

SAVING MILITARY FAMILIES

Captain Gene Thomas Gomulka,
U.S. Navy, Retired



Captain Gene Thomas Gomulka is a military family life consultant with over 30 years of counseling experience. He holds a bachelor and doctorate in sacred theology from the University of St. Thomas Aquinas, Rome, Italy. He authored The Survival Guide for Marriage in the Military. One of the most published chaplains in recent history, he received the Alfred Thayer Mahan Award for "literary achievement and inspirational leadership" from the Secretary of the Navy.

PHOTO: A U.S. Navy personnel specialist from the amphibious assault ship USS Boxer gives his wife a farewell embrace 9 January 2009, in San Diego. (U.S. Navy, Mass Communication Specialist 2d Class Daniel Barker)

MILITARY COMMANDERS who recognize the critical relationship between family readiness and mission readiness are deeply concerned about the high divorce rate of military couples, as well as increasing suicide rates among military active duty personnel and veterans. Evidence in 2008 indicates that the Department of Veterans Affairs downplayed both the number of successful suicides and attempted suicides by veterans. A number of military spouse and veterans groups believe that the divorce rate, as calculated by the Department of Defense, seriously underestimates the extent of marital problems in the armed services, particularly ongoing problems among those who have made multiple combat deployments.

Army chaplain Glen Bloomstrom, while serving as director of ministry initiatives for the Army Chief of Chaplains, reported that in an informal survey of Soldiers and their spouses or significant others conducted by the Army in February 2005, those surveyed rated the loss of a relationship as their top deployment concern—even above personal death or injury. A Navy chaplain's research, conducted while assigned to an operational Marine Corps battalion, supported this finding. Following his return from Iraq, the chaplain and a sergeant from his unit paid a visit to a comrade who had lost a limb from wounds sustained in combat. While driving back from their visit, the sergeant told the chaplain that he would gladly have suffered the loss of his own arm or leg rather than suffer the loss of his wife who was currently divorcing him and seeking custody of their son. At that point, the chaplain realized his unit had suffered copiously more "casualties" than actually appeared in official reports.

Soldiers and Marines have shouldered the burden of most of the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. Given the high stress levels endured among military families after years of multiple combat tours and lengthy deployments, it is no surprise that divorces among enlisted Soldiers and Marines reached a 16-year high in fiscal year 2008. There were nearly 1,000 more divorces among enlisted Soldiers in 2008 than in 2007.

Chaplains who counsel service members with marital problems are familiar with the negative impact that deployments and the stressful reali-

ties of military life place upon relationships. One chaplain recalls working with Rob and Deb, who married just before Rob's 12-month deployment to Iraq. What neither spouse anticipated was Deb's immediate pregnancy and Rob's absence during the birth of their daughter. Even though Rob's basic pay was tax-free while serving in a combat zone, the couple experienced financial problems, which further added to the stress Rob was experiencing while in harm's way. Rob returned from Iraq a changed man, and Deb was also different than the young, immature woman Rob had left behind. With no desire ever to deploy again, Rob decided against reenlisting, even though he did not have employment upon completion of his service obligation. The couple's relationship worsened following Rob's separation from the military; they subsequently divorced. Within three months of their divorce, after his increased consumption of alcohol did not overcome his loneliness and feelings of failure, Rob committed suicide.

Because of the number of divorces and suicides that take place after service members leave the armed services, military divorce and suicide rates are far greater than current statistics reveal. Dr. Ira R. Katz, Veteran Affairs deputy chief patient care services officer for mental health, reports, "Suicide prevention coordinators are identifying about 1,000 suicide attempts per month among the veterans we see in our medical facilities."¹

According to data gathered by CBS News and analyzed by Dr. Steve Rathburn, the acting head of the Epidemiology and Biostatistics Department at the University of Georgia, suicides in 2005 among returning combat veterans aged 20 through 24 were "between two and four times higher than civilians the same age."² Vice Chief of Staff of the Army General Peter Chiarelli reviewed investigations on Soldier suicides, which reached a three-decade high in 2008, and reported that in over 70 percent of the cases, "you have one constant, and that was a problem with a relationship."³ The problems do not appear to be diminishing as the Army counted a record high 64 possible suicides in the first four months of 2009.⁴ Thomas Insel, the director of the National Institute of Mental Health and a highly respected psychiatric researcher, posited that "the suicides and psychiatric mortality of this war could trump the combat deaths."⁵

...the suicides and psychiatric mortality of this war could trump the combat deaths.

