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Marriages -- Another Casualty of War?



Military Divorce: Following Deployments, Military Sees an Increase in Divorces

By STEPHANIE BAKER

The casualties of war are often measured in deaths and injuries. but soldiers often suffer another great loss following war - divorce.

Army officials report that in fiscal year 2001, just two years prior to

the war in Iraq, there were roughly 5,600 Army divorces. That number made a sharp increase to 10,477 by the end of 2004. The percentage of officers getting divorced is significantly higher than for their enlisted counterparts.

"Officers, who are college educated and one can assume the majority of their spouses are, have greater social mobility than the average enlisted soldier. Those who can, will -- so to speak," says Gary Clarke, former Reservist in Army Special Operations, Civil Affairs.

While the full effects of deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan will not be known for sometime, many believe that this data reflects a trend that affects all U.S. military branches and through many other wars. According to a recent study at Brigham Young University, the first marriage of combat veteran is 62 percent more likely to end in divorce or separation. BYU and other researcher have suggested that factors like a dangerous work environment and traumatic experiences may be as much of a factor in the splits as the extended time spouses spend away from each other.

Army officials point out that police officers also face a similarly high divorce rate. "We found that combat experience is an important risk factor for divorce or separation," said Sven Wilson, an assistant professor of political science, whose study is reported in the new issue of the academic journal "Armed Forces & Society." "Traumatic experiences like combat seem to have a persistent impact on the ability of people to form and maintain successful relationships.'

The latest Department of Defense statistics on divorce in the military tell another story. The figures note that despite the war, the total divorce rate for all services in 2008 remained at 3.3 percent, the same as 2007. In comparison, the divorce rate among the U.S. civilian population was 3.6 percent, according to the U.S. Center for Disease Control.

The only area of military divorce that is twice as high as the civilian rate is among female, enlisted soldiers who divorced at a rate of 8.7 percent in 2006. At the same time, female officers in the Army had a divorce rate of 4.7 percent, according to a study produced by the RAND Corp.

Dr. Wilson explains the numbers difference this way: "Our 62 percent figure refers to a hazard rate of divorce over a life-cycle, not the divorce rate which is just the percentage of married individuals at a point in time that get divorced," he explained. "Most of the divorces in the sample of veterans we used occurred after military service ended.

"This war, like Vietnam has soldiers home within days or hours of combat. Unlike some of the other armed conflicts like World War II, where it may have taken weeks to arrive home. The time spent in transit allowed the soldiers to de-pressurize or decompress prior to being home with family. When soldiers arrive home too soon, they may mentally still

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be on another time zone or struggling with issues related to combat," adds Jeffrey D. Murrah, licensed marriage and family therapist.

Wilson and other researchers compared the divorce and separation rates of military personnel who had faced combat duty with those who had not in hopes of shedding some light on the specific causes of the increase in divorces following deployments and to call for additional research and increased knowledge for government officials.

"The impact of war and military service on families of veterans is relatively understudied. A portion of these costs fall not just upon the men and women who serve, but upon those who stay home," Wilson said. "Do members of the military and their spouses need special counseling? Does the military need to more closely monitor what's going on in families? What kinds of support do veterans and their spouses need after their service ends? These are some issues that need to be added to the equation. We just don't know that much about them."

Wilson and his team used a statistical method called duration analysis to control for other social variables in studying the information collected on more than 13,000 individuals conducted in the early 1990s from the National Survey of Families and Households to find the relationship between military service and a man's first marriage.

"After controlling for things like combat, age and religion, the effect of serving in Korea was more than twice as high as it was in World War II. There was a real sea change between World War II and Korea," Wilson said.

Of the three wars studied, researchers found that those who served in Korea were most likely to see an end to their first marriage as a result of the service. Combat veterans in Korea saw a 45 percent increase in their likelihood to divorce over the subsequent 10 vears than non-veterans in their era. Where veterans of Vietnam saw only a 28 percent jump over those men who stayed at home during that war. World War II came in a very distant third.

"There is a notion that Korea was much like World War II, but that Vietnam really messed people up," Wilson said. "We find quite the opposite. It's true that Vietnam vets were getting divorced at high rates, but so was everyone else at the time. We suspect that people often ignore general social trends when thinking about the effects of the Vietnam War."

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