

The experiences of Australian military spouses on overseas postings: a qualitative study

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Military families encounter numerous relocations and absences due to deployments in support of the military member's career, which has been widely demonstrated to have an impact on the psychosocial well-being of military spouses.¹ The impact of the stressors associated with military relocations and deployments is like a pebble dropped into a pond, where the ripples extend out far beyond the drop zone.

Indeed, Saltzman *et al* suggest everything that comes with military service—the good *and* the bad—is a family matter.² Support from the family is critical to the success of the military member.³ One area lacking in the literature concerns the experiences of spouses of members of the ADF, particularly in relation to their experiences with postings. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Australian men and women who accompany their military spouse on an overseas posting using a qualitative research methodology.

This research project is unique in Australia. While the experiences of members of the ADF, and indeed international militaries, are frequently examined in research undertaken from within the ADF, as well as by external researchers, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches, the experiences of families are often neglected. It is recognised that military spouses live a life that is both uncertain and exciting.⁴ Also often acknowledged is their capacity to cope and adjust to uncertainties, and their ability to 'keep the home fires burning' during extended periods of separation while their military partner is deployed or absent from the family residence.⁵

Australian research to date has focused on the experience of spouses during military deployments, all of which found that prolonged separations associated with deployments are profoundly stressful life events that can have a negative effect on health and wellbeing.⁶ Internationally, research exploring the experiences of military spouses during deployments reports



that it often is an extremely stressful and distressing period.⁷ Additionally, some international research has been conducted into the experience and impact of military separation on children.⁸

Through the conduct of a literature search, the author found no evidence of research in Australia on the experience and impact of overseas postings on spouses. One comparable study from the UK, using a descriptive qualitative design, examined the experiences of 13 British military spouses and concluded that the experience is largely dependent on the spouse's personality, resilience and support networks.⁹ However, the UK study was limited insofar as all but two of the participants were spouses of serving officers, which may not be representative of the experiences of spouses of others. Furthermore, some participants were still on their overseas posting at the time, which may have affected their reflections of the experience. Nonetheless, it provided a solid framework on which to build this current study.

The ADF supports its personnel and their families through the Defence Community Organisation (DCO). The official DCO website provides information and guidance for aspects of Defence life that affects families, including postings.¹⁰ Unfortunately, this information is specific to postings within Australia. Preparations for overseas postings occur often only through word-of-mouth from others that have gone before or who are currently overseas, and varying levels of support from staff in overseas posting cells.

Method

A qualitative approach was utilised to evaluate data generated through an asynchronous virtual focus group. As the author sought to understand a human experience, qualitative methods were employed to allow the data to speak for itself, enabling a better understanding of the phenomenon, and acting as a guide for further research and reflection.

The author's Institutional Human Ethics Board approved the study, which included methods to secure the protection of human subjects. To protect the privacy of participants and their ADF spouse, no names or other identifying features have been used throughout this paper.

To be eligible to participate, participants must have accompanied their ADF spouse on an overseas posting for a minimum of one year, and have been back in Australia for at least six months. A secret Facebook page was set up and those who agreed to participate were given access to this page. Facebook was chosen as the 'location' for the study group as this social media platform is frequently used as a support system for military spouses, particularly for maintaining contact with family and friends during overseas postings.

Procedures

Participants were recruited through private and secret Facebook groups that are only open to Australian military spouses and partners. Spouses who contacted the researcher in response to the researcher's advertisement were provided with an information sheet that gave more detail about the project, as well as their role and rights as participants.

In total, 23 spouses participated in the project, whose partners represented all three branches of the ADF, comprising 12 from Army, 9 from RAAF and 2 from RAN. All participants were female, as no male spouses responded to the invitation.

Data collection occurred over the course of one month, which was analysed using a thematic approach in which codes were derived from the raw data in an inductive analysis.¹¹ To ensure credibility in the analysis, the participants' own words have been used to illustrate the themes in this paper.

Results

Participants unanimously reported that overseas postings require numerous physical, psychosocial and cognitive adjustments—some of which were unexpected. However, nearly all reported that the posting was a highlight of their married lives. Four key themes were identified, relating to sacrifices for the good of the family; adjustments to a new environment; seeking support; and personality and resilience. Numerous sub-themes emerged from these themes, which are presented in Table 1.

Key theme	Sub theme
Sacrifices for the good of the family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The 'good military wife' • Adjustments to family way of life • Impacts on health and relationships • Impacts on career
Adjustments to a new environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adaptation to new culture – military and host nation • Culture shock • Coping mechanisms • Influence of rank on experience
Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal support networks • External support networks
Personality and resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparation of self • Approach to problems • Past experiences

Table 1: Key themes and sub-themes

Theme 1: sacrifices for the good of the family

A predominant theme centred on sacrifice, and the regard participants placed on their family above themselves. Several sub-themes emerged as descriptors of the sacrifices made for the good of the family, namely the 'good military wife'; changes to family way of life; impacts on health and relationships; and impacts on career and identity.