The Effects of Relationship Problems

The Pentagon does not account for actual divorces. Instead, they take the total number of troops who are married at the beginning of the fiscal year in each service and compare it to the total number of troops who are married at the end of the year. The difference between the two figures becomes the estimated number of marriages that ended in divorce during the year. There are a number of problems inherent in this method of calculation. For example, because people in the military tend to remarry faster than civilians, a service member who divorces in January and subsequently remarries by September fails to be recorded as a divorce statistic. At the same time, two service members married to each other that divorce count as two single and separate divorces unless they remarry or leave military service before the end of the fiscal year. Because some service members will enter the armed forces and others will depart the service within the course of the year, those who are counted at the beginning of the year are not all accounted for at the end.

A more important reason for underestimating the divorce problem in the military involves the number of military personnel whose marriages end in divorce within a year or two after leaving the armed services. Paul Rieckhoff, executive director of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, argues that Pentagon divorce statistics are too low because they fail to account for "troops who divorce after leaving the military, the divorce rates of National Guardsmen and Reservists, and the number of marriages intact but in trouble."⁶

There are numerous reasons why service members in problematic relationships often wait until they separate from the military before getting divorced. Many couples want to keep the benefits that married personnel and their family members have as long as possible, benefits that will be discontinued once the service member is no longer

on active duty. Service members living in family housing may be reluctant to return to living in confined single quarters or have their basic allowance for housing rates slashed. With health care costs very high today, spouses might wish to hold on to their health benefits as long as they can, even if it means remaining legally married to someone they no longer love.

Because certain states require a period of time for legal separation before a divorce decree is granted, some military couples are not able to complete that period while the military spouse is still on active duty. Even though such couples usually divorce shortly after the service member has completed the service obligation, their divorce is never reflected in Department of Defense divorce statistics.

A final reason personnel divorce after they are separated from the military involves the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act. The Act affords service members the right to request a delay in civil proceedings like divorce. Those on long-term deployments often invoke this provision; consequently, some couples can only finalize their divorce after the service member has returned from a long deployment that may coincide with the end of the obligated service.

Stacy Bannerman is a military spouse and the creator and director of Sanctuary Weekends for Women Veterans and Wives of Combat Veterans. In a recent AlterNet article entitled, “Broken Military Marriages: Another Casualty of War,” she wrote, “Military marriages are at increasingly high risk of failure...More than 13,000 military marriages ended last year...and combat is the cause.”⁷ She also reported that a study published in *Armed Forces & Society* reveals that male combat veterans were 62 percent more likely than civilian males to have at least one failed marriage. While divorce rates among returning male combat veterans are high, divorce rates for women in the Army and Marine Corps are nearly three times that of their counterpart male Soldiers and Marines.

Reasons for High Military Divorce Rates

David Rudd, the Texas Tech psychologist who was chosen by the Department of Defense to lead a three-year study intended to reduce suicidal death among veterans, would be wise to research and

...divorce rates for women in the Army and Marine Corps are nearly three times that of their counterpart male Soldiers and Marines.

address not only the symptoms of veteran suicides, but also their principal causes, particularly problematic relationships. To reduce high divorce and suicide rates among service members and veterans, he should address the three major causes:

- The young age at which many servicemen and servicewomen marry.
- Financial problems that contribute to stress and lead to complications in relationships.
- Multiple long-term deployments, particularly in combat zones, that can result in medical and mental problems, including post-traumatic stress disorder.⁸

Chaplain Frank Muñoz is assigned to Marine Air Group Eleven based in Miramar, California. Early in his career, he recognized that he had to increase the median age at which many of his Marines were marrying if he was going to reduce marital problems and divorces. What the chaplain learned was confirmed by the 2007 RAND Corporation study, *Families under Stress*, which concluded, “Programs and policies that minimize or delay entry into marriage are likely to reduce rates of marital dissolution as well.”⁹ While the median age of people marrying in the United States is 27.7 for men and 26.0 for women, many service men and women marry when they are younger, to discover only later that they are not prepared to cope with the challenges that both marriage and military life bring.

