you arrive at a new in a posting location is a huge leap forward. Assistance to find employment is provided with schemes such as SWAPP/SELECT, but the slow uptake of this program is indicative of the complexity of its conditions. It is causing much frustration that a service is offered but in practice, given regulations and tax implications, is not worth accessing at all. Anti-discrimination laws have helped to equalize opportunities for employment for women, as has the provision of childcare places. However, as we know, childcare places are in great demand and often the best a new arrival can be offered is a place on the waiting list. Flexible work arrangements have also helped current military wives, but there is no guarantee that work will be

available, or that continuity is assured. That means that there is still a monetary detriment to the military family.

Service life is, and has always been, a life on the move. This could mean that you find yourself a continent, or sometimes a world, away from the support of family and friends. The likelihood of multiple moves is high. Our family had ten. Sure, these moves may look just like the moves of many families in our new age, mobile world. The difference is that those families have a choice as to whether they go, where they go and when they go. They know that once they are settled in their new location their family life resumes. They don't have to accept the dictates of the military imperative and the don't find moving and separation usually go hand in hand.

In the olden days for a wife to contact The Service was the last resort, done only in life and death emergencies. This meant that the wives dealt with all manner of things quite alone. This was a time before cheap airfares were available, and the cost of flights precluded the opportunity of visiting, or being visited by, distant family. The idea of military personnel leaving a family in the family home to ensure continuity of partner employment and children's schooling, on a 'fly in –fly out' basis was inconceivable. It is still not common, but it is now possible – and affordable!

The solitude and isolation of the olden day family is something that modern military families can never know. Electronic communications have bridged a gap that yawned wide for the wife and family in the olden days.

Mail was our lifeline, letter power ruled. The written word had to suffice, as even photographs could only be a special treat. The complexity, time and expense involved in producing them made them a luxury we could not afford regularly. Although mail was our link, it was by no means reliable. Postal strikes were a time of dread and although the general community has probably forgotten them entirely, they still resonate with the ex-service community. Often letters came in a group after a prolonged silence, or came out of sequence. Sometimes went missing altogether, or arrived after the ship had returned home. Many a birthday, anniversary or welcome to our new baby card came straggling home long after the event. It is hard for a small child to understand the vagaries of the post; all they knew was that there was no card from Daddy.

However, this time did have some benefits. Our children did learn how to write meaningful, well illustrated, letters. They developed self-reliance, they learnt how to deal with disappointments and something other than an instant gratification; skills that have stood them all in good stead over the years. They value friendship and take care to nurture them. They have learnt to rely on each other and are the best of friends.

Now, I see little ones keeping in touch with their dads via the e-mail and think on balance, they are the lucky ones. They can share daily events, the excitement of a footy final or school success. Anxieties and the need for reassurance can be more easily dealt with, lessening the fretting and separation problems that inevitably occur. As other families in society crumble around them, military kids need to know that a Dad or Mum, who has left the home, cares and is really coming back. Despite the streamlined communications, there is nothing to rival the personal touch. A story at bedtime or a chat around the meal table is irreplaceable. Society has become de-sensitised by the absence of a dad about the house, and offers little support to the service family. Instant and constant communication has also lessened the impact and understanding of our society to the difference between talking to someone in the next suburb and talking to someone in a war zone, (radio silence and censorship issues notwithstanding.)

Military wives had, and have, to be a hardy lot. With the length of deployments, it was difficult to avoid having at least one of your children alone. Childbirth was just a thing to cope with. Two of our three children were born with dad away. As the old naval saying goes, "Men are only necessary for the keel laying, not the launch". There was little in the way of community service back up, in fact I felt lucky I could even get a message to the ship announcing the arrivals at all. Ship-shore calls were expensive and often radio silence precluded even that means of communication. With the shortening of deployments and the control of fertility much more readily available, this aspect too is lessening. Those mums, whose babies are born now with dads away, have access to instant communications and this does a lot to alleviate the feeling of total isolation. There are services available to support new mums, and the chances of having family nearby are greater. However, when a baby is born, believe me, the only person you really want there is the one person you can't have. That hasn't changed!

In the olden days, housing was basic with a capital B. The choice of homes was very limited. No comparison to community standard regulation existed. Receiving a clean house was a bonus. The hours spent cleaning a house and taming a yard were part of the deal. The house was the shell, floor coverings, curtains and light fittings, heating and cooling were down to us. Hot water supply was scant, if we were lucky we had a water heater in the bathroom, seldom in the kitchen, but a laundry never had hot water. Houses were generally perched on the old quarter acre block. Personally, I found this the greatest redeeming feature. The children had a safe place to play and there was room for the vegie patch that was an essential adjunct to our economy. However, it was often quite an onerous task to maintain as a solo act, for months at a time, especially when you were pregnant or had a couple of little children to look after. A trusty sewing machine, a lawnmower and a range of tools was essential survival kit.

