

Naval Families F E D E R A T I O N

The effect of non-operational family separations on family functioning and well-being among Royal Navy and Royal Marines families



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Executive Summary

Introduction



Military families can experience a variety of different separations due to the occupational demands of Service personnel. The most prominent of these is the deployment of personnel on operational and combat missions.

Previous international research has demonstrated how separations related to deployment can negatively affect the functioning and health and well-being of military families. However, little is known about how this might compare to shorter, but more frequent separations unrelated to operational deployments – non-operational family separations.

This form of family separation is more common among the UK Naval Service community, many of whom do not live near military bases or move with personnel but instead reside within local civilian communities across the UK. **An estimated 24% of UK Armed Forces families live separately from personnel during the working week, increasing to 36% among Naval Service families** (Ministry of Defence 2016). While this can have benefits for Naval Service families in providing increased stability to support spouse/partner employment and the education of children, it often results in serving Naval personnel living away from the family home during the working week – referred to as “weekending”. Such separations can also occur in addition to operational deployments, increasing the time Naval Service families may be apart.

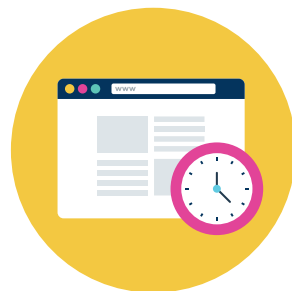
To help understand non-operational family separations and how they influence family functioning and well-being among Royal Navy/Royal Marines (RN/RM) families, a research project was commissioned by the Naval Families Federation, with funding from Greenwich Hospital. This report presents the findings of this study and makes recommendations for future research and potential interventions to support military families experiencing this type of separation.

Methods

This study combines data from pre-existing studies of Naval Service personnel, spouses/partners and children from within the King's Centre for Military Health Research (KCMHR) with new studies including an online survey, interviews and focus groups.

Findings

- The online survey showed most Naval Service spouses/partners perceived non-operational separations to have a negative effect on their employment and on family functioning and health and well-being.
- Spouses in the interview study reported how non-operational separations affected their employment and career progression through difficulties in balancing work and family life without the support of their partner.
- Most spouses reported no major difficulties communicating with personnel.
- The physical absence of Naval Service personnel from the family home during the week was described by spouses as limiting the time families and couples had to spend together and was compounded by short notice changes to working rosters and poor-quality communication.
- Family roles altered across the week to account for the absence of personnel, with older children taking on additional responsibilities to assist the stay-at-home parent and, in some cases, assuming the role of another adult within the household.
- The combination of a lack of time as a family and the rapid changes in family roles, could influence family relationships, with resentment towards personnel from spouses who perceived there to be an unequal distribution of family responsibilities.
- Older children were also described as feeling resentment towards their father because of difficulties adjusting to their changing role within the family. However, young people themselves tended to have more positive perceptions about non-operational family separations than spouses.
- The accumulation of stressors arising from separation could influence family mental health and well-being. Many spouses discussed a sense of 'just' coping with their additional responsibilities, with feelings of stress, anxiety, and tiredness reported.
- Some participants directly attributed their mental health problems to separation, either through the emergence of new problems or by exacerbating pre-existing conditions.
- Access to resources such as civilian employer support, social support, childcare and schools and increased finances were reported to help mitigate some of the challenges caused by non-deployment separation, however, these were not available to all families.
- Perceptions of Naval Service support varied, with some spouses receiving excellent support and others reporting little or no assistance. Some spouses expressed confusion about who they should contact if they required welfare services.
- No differences in perceptions of spouses and young people according to rank and Service branch were evident. Variation in experiences instead related to the amount of experience families had with military life, perceived individual personality traits and the age of the children.



Conclusions

The findings demonstrate how non-operational family separations can influence family functioning and well-being among Naval Service families. While this is the first study to focus on this particular aspect of Service life, many of the benefits and challenges reported are similar to those described by families experiencing deployment-related separations. Spouse employment, family roles and relationships and spouse and child health and well-being could all be affected but access to family resources could alleviate adaptation to separations.

With an increasing trend towards a greater number of military families settling in civilian communities, it is possible that non-operational separations may increase across all three Services. It is therefore important that additional research and resource is focused on understanding the interaction of particular stressors during these separations and how to best alleviate the issues some families may experience.

Recommendations

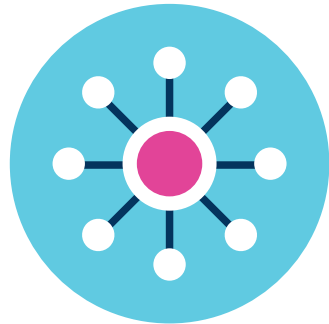
Developed from suggestions from participants and the study findings, the following recommendations include ways in which military charities, Royal Navy Royal Marines Welfare (RNRMW), Naval Command and the Ministry of Defence can support Naval Service families, and those across the Services, who are experiencing non-operational family separations. While designated to particular institutions, their implementation will require input and support from all parties and should be seen as inter-related, rather than stand-alone proposals.

Naval Service families

Participants in the interview and focus groups were asked for their recommendations on how to manage during non-operational family separations.

Their comments included:

- Work at developing communication skills within, and as, a family.
- Have a good network of friends, either military or non-military, for support.
- Develop independence and self-sufficiency.
- Don't overthink it – "roll with it".
- Try to have a positive state of mind and something to look forward to.



