

by-product of the visiting units' experience there, is the improvement of tactical skills in the Army's officer and noncommissioned officer leaders.

The NTC gives a battalion task force commander an unequalled opportunity to exercise the full range of his force in conditions that closely approach those of actual combat. The harsh terrain and climate serve to intensify the stress and fatigue for both men and materiel.

No other training exercise approaches the realism that is routinely achieved at the NTC, and no other training presents the combination of scope, scale, and intensity of effort that is captured there. The NTC's instrumented, one-of-a-kind battlefield provides instant feedback and

increases learning at all levels. Soldiers, leaders, and units train, learn, and improve their fighting skills without actually suffering casualties or losing equipment. They do not just go through the motions of war; they actually live them.

As a result, commanders train as they will fight. Soldiers learn the limits of men's minds and bodies and the durability of their equipment. They also learn not to repeat their mistakes. From each learning experience, a task force grows in competence and confidence. At the end of its 14-day combat cycle, a better task force emerges—not perfect, but harder, tougher, and smarter.

To win the next war, the Army must eliminate during training the mistakes

that inexperienced soldiers and leaders make in combat. War is not the place to learn from mistakes. The learning environment at the NTC is designed to provide such learning experiences and to help the Army win tomorrow's key battles. Most important, the NTC is a place where a soldier or leader can make a mistake, learn from it, and still survive.

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# Family Support Program

LIEUTENANT COLONEL MARSHALL L. HELENA

Many of the Army's units have to be prepared to go to war within 18 hours, and others have to be ready to deploy on short notice to support disaster relief operations. When that happens, many of the soldiers in these units leave behind family members who have difficulty fending for themselves.

Some of the junior soldiers' wives, in particular, may never have experienced Army life or had to manage on their own. To some of them, the mysteries of repairing the car, balancing the checkbook, paying the rent, or going to the hospital may seem monumental. And if a soldier's wife writes to him and burdens him with the problems back home, his morale drops and his stress and frustration increase. Then his concentration is split between his family situation and the combat or training mission, and the results can be fatal, both in combat and in training. Back home, too, the consequences are sometimes tragic.

A good battalion family support program designed to resolve family fears, concerns, and crises can help prevent these problems. Such a program contains several elements:

**Telephone Tree.** Each company commander must establish and maintain an up-to-date wives' telephone tree (sometimes called a "chain of concern") with the wives' names, addresses, and telephone numbers. When the troops deploy, this gives the battalion an internal method of notifying all the families of the reason for the deployment, where the unit is going (if possible), its anticipated return date, and the schedule of information briefings. The notification sequence also works in reverse, enabling wives to communicate their problems to whatever level may be necessary to get help in solving them.

The rear detachment commander must have copies of each telephone tree. Maintaining such a roster is not easy, with

families constantly arriving and departing, but it is the keystone of the program.

The notification process should be rehearsed, especially before the unit assumes an alert status, much the same way battalion and company alert rosters are rehearsed. In fact, these rehearsals should be required by the task force standing operating procedures (SOPs). From these rehearsals, the wives will gain more confidence in the system, and the telephone numbers can be corrected at the same time.

**Routine Activities.** If activities for wives and children are routinely organized and conducted, a greater sense of kinship can be developed, and a soldier's family members will feel that they are part of his work.

Meetings to put out important information can often be combined with holiday parties, picnics, all ranks balls, and unit sports days. Some units treat the wives

to tours of training facilities, trips to the field to observe their husbands' training, or a night in the field with sleeping bags and MREs. One airborne battalion conducted a "Jane Wayne Day," which included weapon demonstrations, airplane walk-throughs, equipment displays, and a picnic. The wives even jumped from the 34-foot tower. (Safety and risk management, obviously, had to be a primary consideration.) Each wife received a picture as she left and a certificate signed by the battalion commander.

Whatever the activity, the purpose is to generate trust among the wives, to increase their familiarity with the chain of command, and to make it easier for them to share problems and get help when they need it.