According to the participants, sacrifice that comes with life as a military wife, especially during an overseas posting, is expected and accepted. Being a spouse of a serving member means they must relinquish control regularly to the needs of the ADF—be it at posting time where they have no control over the location where their spouse, and therefore, their family are sent, or when their spouse might deploy or go away for an extended period.

One such sacrifice includes a sense of duty to the spouse in such a way that it mirrors the sacrifice the service member makes in his or her service to the country. Most participants described themselves as a 'good military wife', insofar as their role as an overt supportive partner in their

husband's career was an important part of their identity. The posting may not have been best for the spouse or the children but because it was important for their husband's career, they fully supported the posting. Comments included:

I knew how much he wanted this posting, and being the good military wife I am, I was genuinely happy for him. I just needed to have a couple of cries ... to feel better.

Another sacrifice comes from changes to the family way of life and its configuration in the pursuit of an overseas posting. For example, several participants described the sadness of having to leave their beloved family pets behind:

Having no children, our dog was our baby and that was the hardest thing to leave her behind.... [U]nfortunately, she passed away while I was [overseas].

Overseas postings brought about some particular challenges for blended families, in which there were step-children and shared custody considerations. This was described as being significantly more traumatic than anticipated,



and while Skype enabled regular face-to-face communication with their children back in Australia, it was not the same as having them come to stay during school holidays and weekends.

Some participants were forced to make certain sacrifices to their health and diet throughout their overseas posting because of climatic, cultural and environmental limitations. In some cases, the climate presented an unexpected obstacle in maintaining their health and fitness. Burdened by months of extreme winters in North American and UK postings, an exercise regime was not as easy to sustain as they were accustomed to in Australia:

The cold and snow stopped us dead in our tracks and we struggled with that the whole time. My children went from being outside adventurers to couch potatoes. We all came back 15kgs heavier!

Other participants indicated that access to healthy and nutritious food in their location proved difficult:

We found it a challenge to try to maintain a healthy diet like we were accustomed to at home ... a lot of heavily sugared [and] processed food was more accessible over fresh produce. We did the best we could to eat healthy, but it was almost impossible or terribly expensive.

An advantage to the sacrifices made to take the overseas postings was that it had a generally positive impact on their relationship with their spouse, and on their family relationships as a whole. Being away from the normal day-to-day life in Australia provided them with opportunities to travel and see the world, which in turn, brought them closer together as a family unit:

Our relationship was strengthened. We saw a lot more of each other and really got some quality family time.

Because their spouse was home a lot more than he normally was in Australia, simple joys such as family dinners and participation with their children's school and sporting activities were savoured. Others found having their spouse home every night required a period of adjustment, especially for those whose partner had just returned from a deployment immediately prior to their posting:

We had the added pressure of having [my husband] just return from a 6-month deployment to Iraq, so we were still reacquainting as we moved overseas. It was hard getting to know him again under such stressful circumstances because everything is magnified when they come home from a deployment and everything is stressful when you have to move, so throw them both together in the mix, well, it was ugly. But we knew we'd survive it because we'd survived everything else up until then.

Several participants indicated their overseas postings had a negative effect on their marriage, to the point it led to the dissolution of the marriage. Infidelity was an issue for a number of participants, although this was only observed by those posted to Asian nations. It was suggested that exposure to temptations not normally as readily available in Australia was too much for some spouses, leading to adultery and marriage breakdown. Other participants noted that they were aware that infidelity was an issue in some marriages of ADF families in same location.

The majority of participants who were working prior to their overseas posting reported that they were forced to resign from their job in order to take the posting. Most were philosophical, suggesting this was a sacrifice worth making for the experience:

As with every posting, I hated giving up my job! I have always struggled to maintain a sense of self-worth when I don't work outside the home ... but our [overseas] posting also meant I could afford not to work, and take some 'me time' for the first time ever! I enjoyed having preschool kids at home part of the day (as opposed to babies when I was last a stay-at-home mum). I also liked being able to go to school events without having to stress about time off work. Lots of spa days, time at the gym ... luxury 'me time' I could never afford in Australia.

Despite the upside of having more time for themselves, several participants noted it was challenging to adjust to being 'dependent' on their spouse financially, suggesting this loss of income influenced their attitude towards money and that this loss of self negatively impacted their sense of identity:

I lost a bit of my identity. I felt bad for not being able to contribute financially to the family ... [and I] felt a bit guilty when I went shopping.