Military charities

- Ensure advocacy reflects the full range of experiences of Naval Service families, including relocation, deployment and non-operational separations.
- Provide information on common experiences and reactions to weekending and simple methods for overcoming these to help families know what to expect when starting non-operational separations. These should include information about:

- o the benefits and challenges of separations for family relationships and roles;
- o the possible impacts on health and well-being for all family members;
- o the potential for a period of reintegration at the weekend for all family members;
- o ways to manage financial stresses;
- o low-cost ways for families to spend quality time together;
- o accessing the Naval Service community when not living close to base ports or units.
- Develop and advertise online platforms specific to the experiences of families undergoing non-operational separations to increase informal information sharing and emotional support and counter the lack of physical Naval communities.
- Investigate innovative ways to expand advice to Naval Service families to include information on easy ways to encourage physical exercise and healthy eating as well as mental health and well-being. This could be combined with welfare services to provide alternative means of encouraging social interaction between spouses in the Naval Service community to complement services that are already in place.
- o increasing awareness of the Royal Navy Forum;
- o identifying extra resources for increased advertising and resources (e.g. online videos and chat) for current services;
- o exploring additional permissions under Joint Personnel Administration (JPA) system to allow RNRMW to contact family members directly.
- Improve outreach of RNRMW to increase provision for geographically dispersed families, including greater advertisement of outreach programmes and an easily identifiable and accessible central information point to signpost families to the nearest welfare service. This hub could also help aid information dissemination for families living outside military communities.
- Provide varied timings for community events on bases to encourage spouses with childcare responsibilities to improve access to social support.
- Explore alternative events to coffee mornings and mother-toddler groups to appeal to more spouses/ partners and accommodate dual-serving partners.

Royal Navy Royal Marines Welfare (RNRMW)

- Increase the provision of information about the services RNRMW can provide families and clear contact details that are easily accessible to non-military personnel and do not rely on personnel as a conduit of information. This should include:

Naval Command and the Ministry of Defence

- Seek opportunities, where possible given operational requirements, to increase consistency around programming, duties and watch-bills to increase the ability of families to plan.
- Improve training and awareness of the similarities in stressors between families separated by deployment

and those separated by other military requirements among military leaders and career managers within the Naval Services.

- Improve identification of separated families within military systems to allow welfare services to target support to families during non-operational separations. This could be introduced as a checkbox in personnel records held by the military with consent for contact by Naval Service representatives.
- Raise awareness of the 'dependant's' pass among families living near Naval Service bases.



- Explore ways of improving information-sharing with Naval Service families to increase awareness about current and planned welfare provision, including exploitation of current and planned systems, within the military community such as the Royal Navy Forum or development of new systems for families similar to the Veteran's Gateway.
- Review the Tri-Service operational and non-operational welfare agreement (JSP 770) to ensure geographically dispersed families are able to receive, and are aware of, welfare support from the Service provider closest to the family

home. This should also ensure that departmental policy is delivered appropriately at local level.

- With the trend towards an increase in non-operational separations across all three Services, the Ministry of Defence should consider how dispersed military families could be supported to connect with each other to maintain the benefits of the military community.
- The Ministry of Defence should consider the impact of non-operational family separations as well as relocation in spouse employment initiatives and programmes. A recently announced fund has been established – which will help spouses and civil partners of serving personnel who wish to retrain or become self-employed – which may help some spouses.
- Childcare programmes for both civilian spouses and women serving across the military, should be explored under the Armed Forces Families strategy, to help alleviate work-family conflict among Naval Service families.

Future research

- Given the differences in the outcomes of military personnel, veterans, spouses/partners and children by Service, future studies should examine military family health and well-being according to Service branch, to ensure differences are explored and to examine changes over time. This includes data from current and future studies within KCMHR.
- Further research should be conducted to expand on the findings of this study, particularly the experiences of family functioning

and well-being among personnel and children and young people. This should include the use of robust measures of mental health, well-being and family outcomes, as well as qualitative studies to better understand the impact of this particular form of family life on all family members, including personnel.

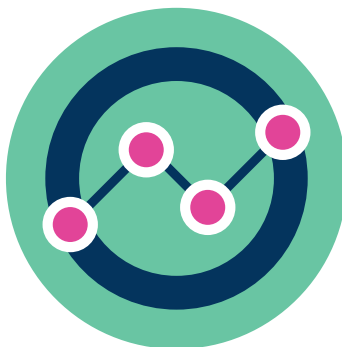
- A framework of common stressors during deployment and non-operational separation, should be further developed to allow for targeted support in key areas for families undergoing such experiences. This should be disseminated to doctors, social workers, local councils, teachers and NHS services to improve understanding of different aspects of military life among service providers and associated professions.
- Interventions to support UK military families undergoing non-operational separations and alleviate stressors and support stronger family functioning, health and well-being should be explored. These could be adapted from existing programmes in the US, such as 'Families Over-Coming Under Stress' (FOCUS) (Beardslee, Lester et al. 2011) or the After Deployment Adaptive Parenting Tools (ADAPT) (Gewirtz, Erbes et al. 2011) or newly developed to be specific to the UK military context. Any intervention must include online delivery of these interventions from inception to account for geographical dispersion among military families.
- Research should be undertaken to determine what welfare support Naval Service families are aware of, their sources of information about services and the type of support they would like to receive.



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