



Family Crises And the Needs of the Service

When the Needs of the Navy Conflict With the Needs of the Individual

By Curtis Jerry Smothers, LCDR, USN (Ret.)

When Deployment Threatens a Family

Impending military deployments place considerable strain on service members and their families. The prospect of six months or longer away from home can aggravate marital difficulties, create financial hardships, and leave spouses struggling with responsibilities they may be unprepared to assume alone. For some families, an approaching deployment can turn an already difficult situation into a genuine crisis.

Unfortunately, military obligations do not disappear when personal emergencies arise. Ships must sail, aircraft must fly, and military units must maintain the personnel necessary to accomplish their missions. Although the Armed Forces provide procedures for requesting humanitarian reassignment or hardship discharge, the standards are necessarily strict. A problem that seems overwhelming to a service member may not meet the military's definition of an emergency. This creates one of the most difficult conflicts in military personnel management: **How does an organization balance its operational responsibilities against the urgent needs of an individual family?**

During my Navy career, I encountered that dilemma repeatedly as a personnel officer aboard USS *Forrestal* (CV-59), an aircraft carrier homeported in Norfolk, Virginia.

The Demands of Military Readiness

An aircraft carrier operates much like a small, constantly moving city. *Forrestal's* complement, including its embarked air wing, numbered approximately 5,000 officers and men. Its demanding

operational schedule included shipyard maintenance, training exercises, short cruises, and lengthy Mediterranean deployments.

Maintaining readiness required thousands of sailors with specialized skills. Personnel losses through transfers, discharges, and expiring enlistments had to be anticipated, and shortages in critical specialties could seriously affect a ship's ability to perform its mission. As a personnel officer, I helped the commanding officer manage those requirements while also assisting enlisted sailors with problems affecting their welfare and morale.

These responsibilities sometimes conflicted. An emergency transfer could remove a sailor from the ship within days, while obtaining a qualified replacement might take two months or longer. Meanwhile, the remaining crew members had to absorb the additional workload. The manpower requirements were understandable, but so were the needs of sailors whose families were in trouble.

When Family Problems Become Official Paperwork

Military personnel experiencing exceptional family difficulties may request humanitarian reassignment or, under appropriate circumstances, hardship discharge. Such requests generally require documentation demonstrating that the circumstances are sufficiently serious to justify relief from normal military obligations.

During preparations for a Mediterranean deployment, we typically received 15 to 20 humanitarian applications. Each required interviews, supporting documentation, and several hours of administrative work. Chaplains, physicians, counselors, and other professionals sometimes provided statements describing the applicant's circumstances.

These requests arrived during the busiest period of the ship's operational cycle. Supplies were being loaded, new personnel were reporting aboard, aircraft and aircrews were embarking, and every department was preparing for months at sea. Yet behind each application was a sailor facing a problem that could not simply be postponed until the ship returned.

Some were struggling with failing marriages. Others faced financial hardship, serious illness in the family, or domestic responsibilities that had become difficult to manage. To those sailors, their problems were not routine administrative matters. They were threats to their families' well-being. Unfortunately, the Navy's eligibility standards were considerably narrower than the applicants' understandable definitions of hardship.

The Difference Between Hardship and Humanitarian Necessity

The military cannot excuse every service member whose family experiences difficulty during deployment. If it did, operational readiness would quickly become impossible to maintain. Consequently, humanitarian requests must demonstrate circumstances sufficiently exceptional to warrant reassignment or discharge. Ordinary family separation, marital disagreements, and many domestic difficulties, however distressing, do not automatically qualify.

My responsibility was to help applicants understand these requirements, evaluate their circumstances, and prepare the necessary documentation. Many had already sought assistance from chaplains, medical personnel, or family counseling services. Their problems were real, and I seldom doubted their distress. Nevertheless, I frequently had to explain that their circumstances did not meet the standards for humanitarian relief.