Theme 2: adjustments to a new environment

Four themes emerged as descriptors of adjustments to the new environment or host country: adaptation to a new culture (military and host nation); culture shock; coping mechanisms; and influence of rank on experience.

Participants described themselves as adaptable and quick to adjust to new posting locations and the ADF lifestyle. However, the adjustments required to adjust to their new host country were challenging for all in some way. Language barriers, isolation, cultural nuances, and even climate presented new challenges. It is important to highlight that the participants described having to adapt to two very different cultures—the host nation, and the military their spouse was now serving alongside.

Participants described feeling welcome and ‘at home’ when they were embraced by the host nation military. Invitations to family events and military-sponsored social activities helped the transition for all family members. Participants posted to North America unanimously agreed they were made to feel very welcome by the host nation military community. Adapting to the host nation proved more difficult in Asia where there was an expectation that Australian families would employ domestic help, such as a housekeeper, and observe the host nation’s behaviours associated with their religion, social norms and social class. One spouse described the stressors of arriving in a new country, and quickly finding herself alone:

[It was] my first time being away from family ... [and] having to rely on my new military family was hard for me. We went from the hotel to our house on the Monday and then my husband went to work and I was left in the house on my own with all these amah [local women employed as maids] coming up to the door looking for a job. [In the end], I closed the door, burst into tears [and] wanted to go home.

Culture shock, a well-known term used to describe the early experiences of an immersion in an unfamiliar culture, occurred across the spectrum of all participants, regardless of their posting location. For most, the shock hit the moment they disembarked from their flight, and continued for weeks, as they dealt with

smells, traffic, climate, social norms and idiosyncrasies that are not typically found in traveller’s guidebooks. In the case of those spouses in English-speaking countries, this was unexpected because they had simply assumed it would be just like living in Australia:

My culture shock came as a complete surprise. I just made the presumption that going to North America would be an easy transition.

Finding a way to adjust to culture shock was very important, as participants were conscious this was their family’s new life for the next year or so:

[I could not just] wallow in self-pity at not having a clue what was going on. [Rather, I needed to] hook in and do whatever it took to acclimatise. I had to go outside my comfort zone, but I just had to do it.

Theme 3: seeking support

Support for military families in Australia came in a variety of formal, Defence-sponsored or supported organisations, and informal networks external to Defence. These organisations recognise social support networks as crucial for well-being and adjustment.¹² Participants suggested support systems for families posted overseas were not always as easy to locate and often required perseverance to find something that worked for them. Two themes emerged as descriptors of the kinds of support mechanisms observed: informal support networks; and external support networks.

On arrival in their new host country, the prevalence of support networks varied. Some participants described being provided with formal support networks by their predecessor or other families in the location, or even by the very strong support networks that existed in the host nation military. This often included simple gestures such as filling the fridge and pantry with staples, escorting new families around their new community, introducing them to locals who were willing to provide support, helping with enrolments in schools, and setting up utilities and bank accounts. This kind of practical support was most effective in aiding their transition.

Higher-level support, such as that coming from the Australian Embassy or the Defence



community back in Australia, was found to be less effective across all host nations when compared to the systems in place for Australian-based families. This was particularly the case in locations where there were no other Australian families. Several spouses described the burden of isolation and loneliness that comes with being away from the Australian accent.

No formal support for us. Informal, half-assed handover from our predecessor who then left us to our own devices. I recall bawling when on day 10, I got a phone call from a lady at the Australian Embassy to touch base ... they were happy tears just to have a conversation with someone with an Australian accent who understood how isolated I felt.

The search for informal support was described as being extremely important, particularly for a sense of companionship and support that comes with friendships. In some cases, it was more difficult to find informal support, especially among those who were childless or had young children who did not attend schools. Often, they had to actively seek out networks. Some joined quilt making clubs or family welfare clubs, or volunteered at a military charity store, finding support there. Others seized on the friendliness of neighbours and joined in neighbourhood activities. One spouse highlighted the significance of those informal networks in avoiding social isolation during her posting:

I spent a lot of time by myself with two small kids. [My husband] went overseas a lot for work. I don't actually remember him being around a lot. I learnt to do everything myself and not expect help as I knew I wouldn't get any. Fortunately, I made great friends with my neighbour across the road and they became my family. Without them, I wouldn't have survived.

Theme 4: personality and resilience

Participants suggested resilience and a positive attitude are key personality traits that could have a significant impact on adjusting to life in an overseas posting. Resilient traits, such as optimism, have been found as key in enabling individuals and families to adapt to stressful events.¹³ According to participants, it takes a certain kind of woman to be a military wife. Not everyone will be able to tolerate the demands,

uncertainties and constant changes that come with postings, absences and deployments.