Now there is a choice of housing. Military housing, with all mod cons, is generally very good. More rigorous inspections and contracts with cleaning firms have consigned the 'horror' houses to history. Again society sees only NOW. It has no idea how much time and money the families of the ex-servicemen saved the government. But, more importantly, society has no idea that no matter how good or bad the house, the house is not quite a home without half of the partnership in residence. It has no idea that in the military home there is always that underlying concern about the safety of the partner who is away.

Removals are still a drama. Furniture 'disappearing' or being delayed for weeks at a time seems to have stopped. However, the pressure put on a family to sign off on a delivery before the unpacking is complete is still a problem. Little realistic compensation is offered for breakages and goods that are damaged. It is a fact of military life that fridges and washing machines all come with dents in them, and that tables and cupboards look more familiar with chunks missing and a few scratches to enhance their character.

I remember one particular move when our dining room table arrived sporting a large gouge out of the middle of it. The assessor calmly told me "Don't worry love, we'll shove a bit of wood filler in 'er" He was somewhat taken aback when I asked for his address. "Why?" he enquired. "I'd like to go to your house and see if your wife would like a hole in her table?" Our table still bears the scars.

Be it then, or now, the job of re-establishing in a new location is hard. It becomes harder and harder each time you have to do it. A service wife has not only to adjust herself, but also has to absorb the anxiety and grief for the children too. It can be very hard to be the one who must always stay strong. It is easy to fall prey to a feeling of disconnectedness. If the family is to interact in the community, the wife has to initiate and support it. Involvement in schools, sporting clubs, scouts and guides and the arts is sometimes hard to do, particularly as a newcomer and "the Odd Wife Out". You constantly

have to prove yourself and sometimes found your contribution was seen as a threat to the incumbent group. You just about established your credentials when it is time to move on.

“Changeover” that period which covers the time just before a deployment, and the period after the return, is a difficult one. The wife has to be the strong one. Once the deployment begins, she longs for the time her spouse will return and she can share the load, but often finds, that far from sharing it, the load has intensified in the resettlement period. The children who have longed for dad’s return often find that Dad isn’t quite the same anymore and Mum just has to sop up the slack til normality returns, (if indeed it does). This is particularly true when a deployment has been a difficult one. Wives understand the causes of the problems, but that doesn’t make it any easier to deal with.

These issues are still to a large degree considered a personal problem. Now there are psych services in place to deal with some of the more extreme cases. Both then, as now, the military wife is still the first line psych-service provider. The military child is still experiencing these unsettling and unhappy times. I sincerely hope that the Government is prepared for the massive commitment it will have to deal with post Iraq and Afghanistan. The lessons of Vietnam are clear for all to see, but myopia in ‘new age’ people, is common. Given help and training wives and partners could be a valuable resource in lessening the impact of this problem on families.

In childhood, the importance of friendship ties is paramount. Leaving friends to ‘start again’ is a trauma. A sense of belonging to a community and a need for roots is very important to us all. Throughout a service career, a child may be asked to move and re-establish four or five times. Being a Naval family, we managed it ten times. Living in different locations does have some benefits and gives the children an appreciation of other places, but it does come at a cost. Most children learn to cope adequately, but a significant number do find the transitions very damaging and their ability to form friendships is impaired and they become withdrawn. In the olden days, children had little chance of keeping up friendships, as mail was the only real way to do so. The modern child has the great advantages of the electronic age. A child can be more or less weaned, from one community to another, rather than uprooted. However, establishing new friendship bonds and ‘fitting in’ is never any easy task.

Education is a *major* issue for the military family. Breaking the continuity of education is never ideal. Moving interstate puts enormous stress into the change and can cause long lasting problems. In the olden days there was little anyone could do to lessen the impact of the transplant. Schools were less aware of, and less accommodating of, the needs of the military child. There were even sometimes when service children they were viewed as a bother, because the differences in state curricula caused differences in standards. Little research had been done into early childhood development and little quarter was given. Parents had to pick up these difficult problems and work to solve them. This was not considered a service problem at all. In military parlance, it was ‘co-lateral damage’. We were to experience this co-lateral damage at first hand, and believe me it was not an easy thing to remedy.

Now, the first day at a new school is still daunting, but often children have been in contact with the school before they arrive in their new location. Having been able to see pictures of their new teacher, classmates and school surrounds, certainly lessen the impact of the move. This is not always possible as often a school can only found after resettlement in a new location. Again the electronic era can ease the transition, as records and teacher communication is possible. Education Liaison Officers and tutoring support is available to counteract its effects. Children with special needs pose even greater challenges for parents; again, help is available (with tax implications, of course!). Options are limited too for private education, as the location of the posting can leave no suitable school available. Waiting

list problems often occur. Boarding schools are available, but to a military family, where each day together matters, it's not a preferred option.

The single greatest problem is the lack of a National Curriculum with a uniform starting age. This change is beyond the bailiwick of the Military to effect, but as a lobbying group, it could be a great deal more proactive.

