

The Needs of Military Families: How are States and the Pentagon Responding, especially for Guard and Reservists?

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Witness:

Mrs. Holly Petraeus

Wife of Lt. Gen. David Petraeus

Testimony

Good afternoon, I'm Holly Petraeus, wife of Lieutenant General David H. Petraeus, the Chief of the Office of Security Transition in Iraq, and I'm here today to speak to you as an Army wife of over 30 years.

A little over a year ago, Senator Alexander came to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and asked a group of military spouses and Department of the Army (DA) civilian experts how the 101st Airborne Division's deployment had affected the community's military families. I was one of the family members who spoke that day, and I'm honored to be asked to come back and give my impressions on where we stand a year later.

First of all, I'd like to say that I think that Fort Campbell handled the deployment, which lasted a year and ended in February 2004, very well. We had great communication and teamwork between our family members, our active duty military rear detachment and garrison personnel, our DA Civilians, and our local communities. Everyone showed a willingness to work together, to communicate with each other, and to be flexible as the need arose. A sign of that success was the relatively light usage of our Family Assistance Center, as compared with the one activated during Operation Desert Storm. In fact, many of the questions to our Family Assistance Center came from the families of Reserve or Guard soldiers who had deployed through Fort Campbell, and who did not have the same level of support as our active duty 101st families.

I'd like to spotlight a few of the improvements that have come about since the hearing last May. One issue that we raised was our desire to see some key Family Readiness Group (FRG) leader positions be salaried. On that issue we owe a debt of gratitude to General (now retired) Larry Ellis, the former Forces Command commander, who made it a priority. In the end DA decided to fund the hiring of FRG site managers and assistants who would support FRG leaders on a number of Army posts which have a high operational tempo. Fort Campbell received funding for a site manager and 7 assistants, and they have all recently undergone training in Atlanta. I think the centralized training is a great idea, so different posts will all be operating on the same sheet of music, and, hopefully, sharing good ideas through the paid FRG personnel who have trained together.

Another issue that was raised was our concern for wounded soldiers and their families. At the time we were having difficulties with the unpredictable and uneven notification system, especially when the wounded were being cared for by another service's medical system. Since the 101st has been back for 5 months, I don't have firsthand knowledge of how the notification system is working at this time, or if it has improved. But I am happy to see that the Army has announced a new initiative called the Disabled Soldier Support System, or DS3. This system is designed to provide the most severely disabled soldiers and their families with a system of advocacy and follow-up as they transition to civilian life. I'd like to note, by the way, that the care provided by Walter Reed Army Medical Center for the 101st's soldiers, particularly the amputees, was wonderful. Not only did they provide state-of-the-art prosthetic devices, but they retained the soldiers in their care for many months, rather than ship them out to face long-term rehabilitation elsewhere in a facility that might not be so well-equipped.

On the topic of casualties, Fort Campbell has established both a Wounded Eagle Support Group and a Grief Support Group for surviving spouses. I had the opportunity to meet with the members of the Grief Support Group before I left Fort Campbell, and they provided me with their insights on how the Army casualty system has worked for them. They said the overall process from notification to burial was handled very well, but their number one problem was dealing with the reams of legal paperwork that came afterwards. The Army provides a military Casualty Assistance Officer (CAO) in each instance, but the CAOs are active duty officers who are tasked with the assignment after minimal training, and they often do not possess sufficient knowledge to help survivors deal with paperwork and learn their entitlements. Since casualties can be very high one month, and very low or nonexistent the next, it's obviously not practical to have a large group of military officers given a permanent CAO assignment and longer training. But the families suggested that each Casualty Assistance Office have a few permanent civilian employees whose job it is to know the system and its entitlements and requirements. They could then be a resource for the CAOs who often don't know where to look to find the information the families need.

One issue that came to my attention after the hearing last year was the fact that some of our soldiers who were eligible for federal and state income-based aid were seeing that aid reduced when they deployed because of their extra combat pay and their absence from the household. To the families this was perceived as receiving combat pay from the government's one hand, and having it taken away by the other. Income-based assistance is complicated, as it involves a number of state and federal agencies, but I'd like to thank the Tennessee state and federal lawmakers who worked hard on the issue during the past year. Their efforts and those of their fellow legislators have borne fruit in the Child Nutrition Act of 2004 (PL 108-265), the Agricultural Appropriations Bill for FY 2005 (which included a provision to not count combat pay when determining eligibility for food stamps), and SEN Alexander's amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2005, which precluded combat pay, the supplemental subsistence allowance, and the family separation allowance from being counted as income when determining eligibility for a number of federally administered social services. All of these initiatives

are great news for our most financially challenged military families.

I mentioned earlier that National Guard and Reserve families often came to our Family Assistance Center for help. I'm very happy to see that members of these committees have worked with the Department of Defense and the National Governors' Association to create a series of summits between state officials and DoD subject matter experts, in an effort to educate the states about what they can and should be doing for their military personnel. I happened to speak with a National Guard wife from Maryland this week. Her husband has just begun his third active-duty deployment since February 2002. She told me of her difficulties in getting her bank to reduce their mortgage interest rate under the Soldiers' and Sailors' Civil Relief Act. Each time he has gone on active duty she has had to fight the same battle with the bank all over again. And she is an attorney, so she can advocate pretty effectively for herself! I hope the better communication afforded by these state summits will eliminate some of the headaches for Guard and Reserve families, who often do not have the same support system available to active-duty families.

In the past year I have seen members of Congress advocate very forcefully for our military families, both in legislation and in their questions to DoD officials about the strains of repeated deployments on the soldiers and their families. We are grateful for what you have accomplished on our behalf thus far, and as a military spouse I thank you for your continued interest in supporting our nation's warriors and their families as they serve our Nation during these challenging times.