



# The home front during the deployment cycle

## Fact Sheet

### Introduction

Participation in a peacekeeping mission affects not only the serviceman but also his relatives and family members. The home front also feels the effects of the deployment. This fact sheet provides general information on the key topics the home front could face when a serviceman is deployed.

A serviceman on deployment can specify the main person he regards as representing the home front whilst on deployment. This will often be the partner or spouse, but could also be one of the parents, a brother or sister or a good friend. In this fact sheet we deal with male service personnel with female partners or wives on the home front, whether or not with children living at home whom they both look after.<sup>1,2</sup> Other home front representatives should translate the information they read in this fact sheet to their specific situations.

The serviceman and the home front partner have to deal not only with the deployment itself, but also the period before and after it. The serviceman and, therefore, his home front partner, too, dwell on the deployment and everything it entails for a fairly long time.

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<sup>1</sup> To make it easier to read, we have based this information on a serviceman; naturally, there are servicewomen in the armed forces as well. We are also assuming that any partner the serviceman might have is a woman. Of course, that person could equally well be a man.

<sup>2</sup> The Veterans Act provides for, among other things, care for the home front during the deployment cycle. The law does not use the term home front partner, rather relationship. According to the law, a relationship is the spouse, registered partner or other life partner and the veteran's relatives by blood or marriage to the first or second degree.

## **The preparation period**

This period begins once it is known that the serviceman is going on deployment. Ideally, this will be about three to six months before departure; this also gives the home front sufficient time to prepare properly. However, the prospect of a mission can result in tension, anger and protest on the part of the home front partner in the initial weeks.

The preparation period is a busy time for the serviceman and for the home front partner. Service personnel often refer to the 'deployment before the deployment' because of the many training activities involved. The home front partner has to organise practical matters, e.g. take over household tasks, adjust working hours, make specific purchases because of the deployment, organise the social network and attend to the relationship (talking a lot to each other and other family members, making arrangements, trying to take a holiday before the deployment).

Quick answers to a few crucial questions are important to the home front partner. Where is he going? What will he be doing? What are the risks? When is he leaving and when will he be coming back? How can I contact him? Since those answers cannot always be given immediately, uncertainty and tension can arise, in particular if it turns out that departure or return dates change - sometimes several times. It is precisely during that busy period that it is important for the home front partner and the serviceman to ensure they are properly prepared emotionally and to discuss those preparations with each other. It is also important that they discuss expectations of the period ahead thoroughly. Such discussions could include practical matters, such as how to deal with money, decision-making, and matters to do with their relationship (communication during deployment, dealing with others, bringing up children).

Distance can develop between the serviceman and the home front partner in the last few days before departure, e.g. because the serviceman is mentally already on deployment or because they are 'disengaging' from each other in anticipation of the imminent departure.

## **The deployment period**

After the serviceman's departure, the home front partner enters a period in which 'emotional disorganisation' may be experienced. During that period, which can last between two and six weeks, the hustle and bustle disappears and the realisation of the months of absence ahead begins to dawn. All kinds of feelings and behaviour can emerge, such as gloominess, dazedness, sorrow, crying or sleep and eating problems. Two in three partners, and one in two children, will miss the serviceman acutely during that particular period. And one in two partners will have to become accustomed to a new life pattern. Fortunately, the vast majority of partners and children rapidly resume life as normal.

A new phase begins after about six weeks. The intense feelings of sorrow and loss ebb away. New routines are developed as does a feeling of confidence in the partner because she can see that she is managing to keep the family going on her own. To achieve this, the home front partner will often need social support, e.g. someone in whom she can confide or ask for advice, and also practical help, e.g. as regards money or jobs about the house or childcare, and support in the form of information about the deployment. A good social network can provide those forms of support; it can also reduce the stress experienced by the partner during a deployment. Contact between the serviceman and the home front partner, e.g. by email or telephone, can prove to have a positive impact on the wellbeing of both parties. Furthermore, there is evidence to show that the quality of interaction during the deployment (and not so much the frequency) has a positive effect on the reunion after the serviceman returns.

Four in five deployed servicemen think deployment is harder for their partners than for themselves. Partners are less certain about this. Roughly two in five partners think deployment is harder for them than for the serviceman. The majority of home front partners do not find the deployment period particularly positive or negative, even though most partners undoubtedly miss the servicemen. In addition, a majority of home front partners regularly worry about the serviceman and some are annoyed by negative reporting in the media.