The appreciation of the unique nature of service life is blurring. It is being overwhelmed by the overload of technological information, and the buy now pay later mentality of the time. Look at what has happened to all that olden day service. Much of it has been forgotten, overlooked, discounted. The 'New Age' Australians, those who now propose our 16 year olds vote, are only considering the needs of the young. Not only has the contribution of the ex-service community been discounted, but so too have their pensions. At the stroke of a pen, Mr Whitlam discounted them. That discounting has never been restored. It compounds as each year passes and sees more and more of the ex-service community declining into genteel poverty. As the CPI stagnates, but prices don't, this is happening at an alarming rate. How a government can increase the Centerlink pensions, which are indexed above CPI because of rising prices, and not acknowledge the hardship of a CPI indexation system to its ex-servicemen is beyond comprehension. Defence widows find themselves in a particularly bleak situation, as their pension is not even fully indexed at CPI. However, don't worry folks the government tells us there is always Centerlink! Military families have paid for their superannuation, they have saved the government millions as an unpaid workforce for years, and put up with conditions untenable today. They have paid in struggle, heartache and loneliness and by living the service ethic. They did so willingly and proudly, surely they deserve the dignity of something better than queuing at Centerlink. They fulfilled their part of the contract.

Few people in our community today understand that some military members who, having actively served for years and years, are not entitled to the benefits of a veteran. These personnel were not in an 'operational theatre' for the statutory, (but arbitrary, decided) 28 days. The veteran is all that is ever mentioned our leadership. When did you last hear a politician talking of anyone but a veteran? All military members are at the disposal of their government and country in the same way as those with 'qualifying service'. Their commitment is no less. It is a difficult distinction for the families to understand. They often endured years of long separations and disruption to their family life. Their experience was just as lonely, unsupported and valuable as any "qualified" service family. They too shared the knowledge of the dangers of service life and held that subliminal fear that anything may happen at any time. The tragic helicopter accident in Queensland; the experiences of HMAS Melbourne with Voyager and Frank.E Evans; the "Westralia" disaster; the diver attacked by a shark in Sydney harbour; a whaler full of midshipmen lost in a storm; all these incidents testify to that. This is by no means a complete list, but the point is, that not being in an 'operational theatre' does not mean that the dangers and commitment disappear or that the ultimate sacrifice is not made. This official governmental discrimination does not recognize the unique nature of *all* military service. The mutual obligation that was undertaken when a service member enlisted is it seems, flexible.

It is unimaginable that even some ex-service organizations turned away long-term servicemen on these grounds. It mattered a great deal to those servicemen, as it sent the message that their service was considered only second best. The fact that such organizations then purport to speak on behalf of the ex-service community is not acceptable, and offends much of that community. Unfortunately, for too long our government just hasn't understood that point. DFWA, as an organization which embraces all who have served and all who are serving is much more alive to the true nature of the military commitment. This gives it validity to speak for the entire service community rather than for just selected veterans. The government needs to listen, as there are many challenges ahead.

What is happening now? New Age attitudes in our new age government are changing. Policy makers in our new Government, despite rhetoric and promises, chose to ignore their mutual obligation to those who have served before now, and endorsed the neglect of the ex-service community by previous governments. From this platform it is easy for them to seriously consider that by offering competitive pay scales and generous allowance and a new super scheme, it will be enough 'pay off' for military life and its legacy. The idea of limited liability is very appealing. Messing about with family issues and addressing the most obvious shop-front issues such as pay and housing and the provision of lots of seemingly family friendly schemes, feeds the societal perception that the Government is looking after the Australian Defence Force. These policy makers are new age people who compare the dangers of the mining industry with that of military life. They are the same people who have not yet learned the lessons of post Vietnam.

The goodwill of the military community that the government has so heavily relied on in the past, is about to run out. The families of the modern soldier, sailor and airmen are new age people too. This is why the new pay scales were needed and why they can be no more than a band aid solution. The expectations of the 'new age military' are many. They are no longer prepared to 'put up with things'. Society has changed and brought many challenges for the military, which the Government cannot afford to ignore.

Military families know only too well the unique nature of military service. While glad that their service partners are now paid as valued members of the community, there is a growing frustration and disengagement from the services offered to families. They are unnecessarily complex and convoluted. They are administered by a multiplicity of agencies that cannot seem to work together. Frustration is mounting with programs that seem to promise help, but when accessed, deliver little. Military families want honesty, not smoke and mirrors, or being fobbed off with political spin.

Service families want the unique nature of all military service recognized; they want an acknowledgement of the ongoing nature of its impact on family life. They understand the life and are prepared to do what they must to support their service partners. But they do need to know that when the initial job is done they can rely on a government to honour its part of the social contract it undertook to those who have defended and continue to defend this country. The Government will always get good value for its dollar from military families. It is time to stop exploiting good will and show a realistic concern and support to those who have earned it.

Despite the changes in values and attitudes as the years have passed; despite the spin and perception that now govern much of our society's judgement; despite the disguise brought about by affluence and technology, the service family remains unique in nature.

It is as unique as it is vital to the continued defence of this country.

Thank you.

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