

Everything from housing and services to personnel assignment policies reflects the fact that most military people today are married.

The Family and the Force

A MERICAN lifestyles have changed over the decades, and, as a result, both the demographics and the personnel policies of the armed forces have shifted dramatically.

The makeup of today's Air Force illustrates this transformation. Almost two-thirds of all enlisted members are married. In the officer corps, the ratio continues to be somewhat higher, but it is dropping gradually, having fallen from eighty-three percent in 1976 to seventy-six percent in 1996. Across all officer and enlisted ranks, the divorce rate has doubled over those two decades, rising from less than three percent to almost six percent.

The gender mix also has changed. In the 1980s, the number of women in the Air Force totaled about 61,000. Today, the number has risen slightly—to 63,000—but, as the size of the force has dropped, the percentage of women in the force has leaped from about eleven percent to about sixteen percent.

Many women now serving are married, and substantial numbers of them are married to other USAF members. The Air Force still allows such couples to serve together where

By Bruce D. Callander

it has vacancies, but, in a smaller force, finding assignments for both spouses is proving to be more difficult. For USAF women married to civilians, no "join spouse" provisions exist and reassignment of either husband or wife can force difficult career choices.

The two-income family, once the exception in the armed services, now is the rule. At last report, almost sixty percent of officers' spouses and more than three-quarters of enlisted members' spouses worked outside the home or were actively looking for jobs. There also has been an increase in the number of single parents, both male and female.

The Air Force long ago gave up trying to bar married applicants from enlisting and requiring lower-

ranking members to get permission to marry. However, some restrictions continue. Since the 1980s, for example, USAF has refused to permit reenlistment of persons in grades of E-3 or below if they are married to civilians and have two or more family members incapable of self-care. Pregnancy alone no longer is grounds for separation.

The aim of these policies is to keep Air Force individuals from getting into financial difficulties. With pay still fairly modest and quarters allowances no longer based on family size, the addition of dependents can be a burden, particularly in the lower grades. Large families are less common than they were in earlier generations, with the average Air Force household now reporting only two children. Even so, most families find that they need two incomes to make ends meet.

One result has been a dramatic increase in the need for child-care facilities. The Air Force now maintains 161 child-care centers and another 3,200 day-care homes, private residences where the owners are trained and licensed to care for youngsters.

Air Force officials say the service has an aggressive program to build additional facilities, but they add that funding is tight. They estimate that the Air Force needs some 36,000 more child-care spaces to meet future needs. They hope that, by Fiscal 2001, they will have met at least sixty percent of the requirement but, as in the private sector, the demand continues to outpace the supply.

World's Largest System

The Defense Department's child-care program is by far the largest in the world. More than sixty-five percent of military spouses are in the labor force, resulting in a huge need for child care. In a recent study, DoD learned that in military families, nearly 299,000 children under age thirteen need some kind of child care.

Today, DoD provides 155,391 child-care spaces at 346 locations. The Pentagon also is conducting two evaluations regarding outsourcing child care, recognizing that the department is nearing its maximum ability to meet child-care needs on base.

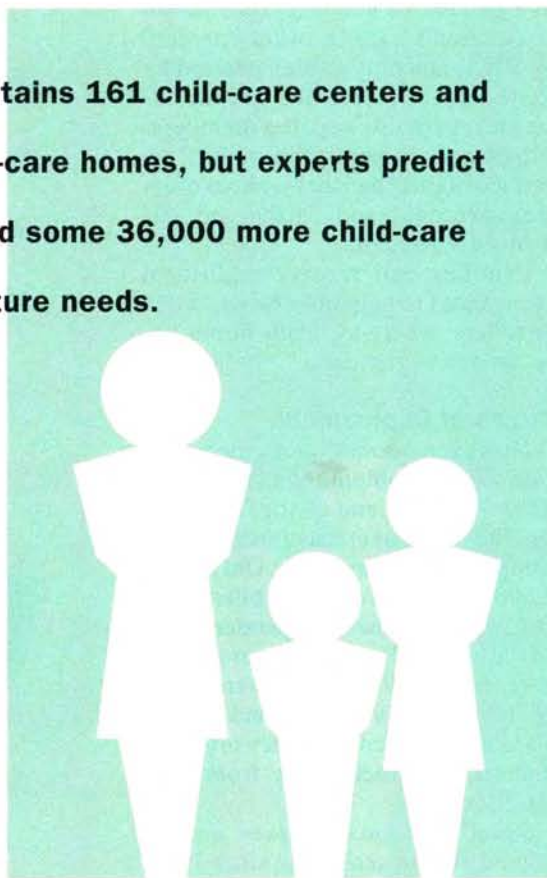
Another new aspect of Air Force

life is the vast array of counseling and guidance available. Family Services offers a variety of financial planning, parenting, and domestic counseling services. Such on-base resources have long been available, but their scope and the range of fam-

completely and had their units moved to other locations, which has increased rather than decreased the housing demand at the remaining bases.

At present, only about 96,000 Air Force families live on base. Some

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ily problems they address have widened dramatically.

