

By John T. Correll, Editor in Chief

The Quality of Life

NOT since the creation of the All-Volunteer Force in the 1970s have the services and the Department of Defense given such concentrated attention to the quality of military life. Major studies done in the past year confirm that the armed forces have fallen behind in providing for service members and their families. The warning signs are abundant. Recruiting, retention, and readiness troubles lie ahead unless conditions improve.

The defense drawdown, which reduced active-duty military strength by almost thirty percent, has been hard on the troops. A lot of good people who wanted to stay in the service were pushed out. Those who did stay were subject to the turbulence of unit realignments, deactivations, and base closures. The smaller force pulled back from overseas bases, but it was soon deploying abroad to one distant contingency after another. Military compensation already lags pay in the private sector by 12.6 percent, and the gap is getting wider. Access to medical care, which military people regard as their single most important noncash benefit, is diminishing.

More than a year ago, Secretary of Defense William J. Perry appointed a task force to examine the military quality of life. The findings of that study were announced in October, shortly after USAF released the results of its own Quality-of-Life Survey, which drew 356,409 responses. These reports give a detailed analysis of problems in housing, operations tempo, and base-level services. They also demonstrate that personnel support programs have not kept up with changing force demographics.

More military people are married today than ever before in the history of the armed forces. There has been a steady increase in the number of dependent children. Service members now have about one million children younger than age twelve. Single parents, once a rare phenomenon in the military, now account for about five percent of the force. This force has definite needs, such as child

care, that the services are not able to meet.

■ **Housing.** Much of the government housing for families is old, cramped, and run down. The Department of Defense rates sixty-four percent of its housing units as "unsuitable." Even so, there is brisk demand for them. By recent count, the Air Force had 39,000 families on waiting lists to move on base. The reason, no doubt, is that military quarters allowances fall twenty-two percent short of actual housing costs off base, where many military families live in less-than-desirable places.

Most single enlisted members live in a barracks, sharing a room with

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at least one other person and with a communal bathroom and a telephone down the hall. The Air Force, well ahead of the other services in providing barracks privacy and amenities, can house only forty percent of its enlisted personnel one person to a room. At a meeting last summer, one of the Quality-of-Life Task Force members asked his colleagues, "Would you drop your son or daughter off at a college dorm if it looked like some of the barracks we've seen?"

The task force was disturbed enough by what it saw to propose a radical solution: Establish a Military Housing Authority, a nonprofit corporation that would build, maintain, and operate all military housing. It would also provide assistance to service members in purchasing homes. (The task force also proposed an increase in housing allowances.)

■ **Operations and Deployments.**

The task force called the personnel tempo problem "unsustainable." The armed forces are constantly engaged in operations overseas. An Air Force white paper illustrated the impact of these "long and multiple deployments" with the case of the 429th Electronic Combat Squadron at Cannon AFB, N. M. The previous year, some members of that unit spent 200 days deployed. The Air Force survey found some members having personal and financial problems because they were away from home so much. Proposals include calling on Guard and Reserve volunteers to handle some of the deployment action, but no general solution is in sight for the operations tempo problem.

■ **Needs of Families.** The armed forces today consist primarily of married members with families. (Sixty-one percent, compared to forty-two percent in 1955. In the Air Force, sixty-eight percent are married.) About two-thirds of military spouses are employed. Ninety percent of the preschool children live in homes where both parents work full time. A leading consequence of this demographic shift is that the demand for child care far exceeds the supply. (The Air Force, for example, presently meets only fifty-three percent of the calculated need for child care and has 8,000 children, most of them under three years old, on waiting lists.) DoD hopes to be covering eighty percent of the demand by 1999.

Secretary Perry says that the Quality-of-Life Survey findings "will not sit on the shelf." To their credit, the Department of Defense and the services are not shying away just because solutions are difficult and expensive. Quality of life clearly influences recruiting and retention, but those are only the immediately visible manifestations. At a deeper level, it has a profound effect on morale, attitude, and, ultimately, readiness. Call it an investment in national security. As an Air Force sergeant at an NCO Academy in Germany said when the task force visited, "Sir, we are ready to go anywhere as long as you take care of our families." ■