

CYCLES



— Capt Adrian D. van Breda,
Social Work Officer

THE QUESTION of deployments is one which has been on the minds of many in Simon's Town for the past year or two. With longer and more frequent deployments, family support networks have become more and more important. These groups are still informal, yet serve an ever increasing role in helping families cope with separations. More recently social workers have joined ships in the last week of longer deployments to prepare the men for reintegration into the family.

In order to guide these support functions, social workers at the Institute of Maritime Medicine conducted a detailed survey of married sea-going men and their wives. The purpose of the study was primarily to understand how men and women experience deployments, and secondarily to compare their experience with that of foreign defence personnel. Essentially, 3 questions were asked: What changes do the men and women experience in their emotions and marital relationships? What changes occur in their roles? Do other factors, such as age, sense of support or employment status affect the responses to the first 2 questions?

Emotional Cycles of Deployment

The results of this aspect correspond with those found by Logan, in her article "The Emotional Cycle of Deployment" (1987), an article which is used by many naval wives. The people who took part in the study were asked to state what emotions or relationship changes they experience in each stage of the deployment.

The pre-deployment phase seems characterised by conflict, anxiety and sadness. In addition, many seem to withdraw from each other just prior to the actual separation. Apprehension about the deployment, as well as optimism or bravery, were evident here. The conflict and withdrawal seem to be used by couples to prepare for the inevitable separation. One person wrote: "Sometimes I pick fights to make the parting easier."

The deployment itself is characterised by loneliness and longing for each other. Men express marked concern about the family's coping during their absence. People tend to throw themselves into their work in order

to avoid the lonely feelings. As the deployment progresses, people seem to adjust to the separation and life takes on a new routine. However, feelings of frustration and boredom begin to emerge. As home-coming draws near, men and women become excited and nervous. One man wrote: "I hope there's enough love when I get home."



Captain Adrian van Breda has been a social worker at the Institute for Maritime Medicine for 3 years. He trained at UCT and is currently studying for a Master's Degree in Clinical Social Work. He is married and has a particular interest in support groups for naval families.

Happiness and contentment are the hallmarks of the post-deployment phase, with a growing sense of having adjusted back to "normal family life". The anxiety and conflict which frequently follow the return home give way to a sense of calm after a week or so. Sometimes there is an apprehension about the next deployment, and so the cycle repeats itself.

Differences Between Groups

It was interesting that certain groups did not differ greatly in their experience of deployments. Men and women, for example, present very similar pictures. Men tend only to be slightly more defended against anxiety than women. Women's employment status does not influence their experience. Age was not found to be especially significant, except that as women get older they tend to become increasingly self-reliant and independent.

Comparisons of different ranks was a key area of difference. The lower rank groups, particularly Petty Officers, seem to experience the greatest distress as a result of deployments. They also have the greatest

financial concern and experience the most difficulty in adjusting to the changing roles of the husband.

The type of separations experienced was a very important issue. People who work on vessels that have erratic, brief, but frequent deployments tend to experience greater difficulties than those who work on vessels that have longer but more predictable deployments. The second group tend to have more time to adjust better to the separations and home-comings, although they experience more loneliness as a result. The first group seem to find it very hard to constantly adjust to the rapid comings and goings. For them, the changing of roles between husband and wife is a source of tremendous frustration. One woman wrote: "If he goes for a long period, I adjust quickly and cope as well as I can, but for the short trips I feel frustrated because I just start adjusting and then he returns".

People who find the changes in roles difficult tend to find the whole deployment experience difficult, they tend to feel unsupported by the other members of the unit, and they experience much more anxiety and marital conflict. One man wrote that the role changes are "confusing and always lead to arguments. If something is not done or is incorrectly handled, the blame is also shifted to and fro".

The presence of support, while not leading directly to better coping, seems to be associated with greater ease in handling the changing roles, less stressful responses to the deployments and greater sense of satisfaction with life.

Conclusion

This study compares very favourably with international research. It is also the first study to compare men and women. The findings indicate that men require as much support as women, that the lower ranks, particularly POs, need extra attention, that vessels with irregular sailing schedules need to care especially well for their personnel and that more attention needs to be given to those people who experience difficulty in adjusting to role changes in the marriage.

Those interested in more detailed information are welcome to contact the author or one of the other social workers at the Institute for Maritime Medicine.

DEPL YMENT