I encouraged them to use available support services and stabilize their family situations before deployment, knowing that such advice was easier to give than to follow. A sailor facing the possible collapse of his marriage was unlikely to find much comfort in being told to resolve his difficulties before the ship sailed. Those were among the least satisfying conversations of my Navy career.

When the Bureaucracy Stepped Aside

Fortunately, military regulations also provide opportunities for compassion when circumstances clearly justify it. One case remains especially vivid in my memory.

Two days before a scheduled deployment, a crewman's wife died suddenly, leaving three children without anyone in the immediate area to care for them. The sailor was devastated, and there was no practical way he could fulfill his shipboard duties while his children were left without a parent. In this instance, the Navy responded with remarkable speed.

With a single telephone call, I arranged for the sailor's temporary transfer ashore for six months, allowing him to care for his children and reorganize his family life. I learned later that he received a humanitarian discharge. There was no prolonged administrative struggle, no attempt to minimize the family's circumstances, and no suggestion that operational requirements should take precedence over an unmistakable human emergency.

It was one of the most gratifying experiences of my assignment aboard *Forrestal*. The incident demonstrated that even a large military bureaucracy can respond with humanity when its regulations are applied with sound judgment and compassion.

The Emotional Burden of Helping Others

Personnel officers, chaplains, counselors, and others who assist military families face another challenge that is less frequently discussed: the emotional strain of dealing with problems they cannot always resolve.

Years after my Navy service, I read Dale G. Larson's *The Helper's Journey*, which examines empathy, sympathy, personal distress, and the importance of maintaining what he calls "detached concern." His observations helped me understand the emotional demands I had experienced while assisting sailors with serious family difficulties.

Rather than maintaining a healthy professional balance, I sometimes became too personally involved in individual cases. I found myself rooting for certain applicants while becoming frustrated with others whose circumstances seemed less compelling but whose requests required

equal attention. I also discovered how discouraging it could be to listen to someone describe a desperate situation while knowing that the available regulations offered little relief.

At times, I even avoided sailors who needed assistance because I dreaded becoming involved in another problem I might be powerless to resolve. Looking back, I believe additional training in counseling techniques and emotional boundaries would have made me a more effective helper. Compassion is essential, but so is the ability to remain objective when difficult decisions must be made. That lesson applies to anyone whose professional responsibilities involve helping people through personal crises.

When the Needs of the Service and the Family Conflict

Military organizations depend upon discipline, established procedures, and the willingness of individuals to place service obligations ahead of personal preferences. Those principles are essential to operational effectiveness. But military personnel are not merely names on assignment rosters. They are husbands, wives, parents, sons, and daughters whose families depend upon them.

A family crisis that appears manageable under an administrative regulation may be overwhelming to the person experiencing it. Conversely, a personnel shortage that seems unimportant to an individual sailor may create serious difficulties for an entire military unit. Neither reality can simply be dismissed.

The challenge is to distinguish between hardships that military families must ordinarily endure and exceptional circumstances requiring special consideration. That judgment demands more than an understanding of regulations. It requires empathy, fairness, and an appreciation of the consequences for everyone involved.

Military Readiness Begins With Military Families

Military family crises cannot always be resolved through regulations or good intentions. Sometimes the needs of the service and those of the individual are genuinely incompatible. Nevertheless, the sailor whose wife died demonstrated that military organizations can act decisively and compassionately when circumstances demand it. His experience also illustrates why humanitarian procedures are an essential part of military personnel management rather than an obstacle to readiness.

Throughout my Navy career, the gratitude of sailors I was able to help provided some of my most satisfying professional experiences. The cases I could not resolve taught me equally important lessons about the limitations of regulations and the responsibilities of those who administer them.

The strength of America's Armed Forces depends upon more than ships, aircraft, weapons, and trained personnel. It also depends upon the stability and resilience of the families who support those serving in uniform. **Behind every entry on a military personnel roster is a human being**

whose family matters every bit as much to that individual as the military mission matters to the command.

Recognizing both obligations—and treating each with the seriousness it deserves—is one of the most important responsibilities of military leadership.

Clarify my personnel officer roleReduce repetition about readiness