The emphasis on prevention must be adopted by chaplains, counselors, and others involved in the social sciences. The likelihood of divorce can be reduced by both preventing unhappy marriages from occurring and by altering the course of marriages that have gone poorly. As one human behavior writer noted, “Preventing unhappy, destructive marriages is much cheaper—in dollars and in human misery—than attempts to clean up the toxic waste that follows them.”¹⁰

One effective way of encouraging young service members in their teens and early twenties to

consider postponing their marriage plans is to use military self-help relationship inventories. These inventories are designed to raise questions that identify areas of concern and assess the couple's true potential to prevent divorce. Chaplain Miles Barrett, the command chaplain at the U.S. Coast Guard Training Center in Cape May, New Jersey, compares the marriage and military-life inventory to the effective counseling of alcoholics. If he were counseling a Marine who exhibits all of the signs of alcoholism, he would not state, "Your problem is that you're an alcoholic." Instead, he would help the individual understand the symptoms of alcoholism and lead the service member to self-identity and state, "Chaplain, I think my problem is that I am an alcoholic."

Likewise, instead of saying to a recruit, "You're too young to get married and you need to wait," Chaplain Barrett will make marriage and military-life relationship inventories available to recruits and their potential spouses to use. When a young recruit and his potential life partner respond to the inventory, which involves detailed questions about personal communication, finances, conflict resolution, children, and other major relationship issues, many are led on their own to realize and say, "Maybe it would be best if we waited a

little longer." Others may decide to proceed with their wedding plans, but acknowledge, "We need to develop a budget and stick to it if we're ever going to save up enough money to start a family." By reducing the number of marriages by young recruits, who often divorce within a few years, and by assisting those who do marry to better prepare themselves to cope with the challenges of marriage and military life, Commander Barrett helps lower the high military divorce rate as well as the spouse abuse and suicide rate, all of which derive in part from problematic relationships.

The second reason for the high divorce rate among active duty personnel and veterans is finances. Financial problems that place high stress on relationships are often the result of poor budgeting and financial mismanagement. Instead of limiting spending to those items that they can afford to pay for in cash, some couples use credit cards to delay payment, without a plan to pay off the debt. Many couples only pay the minimum amount on their credit card statements, thus incurring high interest charges and significantly increasing the cost of the items. Few couples save and invest a percentage of their income for later needs. Some young married couples spend an inordinate amount of money on entertainment and expensive electronic "toys." Married enlisted personnel with children, particularly E-1s through E-5s, can find themselves living from payday to payday if they are not disciplined enough to budget and save their money.

A third cause for marital problems, divorces, and even suicides among active duty personnel and veterans is the loneliness that can occur during deployments and the resulting medical and mental problems that can arise when a service member returns from a combat tour. Although the RAND Corporation reported that evidence linking deployments and the demands of military life to failed marriages "remains sparse," it did note that "the strongest evidence...comes from interviews and surveys of military spouses."¹¹ Had the RAND study included data involving veterans who divorce within one or two years of leaving active duty service, the researchers would have had more than enough "evidence" to link failed marriages with multiple deployments.



U.S. Army, Martin Greeson

U.S. Soldiers are gathered at Panzer Kasern, Boeblingen, Germany, to deploy to Iraq, 31 May 2009.

When Paul Olson returned from a tour in Iraq where he served as an Army company commander, his wife, Erin, was interviewed by Ashley Stetter of the *Army News Service* about how she coped with their long separation. She said she spent time wondering where her husband was, what he was doing, and whether he was thinking of her and the baby they were expecting. Having witnessed a number of problems that other wives were having, she noted, "I've seen many marriages fall apart due to the stress that deployments put on Soldiers and their families. Life in the Army is hard, and you have to be truly committed to the other person and the life you've built together in order for it to last."¹²

Licensed counselor and retired Navy chaplain David A. Thompson works with the Minnesota National Guard in the Beyond the Yellow Ribbon Program, which assists Minnesota National Guard and reservists and their families. The program focuses on reintegrating guard personnel and reservists into their civilian and family life after extended deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. After witnessing the dissolution of many marriages following 12-month deployments or longer, he has no doubts about how relationships can be harmed or dissolved because of multiple long-term deployments. He maintains, "If couples have good communication skills, strong support networks, and skills in being resilient, they have a good chance of weathering the 'storm of deployment.' If they lack these tools in their toolbox or don't know how to use them, they are high risk candidates for marital problems at the end of a deployment."

The Yellow Ribbon Program, conceived by Major General Larry Shelito and Chaplain John Morris, trains personnel and families to deal with deployments through—

- Family prep academies—60 days before deployment.
- Family readiness academies for family members—30-60 days before service members return from deployments.
- Reintegration training events after deployments for service personnel and their families.

Programs to Help

With the accelerated operational tempo following the 2001 terrorist attacks, all of the military services have developed both predeployment programs

that assist personnel and families preparing for the stress associated with deployments and post-deployment programs to help personnel make a smooth transition back and overcome the challenges of reintegration.

