

Family Support in the German Armed Forces

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ABSTRACT

In recent history, German armed forces have been transformed into a modern, international recognized force. Readiness suddenly was a major issue and personal disposition was a core value of a soldiers profession. Soldiers suddenly had to be prepared for a broad variety of international missions. The most crucial link to this new military environment is the link to the home front. A soldiers individual social network including spouse, children, partner, parents, relatives and friends as well as comrades in arms, is essential for his or her well being. To support this network as effective as possible is a major challenge and key responsibility for military leaders. In this article the family support organisation of the Bundeswehr will be described, especially its network structure, the contribution of different faculties, volunteers and NGO's to the system. Quality management is also an essential issue of the support program. Some statistical data and conclusions of a field research study will be presented and discussed.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

RTO Germany's postwar development has been defined essentially by the obligations ensuing from the Second World War. Military powers were restored to the originators of "Amt Blank" (forerunner of Germany's Federal Ministry of Defence) from 1955 onward and were largely static in character due to the doctrine of the Cold War and integration in NATO. The reunification in October 1990 led overnight, as it were, to the enlarged Federal Republic of Germany taking on a more responsible role in concert with the powers around the world. For the military establishment this meant, particularly, involvement in international crisis management operations. Equipment, materiel and personnel preparedness have had to be redefined and geared to the humanitarian and military peacekeeping tasks around the world.

The global deployment of servicemen and women on operations as far-reaching as peace enforcement, with all the personal consequences and risks to life and limb involved, has become a reality in our armed forces as well as a defining characteristic. Welfare, social security for the military personnel and their families, and better compatibility of family life and duty have gained crucially in importance with regard to motivation, self-assurance and efficiency.

The ties of the servicemen and women to their home country have also become a determining factor in this process of transformation. Readiness for duty, military self-perception and motivation have, all of a sudden, also had to be understood as part of the interaction between the home front and location of deployment. The family, spouses, children, partners, friends and parents have become key to there being a high preparedness for duty, as well as fundamental to decisions to repeatedly be available for assignments abroad.

Top-level politicians and military leaders of the Bundeswehr have identified family support as a central challenge and have wasted no time in setting about its development.

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The conceptual and legal prerequisites for the Family Support Organisation, its present structure and main elements, and the Family Support Centres and Support Points are described in what follows. Initial statistical and empirical data underline the necessity for them. To round off, help networks are also looked at.

2.0 CONCEPTUAL BASIS FOR A FAMILY SUPPORT ORGANISATION

The stresses and strains that the military profession places on the spouses or partners and families of servicemen and women have taken on a new dimension through the increasing frequency of Bundeswehr missions abroad and the parallel reorganisation of the armed forces. To be able to meet these diverse challenges better, family support, which for years has been looked on as a secondary task, has been reconceptualised and reformed.

When military personnel are away on duty, their family members and dependents are entitled to intensive support. Especially during extended and repeat periods of absence, it is important for suitable contact persons to be available in local proximity at all times who know how to listen, give advice and offer assistance. This requires a widespread family support organisation that assists servicemen and women and their families effectively, also with regard to social problems and matters.

Besides being a fast and reliable point of liaison and help in an emergency, it means being a counsellor, organiser and administration specialist, as well as mediator to offer dependents the opportunity to make contacts and share experiences.

3.0 LEGAL BASIS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Section 87 of the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany regulates the constitution of the German armed forces, in which respect a differentiation has to be made between military matters per se and their servicing with materiel and personnel by civilian administration.

Section 31 of the Legal Status of Military Personnel Act (“Soldatengesetz”) regulates the duty of the employer to provide care and welfare services. In the context of the service-loyalty relationship, the state is obliged to look after the welfare of its military personnel, civil servants, and their families. This also applies to the period after termination of service. Active servicemen and women as well as reservists, along with their families, potentially benefit from such measures as a result. To fulfill this obligation, the employer can have the armed forces provide morale, welfare and recreation support.

Section 10 (3) of the Legal Status of Military Personnel Act includes the obligation of superiors to look after the well-being of the military personnel entrusted to them. This ranks alongside the duty of the employer to provide care and welfare pursuant to Section 31 of the Legal Status of Military Personnel Act. In performing such duty to provide care and welfare, superiors act both on their own responsibility and on the responsibility of the employer.

The Conscripts and Dependents Maintenance Act and the Military Pensions Act round off the legal framework. Responsibility in this respect lies with the civilian arm of the Bundeswehr, the Federal Defence Administration.

4.0 THE FAMILY SUPPORT ORGANISATION

4.1 Principles

The experience gained over the past few years has demonstrated that professional and competent support for the families is absolutely necessary in order to preserve the readiness for duty and motivation of our

servicemen and women. The Family Support Organisation is therefore equipped in terms of manpower and materiel as to be able to provide suitable and comprehensive support through full-time personnel.

