

# Improving deployment resilience

## Guidelines for managers.

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**A** SIGNIFICANT PROPORTION of the SANDF is required to deploy away from home on a routine basis. Deployment is an intrinsic dimension of the Combat Ready User System. The ability to deploy effectively and at short notice contributes substantially to the combat advantage of the SANDF. It is thus of critical importance for the organization as a whole to ensure that military members are competent to deploy.

Extensive research by social work officers in the SA Military Health Service has demonstrated the detrimental effects that deployments have on many military members and their families. This research corroborates fifty years of international research in Europe and North America.

Some of the research has highlighted factors that are associated with a greater capacity to tolerate deployment stress. I have termed this capacity (and its constituent factors) "deployment resilience". In the SANDF, eight primary resilience factors have been identified, of which seven are located inside families (these were described in the December 1998 edition of SALUT).

The eighth factor deals with matters pertaining to the management of deployments. Research suggests that attending to these issues will reduce the stress which results from deployments, which, in turn, will improve the combat or mission readiness of the organization.

Deployment is inherently stressful. Social work interventions which target the family system address only one half of the client system. The other half is the organization itself. It is unacceptable to expect families to accommodate the needs of the organization if the organization does not reciprocally accommodate the needs of families.

Many people apply for jobs that require deployment simply due to a lack of alter-

natives. Some of these people later discover that they are unable to tolerate routine deployments. Some of these leave the organization. Others develop psychosocial problems which impair their combat readiness and may result in their transfer out of the unit.

The loss of personnel who have been trained for combat is a cost the organisation cannot afford. We need to ensure that we employ people who can tolerate deployments and that we maintain and promote their deployment resilience.

This short article summarizes some of the key findings regarding the SANDF's contribution to deployment resilience.

### Recruitment

Our recruitment procedure is a first line of intervention for the management of the SANDF. Those who clearly lack the capacity for deployment resilience can be excluded by exposing potential recruits to a briefing which aggressively highlights the psychosocial dangers of a career involving deployments. By excluding the obviously unsuitable, we could increase the average level of deployment resilience in a group of new recruits.

### Contract system

The current contract system of employment offers the possibility of excluding members who, despite assistance, have demonstrated a marked lack of deployment resilience. The decision to renew or not renew a contract is multifaceted and should include an evaluation of a member's capacity to tolerate deployment stress.

### Proactive personnel development

Deployment stress tends to be particularly great for members who are married or in a serious relationship. Members who are engaged to be married could be encouraged to attend a premarital seminar on deployment resilience. This would assist in devel-

oping families who are resilient to deployment stress early in the member's career, before the stress reaches a critical threshold.

### Rotation of personnel

Many military members who deploy do so continuously for many years - often more than ten years. This frequently results in chronic disengagement in the family and even family breakdown. In order to maintain a flexible and resilient family, periodically military personnel need to spend time at home. This could entail not deploying members for one year in every three to five years. This time at home would be used to strengthen family ties, to build parent-child relationships, to enhance worker satisfaction (thereby promoting retention) and to enhance the productivity of personnel. Although this would require a larger workforce, we believe that it would also significantly enhance the mission readiness of the organization.

### Predictable deployments

Studies in the SA Navy indicate that the predictability of deployments has a significant impact on the deployment resilience of sailors. A large component of deployment resilience hinges on the ability of families to emotionally and physically prepare for separations. When deployments are frequently arranged or cancelled at short notice, this ability is severely impaired. As a rule of thumb, families should receive at least one week's notice to prepare for a deployment. In addition, families should receive as much information as possible about an upcoming deployment.

### Support systems

Local and international studies clearly demonstrate that military support buffers members and their families from deployment stress. Support is a key ingredient in deployment resilience. Formal support networks should be established for all personnel who deploy. Managers, in conjunction with social workers, need to facilitate the establishment of such networks. Managers should also promote healthy interpersonal relationships between workers.

## Spacing of deployments

It is often believed that longer deployments are more stressful than shorter deployments. The reverse is, however, true. It is the transition of the military member into and out of the family that creates the most stress, not the separation itself. It is, of course, not necessarily practical to make deployments longer and less frequent. Managers, however, need to pay particularly close attention to providing support to members who deploy for frequent brief periods.

## Contact during deployments

Sometimes deployed members are not able or permitted to contact their families during deployments. This will not damage the family if it occurs occasionally and for good reason (eg security), but, when it is typical, it results in loss of family cohesion. Some people prefer not to contact their families during deployments since telephone calls are felt to be impersonal. However, managers actively need to promote such

contact in order to maintain family relationships. Deploying units should create and facilitate channels of communication between military members and their families.

## Caring military management

The words "caring" and "military" possibly do not belong together, yet much research indicates that they are not mutually exclusive. The morale and commitment of military families and employees are enhanced when they feel that management is interested in their personal needs. Caring also improves the retention rate of personnel. Caring management can be manifested in time off for important family needs, such as taking one's partner to the doctor or attending one's child's birthday party.

## Social work programmes

The Directorate Social Work has developed a one day workshop for couples who experience regular deployments. This workshop, called the Deployment Resilience Seminar, develops the seven deploy-

ment resilience factors mentioned in the previous article. Initial evaluations indicate that people who implement the seminar's recommendations experience significant positive improvements in their social, family and job functioning. We believe that this has a positive impact on mission readiness. Managers should request their unit social workers to run the seminar with all deploying members who are in a serious relationship.

## Conclusion

Fifty years of research into the nature of deployment resilience has repeatedly demonstrated the important relationship between management approaches and the resilience, retention, performance and morale of military personnel and their families. In addition to preparing military members to perform their tasks during a deployment, it is also important for management to assist these members in reducing the stress inherent in deployments. It is our conviction that, in so doing, we can improve the combat/mission readiness of our forces and the combat advantage of the SANDF. ☆



# Coming home

**O**N SATURDAY, 28 NOVEMBER, GEN SIPHIWE NYANDA, CHIEF of the SANDF returned to his former Primary School, Thulasizwe in Soweto, to join in the school's Golden Jubilee Celebration.

Although the events of the day were geared for entertainment, the strong underlying message was of the school's commitment to excellence.

During the celebration, Gen Nyanda handed a cheque for R5 000 to the school principal, Mrs Martha Donga, who assured the General that the money would be wisely spent. "It will never be wasted, every cent will be used to improve the school," she said.

Gen Nyanda, who attended Thulasizwe Primary School from 1960 to 1964, said that it was a good school. His sister, himself and eventually his entire family, attended the school. "We have done well in life because of the foundation laid at Thulasizwe," the General said.

Addressing the scholars, Gen Nyanda emphasized the importance of education. "Without it few people make it in life," and added that times have changed and that the challenges facing teachers today are greater than in the past. "Students can no longer be forced to learn. These days their success depends on understanding, persuasive teachers and parents who encourage children to do well."

In conclusion, Gen Nyanda said that he was happy to see that the same commitment to achieving results and high standards had remained, and that the school's proud history of learning would continue. ☆



**PHOTO CAPTION:** L Cpl Wessel Molale receives the Air Force Cross from Chief of the SA Air Force, Lt Gen W.H. Hechter, during a Flag Hoisting Ceremony and Medal Parade held at Swartkop AFB on 6 November. During this parade forty Air Force members received their medals as a tangible acknowledgement of their excellent service and devotion to duty. The Ad Astra, Air Force Cross and Southern Cross medals were *inter alia* presented at the parade. It was also the last official medal parade to be held at Swartkop AFB, as all indications are that it will cease to function as an operational base by March 1999. (Photo: Sgt Pieter Drodskie) ☆