Financial worries are nothing new to military families, of course. Although service pay has risen sharply in the past twenty-five years, so has inflation. Even based on a forty-hour work week, a rarity in the military, basic pay for recruits barely matches the minimum wage, and starting pay for lieutenants with college degrees is less than \$25,000 per year.

Housing costs also remain a concern for USAF members, even for those families with two incomes. At some bases, the drawdown has eased matters a little, because fewer members are competing for the same amount of on-base housing, but this is not the case throughout the force. A number of bases have shut down

223,000 live in civilian communities. Of those who live off base, almost forty percent own their own homes. The combination of USAF efforts to reduce permanent change of station moves and the emergence of an improved housing market apparently has convinced many that buying is a practical option and often a good investment.

Buying or renting still claims a significant part of a family's budget. In recent years, the services have won some improvements in Basic Allowance for Quarters (BAQ) and in special payments for high-cost areas and special circumstances.

With-dependents BAQ rates range from \$346 for recruits and \$469 for new lieutenants to \$631 for top NCOs

and \$874 for colonels. These can be supplemented by a variable housing allowance (VHA) and a cost-of-living allowance for those in high-cost US areas.

Still, officials say, quarters money remains barely adequate. Congress's stated intention has been that sixty-five percent of housing costs would be covered by BAQ, twenty percent by VHA, and only fifteen percent by basic pay. Despite the recent increases, officials say, the members' out-of-pocket contribution has remained higher than that—about nineteen percent—and further adjustments are needed.

Families can receive additional allowances to help cover costs when members are away from home because of assignments.

Stress of Deployment

However, money alone does not ease all the problems of such separations. With the end of the Cold War and the cut in overseas forces, unaccompanied tours are rarer. Only about 3,500 permanent overseas billets now are in areas where dependents are not allowed. In recent years, however, the Air Force has been called on increasingly to respond to humanitarian and contingency missions that take members away from their families.

Relatively small forces are involved in most cases, but, since 1989, the number of members deployed on these operations has more than quadrupled. At last count, some 14,500 members (about five percent of the force) were away from home for such reasons on any given day. Most are on TDY for no more than thirty days per year, but members in a few key specialties may be deployed for up to 120 days per year and sometimes longer.

Separations long have been a difficult fact of service life. Today, day care and added parenting problems make separations even more exacting.

Time was when wives' clubs and close friends provided informal assistance during these periods of deployment. Today, the help offered by Family Support Centers is more organized and extensive. The Defense Department's 291 family centers are the focal point of basic social services and support networks for the military community. Bases

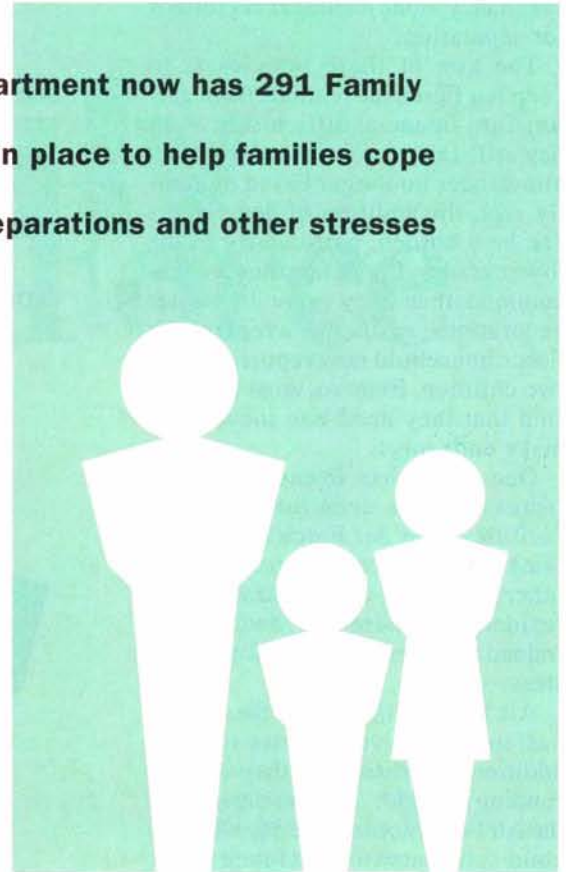
now provide predeployment briefings, organize spouse networks, and help with everything from financial management to car repairs. They can coordinate the resources of chapels, medical facilities, youth groups, and counselors, if the situation war-

Bases also provide families with the more traditional fringe benefits and relatively low-cost recreation opportunities.

Clubs and Stores

During the drawdown, base stores,

The Defense Department now has 291 Family Support Centers in place to help families cope with prolonged separations and other stresses of military life.



rants. They can provide something as simple as a video camera, so family members can tape messages to each other.

The centers operate a major relocation program, providing information and assistance to the more than one-third of the force that relocates each year. Many of these members and families are facing their first move and do not know how to plan and carry it out without significant stress and unnecessary costs.