The mission contingents far exceed the stationing area of the lead unit in each case composition-wise and are drawn from practically all over the Federal Republic of Germany. The reason for this is that a large number of external specialists are called upon, and domiciles are situated at remote locations from the garrison. The Family Support Organisation (FSO) therefore maintains a widespread presence throughout the Federal Republic and covers all the armed services, so that support can be ensured irrespective of the lead units responsible.

The basic responsibility of the commanders and agency heads for the military personnel under their command and for their family members in the context of care and welfare services continues to apply, nevertheless.

The Family Support Organisation, or FSO (s. capture 1), is divided into a Lead Family Support Centre (Lead FSC) at the Bundeswehr Operations Command in Schwielowsee, 31 regional Family Support Centres (FSC), and additional Family Support Points (FSP) set up by the parent units and operated by regular personnel in addition to their duties.

The “Conceptual Principles“ predefine the creation of a comprehensive and nationwide support network. Military personnel and their dependents should be able to get to an FSC and make use of its services within a reasonable time. The FSC are spread out in such a way that those requiring support can reach them in roughly one hour using public transportation.

4.2 Functions and activities of the Lead FSC

The Lead FSC plans and coordinates the training of the support personnel and is the central point of contact between the area of deployment, FSO and lead unit. All of the regional FSC are technically under the control of the Lead FSC, which coordinates all the instructions and measures involved in supporting the families of servicemen and women on operations abroad.

4.3 Functions and activities of the regional FSC

An FSC is responsible for supporting all the military personnel assigned to it, and their dependents, in all operations-related and social matters. The units receive advice and support locally on how to set up and operate a Family Support Point. They assist the families of the military personnel in all social matters when dealing with authorities, offices, agencies and units.

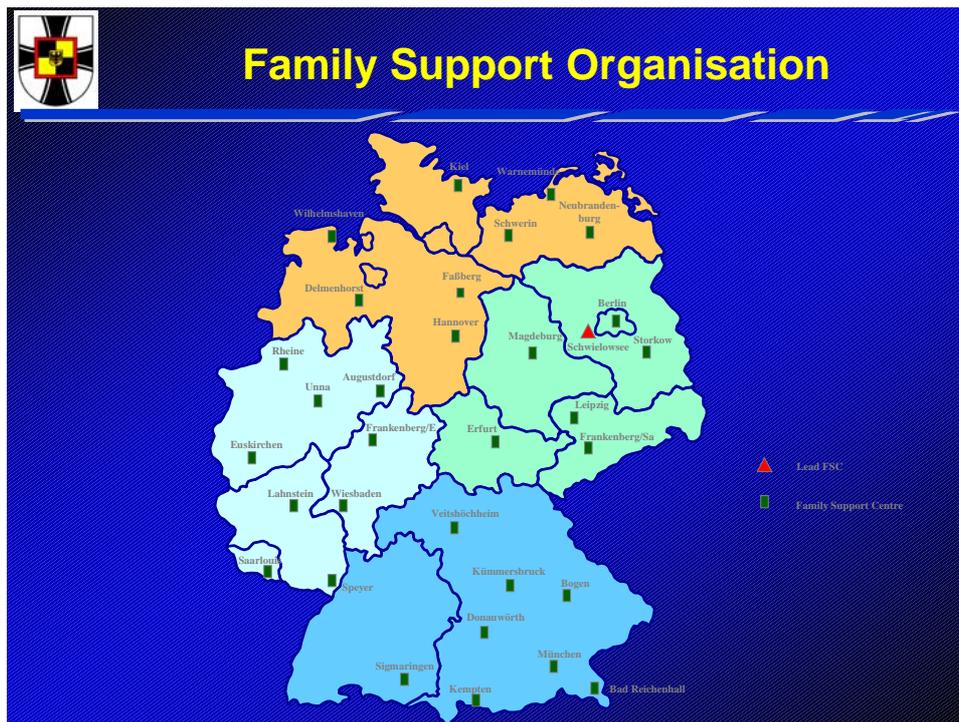


Figure 1: The Family Support Organisation

4.5 Functions and activities of the FSP

The full-time Family Support Organisation is supplemented and consolidated by the temporary establishment of Family Support Points. These are set up, as in the past, by the contingent-contributing units at the relevant garrisons and employ part-time/voluntary personnel for the duration of the operation, and are technically under the control of an FSC. Fifty FSP currently exist for the ongoing contingents. These FSP undertake solely operations-related support activities. The central support functions and activities include:

- Point of contact for all servicemen and women and their dependents, also outside regular duty hours.
- Regular information events on all social matters
- Information on the situation in the area of deployment and assistance in emergencies and crisis situations for the dependents
- Point of liaison for the servicemen and women in the area of deployment
- Support and concrete assistance in difficult situations
- Coordination of sources of social and psychological assistance
- Coordination of the voluntary family support work
- Integration of local networks
- Transportation services, discussion circles, child care
- Support of media work
- Assistance with post-deployment reintegration

4.6 Training

The intention is to ensure continuity, quality and professionalism of the support services through full-time personnel. The full-time support personnel undergo intensive preparation for their manifold responsibilities and activities on 14-day courses at the Leadership Development and Civic Education Centre in Koblenz and at the Federal Academy of Defence Administration and Technology in Mannheim.