**FSP Newsletter.** Uninformed wives, just like uninformed soldiers, get to feeling they aren't important. A monthly newsletter with information from each company—promotions, awards, schools, graduations, departures, arrivals, weddings, births, announcements of upcoming activities—will help. (There are procedures for having the government pay for such mailings.)

Getting people to contribute material for the newsletter can be a problem, at least initially, and will require command emphasis. To ensure that the editor receives good material, the battalion and company commanders must get personally involved. If one of the wives volunteers as editor, she will have enough problems without having to "crack the whip" if input is late or of poor quality. Finally, a column or comments written by the battalion commander and his wife can be useful.

Most people like to see their names in print, and the newsletter gives them that opportunity. It helps the wives build personal pride in themselves, as well as pride in their husbands and the battalion.

**MARS Communications.** A unit that is deploying to a location outside the continental United States, or to a distant point within it, can set up a Military Affiliated Radio Station (MARS) patch between the unit and home station. This enables husbands and wives to talk to each other at regularly scheduled times.

**Family Visitation Program.** A visi-

tation program that requires the company commander or platoon leader, along with the chaplain, to visit each new family in its quarters within one week after they move in gets everyone off on the right foot from the beginning. It clearly shows that the Army and the unit's leaders care.

The visitors should carry with them the latest unit wives alert roster, the latest family support newsletter, and a welcome letter from the battalion commander. The family will learn about alert procedures, where to get help and the like. At the same time, the leaders can learn of any special needs the family may have—a handicapped child, for example, or a wife who doesn't speak English.

**Family Support Program Briefing.** Before assuming mission cycle, division ready force, or his unit's equivalent, the battalion commander should conduct a battalion-level family support program briefing. To promote attendance, the battalion might release a married soldier for the day if his wife attends; if she cannot, the soldier should attend. That way, almost every family will get the word. Nursery service should be provided, along with refreshments.

The briefing should include an introduction by the battalion commander followed by staff briefings—the six-month training calendar by the S-3 (and the dates when the soldiers will be home), world "hot-spots" by the S-2, family medical care by the physician's assistant, legal topics by a staff judge advocate representative, and Army Community Service (ACS) topics including interpreter assistance for foreign-born wives, chaplain's activities, guidance for dealing with the news media, and alert notification procedures.

Following the battalion-level briefing, those attending should break into company groups so the company commanders can conduct their own briefings. Hand-out material should include alert rosters, family support newsletters, ACS information, and the six-month training calendars.

These briefings should be conducted twice—first in the early afternoon while children are in school, and again in the early evening for wives who work outside the home during the day.

The program should also consider the soldiers' fiancées and girl friends. Many soldiers have arrangements for these friends to pay their bills, collect their mail, or keep their cars in the event of deployment. In these cases, powers of attorney may be in order, and these women may also need to be on the telephone rosters.

Just as in combat, redundancy in communication is crucial to the success of a family support program. For example, in advertising the battalion-level briefings before a mission cycle, the unit should certainly hand out flyers for the husbands to take home. But it should also put the information in the family support newsletter, advertise it at troop pay-day formations, and put it out through the telephone tree. With all of these channels working, the information will get to the wives.

In disseminating the telephone trees themselves, the unit should send them home by the husbands and also hand them out at the battalion-level briefing and at unit family parties. The same applies to newsletters.

Finally, but most important, command emphasis is needed all the way down to platoon and squad level. At the top, the battalion commander has to be active and aggressive in selling this program to the families, and must convince them of his personal sincerity and commitment. In his remarks at hail-and-farewell gatherings, promotion and awards ceremonies, reviews, changes of command, family support briefings, or parties, he must send a consistent message that the families are as much a part of the battalion as the soldiers.

A sound, effective family support program is a 24-hour-a-day operation. With strong leader emphasis at all levels and trust by the spouses, it can also be a combat multiplier. For both reasons, the program is worth doing right.

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