To be successful, programs need to help service and family members express their feelings. *The Survival Guide for Marriage in the Military*, used in the Beyond the Yellow Ribbon Program, provides topics that stimulate discussion among married couples. This program is highly successful in reducing relationship problems following deployments. It has become the national model throughout the military.

Although the military has chaplains and licensed counselors who offer partnership programs that can strengthen relationships and develop important skills, many people in the military community do not use these services. For example, when a marriage enrichment retreat was scheduled for a major naval installation that hosts over 100 tenant commands and employs some 19,000 personnel, only two couples attended the all-expenses paid weekend event. Unfortunately, only a very small percentage of married and single service members attend chaplain-sponsored retreat programs, and many of those that avail themselves of counseling services only do so when their problems have reached a critical and often incurable stage.

**...those that avail themselves
of counseling services only do
so when their problems have
reached a critical and often
incurable stage.**

Proactive Marketing Strategy

In an effort to encourage personnel and couples to make early use of counseling services and support programs, the chiefs of chaplains and family support directors might consider employing a marketing strategy similar to that used to sell commercial products. For an example, a department or grocery store offers shoppers sample products. Whether it is perfume or a new food item, if the sample is pleasing, the customer may purchase the product. As another example, movie

previews online, in a theater, or on a DVD often entice people to watch the movie in a theater or rent or purchase the DVD. This sales technique requires offering a training presentation to all personnel, during which dynamic speakers would offer salient “samples” or “previews” of beneficial relationship programs participants could register to take. If participants are exposed to a “preview” of the program, a number of them will participate who otherwise would not have. Such a proactive approach could not only increase participation in programs and services offered by chaplains, family support agencies, and Military OneSource, but also get professional assistance to personnel for addressing problematic issues before they reach the critical and irreparable stage.

Similar to the sales approach used by those selling time-share properties, it is critical that participants sign up for the programs that interest them immediately, before departing the training session. Those who signed-up should receive a personal follow-up phone call or email within a week from the sponsoring program representative. If the “sample” presentation at the training session is dynamic, if the sign-up process is immediate and simple, and if contact with interested service members is timely, then one should expect a 50 percent participation increase in programs designed to mitigate the effects that youth and immaturity, inexperience with

financial management, and deployments have on personal relationships, particular those of married personnel and their loved ones.

Those who work to strengthen relationships need to take steps to increase the use of services provided by chaplains and family support counselors. To improve military family life, we need to evaluate programs that are designed to strengthen the relationship between family readiness and mission readiness and market them better to reduce problems that stem from troubled relationships and multiple long-term combat deployments. **MR**

NOTES

1. Aaron Glantz, “The Truth about Veteran Suicides,” *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 9 May 2008.
2. Armen Keteyian, “Suicide Epidemic among Veterans,” *CBS News*, 15 May 2009.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Blake Farmer, “Record High Army Suicides Prompt Action,” National Public Radio, 15 May 2009.
5. Avram Goldstein, “Post-War Suicides May Exceed Combat Deaths,” *Bloomberg Press*, 5 May 2008.
6. Paul Rieckhoff, “Military Divorce Numbers on the Rise,” <military.com> (9 December 2008).
7. Stacy Bannerman, “Broken Military Marriages: Another Casualty of War,” 23 January 2009, at *AlterNet*, <alternet.org/sex/122198/broken_military_marriages:_another_casualty_of_war/>.
8. RAND Corporation, “One in Five Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans Suffer from PTSD or Major Depression,” news release, 17 April 2008. According to this report, “Nearly 20 percent of military service members who have returned from Iraq and Afghanistan—300,000 in all—report symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder or major depression.”
9. Benjamin R. Karney and John S. Crown, *Families under Stress* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation: 2007), xxxii.
10. Francine Russo, “Can the Government Prevent Divorce?” *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 1997.
11. *Ibid.*, xix.
12. Ashley Stetter, “Army Programs Help Keep Military Marriages Strong,” *Army News Service*, 31 January 2007.

Interested in subscribing to Military Review?

The Government Printing Office handles MR’s public subscriptions.

To subscribe: http://bookstore.gpo.gov/collections/military_journals.jsp

Or write to: The Superintendent of Documents
P.O. Box 371954
Pittsburgh, PA 15250-7954

Or call: 1-202-512-1800

Or fax: 1-202-512-2104

MILITARY UNITS: to receive free subscriptions, email us at leav-milrevweb@conus.army.mil