Centers also provide programs not offered elsewhere on the installations. These range from counseling and transition assistance to programs for family members with special emotional, physical, or educational needs.

clubs, and other facilities received less government support, increasingly paying their own way. Despite the belt-tightening, officials say, on-base facilities still contribute substantially to the overall benefits package. A full-course family meal at a club may no longer cost less than a round of hamburgers in town, but surveys show that more than half of all club members think the same or better value is offered at clubs than at similar off-base facilities.

Air Force market comparisons also indicate that base stores still offer bargains. The latest surveys showed that customers save 23.4 percent at commissaries and twenty percent at exchanges when the two are compared with civilian stores. [See "Tar-

getting the Commissaries," *December 1995*, p. 46.]

Sales figures indicate that most families continue to shop on base for at least some items. For example, 2.6 million active-duty members and dependents shopped in Army and Air Force Exchange Service (AAFES) facilities in 1994. The number of Guard and Reserve customers (2.9 million) and retirees (3.6 million) increased in that year. Overall, nine million customers from both services spent more than \$7.1 billion in the stores in 1994.

AAFES continues to plow the bulk of its profits into morale, welfare, and recreation activities and keeps only enough profit to improve existing facilities and build new ones. In 1994, its dividend to USAF MWR activities was \$67 million, an increase of seventy-five percent over the contribution ten years earlier.

Military family health care has been transformed over the past several decades. Dependents have wider choices of care providers and depend less on base facilities alone. At the same time, however, they must expect to pay more for such care. With the rapid rise in medical costs, service families now pay premiums and copayments for much of their care.

Still, the military medical system remains one of the major perks of life in the service. It also has an advantage most civilian workers wish they had: The coverage goes with the member no matter where he or she is based and even, at least in theory, into retirement.

Service families are likely to look to local communities for some needs, however. Gone is the "stockade mentality," when the base provided not only most of a family's social life but everything else from quartermaster packing services to on-base elementary schools.

With most members now living off base and most of their spouses working, today's service family more often blends into the local community. Children attend in-town schools, parents join local clubs, and families generally become involved with the civilian community. The Air Force does not keep records of member involvement with volunteer organizations, but bases do encourage it, and many base fami-

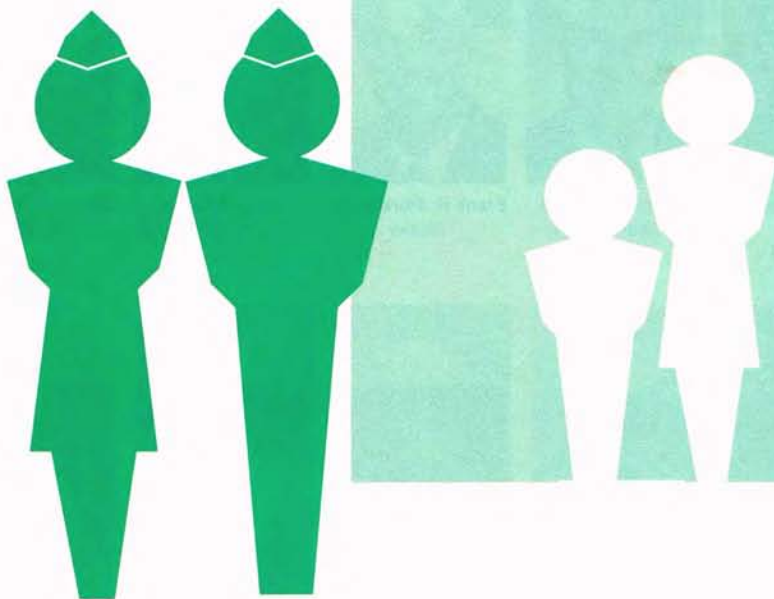
lies are active in everything from youth baseball to school and charitable organizations.

Still Distinctive

Even with this breakdown of base-town barriers, however, service life

say about the military's impact on children later in life. Recently, the Department of Defense began a study to see if significant differences between military and civilian adolescents do exist. The results are due this fall. So far, officials say, they

Today, Air Force bases provide a variety of recreational and educational activities to help youngsters make a successful transition from one location to another.



remains distinctive—especially for children. USAF is only too aware of this. Today, bases provide a variety of recreational and educational activities and special services to help youngsters make a successful transition from one location to another. Every organization, from the base chapel to Family Services, has on-base and outreach programs to help youngsters cope.

Several recent books have examined the upbringing of service "brats" and have had unflattering things to

have found no evidence that youngsters who live on base or whose parents are affiliated with the military have more or fewer behavioral problems than their peers from nonmilitary households.

The DoD study may conclude otherwise, but USAF parents appear to agree with this early assessment. In a recent survey, well over half of the members responding said that the Air Force is a good place to bring up kids. Only about sixteen percent expressed dissatisfaction. ■

Bruce D. Callander, a regular contributor to Air Force Magazine, served tours of active duty during World War II and the Korean War. In 1952, he joined Air Force Times, serving as editor from 1972 to 1986. His most recent article for Air Force Magazine, "Eight Decades Over Hollywood," appeared in the July 1996 issue.