Nearly all children miss a father who has been deployed. Roughly one quarter of children find the deployment period a difficult time. The effects vary depending on the age of the children. Children of school age can feel anxious and worry because they are better able to imagine the potential risks of a deployment. In very young children, up to the age of about five years, the effects can be expressed in sleeping problems or bed-wetting, for example. Slightly older children, up to the age of about 10 years, are often irritable, disobedient or stubborn. Adolescents are generally well able to continue life as normal. There is evidence to show that the well-being of the parent remaining at home can have a powerful impact on the well-being of the children and vice versa.

During the last month of deployment, the family activities are often dominated by the return. Just like the first month after departure, this can be period in which the home front partner experiences various conflicting and powerful emotions such as hope, fear, stress, tension and joy.

## **The return and the period after deployment**

The homecoming is a joyous event for nearly all partners. The initial period after a return often seems like a honeymoon. For some servicemen and their home front partners, however, the period immediately after a return is also one of familiarisation and adjustment, e.g. because tasks and responsibilities have to be reassigned and new routines developed. Added to that is the fact that both the serviceman and the partner might have changed. Roughly two in three partners notice, mainly positive, changes in themselves; these can include becoming more independent, braver and more appreciative of things. About ten to twenty per cent of partners also observe the negative effects deployment has had on them; these can include becoming more emotional, more troubled or becoming overly independent. Moreover, roughly one in three partners finds it difficult to become used to the serviceman again and more than half of the partners notice that the serviceman has changed. Roughly one in three to four partners who notice this think it is a positive change, whilst an equally large number notice negative changes. Examples of positive changes included 'has become more open' or more involved with the family, whilst excitability and irritability are among the negative changes.

Six months after a deployment, roughly one in ten to twenty partners reports needing help with problems which (might) be related to the deployment. For half of them, these are relationship problems (relationship, family, relatives, and friends). In addition, one in six to eight partners report, six months after his return, that they are worried about the serviceman because of problems which (might) be related to the deployment. Frequently mentioned problems include irritability, fatigue, remoteness or introspection.

Roughly one in five children finds it hard to have the father at home again and have to readjust to the new situation. Roughly two in five children worry - sometimes for as many as three months after he has returned - that their father will go away again (fear of abandonment). This mainly applies to younger children of up to about five years of age and, to a lesser extent, children aged between five and ten years. About six months after a return, one in fourteen partners reports feeling worried about one or more children because of problems which (might) be related to the deployment. These are mainly problems within the family and at school.

For most servicemen and their home front partners, the situation will take no more than a few weeks or a few months to re-stabilise. Six months after a return from deployment, the majority of partners generally look back positively on the deployment and the period following a return. However, deployment will have an immediate or subsequent negative impact on some servicemen and/or their home front partners, for example if the serviceman or home front partner is troubled by psychosocial problems, or subsequently develops such problems, on account of the deployment, or because the serviceman returns with a physical injury and sometimes has to undergo a lengthy phase to learn how to deal with a disability.

## **Conclusion**

A deployment can be viewed as an important life event for the serviceman and the home front, i.e. an event constituting an extraordinary burden and requiring extraordinary adjustments. Life events can influence the stability of the family and the challenge for the family is to respond to the life event and create a new equilibrium. The same therefore applies to a deployment. Fortunately, most families manage to adjust to the different situations occurring during a deployment cycle and, ultimately, achieve a new equilibrium fairly soon after the deployment. After some time, the overwhelming majority of home front partners will also look back on a deployment with an attitude ranging from neutral to positive. In other words, a deployment does not necessarily mean a risk to the serviceman's family. However, given the specific stressors surrounding a deployment, a serviceman's family is a special family which deserves the attention and care of Ministry of Defence and – including later on – of the Veterans' Institute.

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## **Further information**

A great deal of information on the topic of the home front and deployments is available. Among other things, you will find practical advice on interaction, research findings and links to other websites containing information and literature on the Veterans' Institute website ([www.veteraneninstituut.nl](http://www.veteraneninstituut.nl)). You will also find practical tips and tools for veterans and their home front partners in the book 'After the Mission' by E. Kamp and M. Schok (2012, Delft: Eburon). You may contact the Veterans' Institute by telephone (088 - 334 00 50) or by email ([info@veteraneninstituut.nl](mailto:info@veteraneninstituut.nl)) if you have any questions.

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