4.7 Staff

Four military posts and one civilian post are currently listed for each FSC. In charge is a senior NCO (Sergeant Major, Sergeant First Class) who is assisted in each case by two senior NCO, one junior NCO and one Private and clerk.

Called in where necessary are: social advisors/social workers from the garrison administrative offices, military psychologists, administrative officers, and chaplains of the two major confessions. There are also contingency arrangements to strengthen the FSC and FSP with additional military and civilian personnel to cope with special situations (temporary duty, active and inactive duty training, detachments to other units/locations) so that they can carry out the activities around the clock. The assigned personnel complement one another and act as a “nerve centre” or hub, thereby providing optimum assistance for those concerned.

Each individual FSC, as well as all the FSC together, form a help network that incorporates all relevant partners for families of military personnel.

4.8 Help networks

At each garrison, the Psycho-Social Support Working Group strives, as part of its official tasks, for cooperation between medical officers, military chaplains, social workers, military psychologists and administrative officers, initiated by the garrison senior officer.

Voluntary involvement, particularly of spouses and partners of servicemen and women, is made possible and encouraged through the defrayal of travel expenses and insurance contributions. Some 80 female volunteers currently work on this basis in the family support network and provide effective assistance, especially in the field of emotional counselling. They represent an important component of the support work and have meanwhile established themselves in organisations such as the “Forum for Soldatenfamilien” (forum for servicemen and women’s families) or the “Frau zu Frau” (woman to woman) initiative. One substantial outcome ensuing from the latter initiative is a project aimed at emotional-communicative support for dependents in the form of a volunteer telephone hotline, which the churches also endorse.

5.0 STATISTICS AND STUDIES

The first surveys following the nationwide establishment of the FSO in late 2005 reveal a monthly workload of 3500 enquiries of the diversest quality.

In 34% of the cases, the servicemen or women themselves contact the FSO, while 23% of the enquiries come from spouses and partners, 22% from parents, and 21% from others.

78% of the enquiries are made during duty hours, and 22% outside regular office hours.

Problems are listed in the following areas: flight planning 24%, personal difficulties 19%, operations-related questions 15%, unclear documentation 13%, administrative problems 8%, financial difficulties 5%, child-related problems 3%, accommodation situation 1%, and leave 1%.

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The problems were resolved by partners and relatives (47%), through offers of professional assistance (18%), by the unit (16%), by the servicemen or women themselves (11%), by the FSC itself, or without using the services of others (7%).

Among the 18% stated in the professional assistance category, superiors were able to help in 8%, the social services in 5%, the armed forces chaplaincy in 2%, the authorities in 1%, the family housing services in 1%, and the Psychological Service in just under 1% of the cases.

The Bundeswehr Institute of Social Sciences has been conducting a study since 2003 on the topic of “Sozialwissenschaftliche Begleitung der Auslandseinsätze der Bundeswehr” (Social Science Monitoring of Bundeswehr Deployments Abroad”). Among the total of over 500 participants taking part in this study, 30 families have been monitored intensively over a period of two years. Initial findings of this qualitative study show that:

- the most stressful phase for a relationship is prior to a mission or deployment,
- the partners at home (99% female, 1% male) bear the main burden,
 - although these partners at home adapt more quickly and flexibly to the new situation than at first thought, new problems arise however in case of leave and the return to deployment,
- good preparation and communication reduce the problems during missions,
- the FSC have to maintain contact with the families, and they have an indispensable “fire fighting function” in the case of emergency.

6.0 OUTLOOK

In future, the FSC are to provide support for dependents of the military personnel taking part in exercises of more than 30 days’ duration outside the Federal Republic of Germany.

As Bundeswehr personnel working on integrated staff assignments outside Germany generally live with their families at those foreign garrisons, and they are called upon to a considerable extent to participate in Bundeswehr operations abroad, the FSO should be expanded in a further step to include large foreign garrisons.

Against this background, there is discussion about redefining the mission of the FSO to support servicemen and women and their dependents during routine Bundeswehr operations. In the context of a so-called “hub function”, it would be available as a point of contact to all families of military personnel on social issues and matters of support, care and welfare. It would establish contact with facilities and institutions within and outside the Bundeswehr.

As the Bundeswehr has opened its doors to females in all careers only since 2001, up to now only a small number of female soldiers do have the appropriate rank and qualification for that assignment but this number will increase in time.