Participants insisted that overseas postings are more complicated than a regular Australian-based posting and, as such, require a different attitude. There were numerous examples of resilience found in the data. Three themes emerged as descriptors of personality and resilience: preparation of self; approach to problems; and past experiences.

Among those who found their overseas posting enjoyable, there was a degree of preparation of themselves and their families. Some sought out language training so they could at least master some key phrases on arrival. Others studied the cultural nuances and sought out information that would make their transition smooth.

Before they even left Australia, most participants tried to establish a relationship with their predecessor to start asking questions and seeking advice on important issues such as schools, housing and health care. Having access to this type of information was instrumental in the transition of the family because it gave them a situational awareness of what to expect. All indicated they used the Internet to research the town they were going to, and to help establish some early networks with school and social communities.

Participants predominantly displayed a robust 'get on with it' attitude in their approach to the overseas posting and problems as they arose. Over the course of their lives as military spouses, most have learned to be incredibly self-sufficient and 'problem solve' rather than 'problem dwell', and generally approach postings with an inspiring efficiency and resilience:

I still remember finding out about our posting - it was a huge week in our lives!! Basically, we found out we were expecting our first baby, a deployment, and the posting all in the same week! I had to do all the planning as I was on my own, and pregnant. It was tough, but very exciting all at the same time! We had our baby girl ([which coincided with] husband coming home on [deployment leave]). [Then] he went back to Iraq for 8 weeks, came home and a week later we packed up and moved overseas! How did I do it? I just did!

Past experiences aided participants immensely. There was a relationship between those participants who enjoyed the experience and those who had done a number of previous postings with their partner around Australia. Those women who were new to military life tended to have more negative perceptions of their posting experience and described more negative issues. With experience came wisdom and reason, because they had encountered stressors associated with numerous military postings before and knew that everything would fall into place in the end. Among those who found the experience positive, an optimistic attitude was evident in the way they described events and situations:

I think the thing to note is that by accepting an overseas posting, you're agreeing to a bigger change than normal. I know when I post internally here in Australia what to do when I get sick, the parameters of seeing a dentist, what's required with a school enrolment. When we were overseas, there was so much information on top of the normal challenges that I understood I needed to be prepared for but not fully aware of the extent. So buying a car wasn't as easy as just buying a car. Getting a phone wasn't as easy as walking into a shop and buying a phone. Everything is harder, but you can't let it cripple you or you'd never go.

Discussion

In providing responses to many questions, participants indicated there was an explicit need for sacrifice in order for the family to survive and function 'normally' while supporting their spouse. Some sacrifices were made by the entire family: leaving pets behind, saying goodbye to family members (some of whom were elderly or ill and might not be alive by the end of the posting), and giving up freedoms and 'normal' life events such as sports or hobbies.

Other sacrifices were clearly made by the wife in support of her husband's posting and career. These sacrifices are often unacknowledged and unappreciated. Nonetheless, these participants were happy to make them. Those who were most at peace with their sacrifices were most likely to describe their posting as a highlight of their lives. In this way, their resilience is amplified by their acceptance of their sacrifice.

The participants were adamant that not everyone is able to make these sacrifices, or indeed live with the consequence of them once made. In their eyes, only those who are resilient enough to handle whatever is thrown at them will survive this lifestyle and the constant sense of loss that comes with frequent relocations and absences. One spouse acutely captured the overall sense of resilience:

I married my husband accepting his career choices and all the ups and downs that come with it [like] me changing jobs, friends [and] houses every few years. It's just what you have to do. I have met many spouses who act as though the ADF shouldn't be allowed to tell them where to move, or why their husbands have duty on a certain day. They forget that it's all part and parcel of an important job.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

The picture provided by this research is incomplete. For example, the experiences of male spouses are absent, as no males volunteered to participate. This is a significantly smaller population within the ADF but their voices are still important. Additionally, the experience of spouses who have been posted to other international destinations where ADF members serve might have provided a more complete illustration of the experience for spouses.

To improve generalisability, researchers may wish to replicate the current study with a larger, more diverse sample that includes male spouses and a wider cross-section of posting locations (for example, Canada, Europe and New Zealand). Additionally, greater understanding could be gleaned by the inclusion of more spouses who endure a third-country deployment and the effect this has on their well-being.

Finally, this study did not explore the experiences of children who accompany their family on an overseas posting, and perhaps a study of these experiences may assist educators, health care professionals and Defence family and community organisations in understanding the unique needs of children before they are posted overseas and on their return to Australia.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was not to produce generalisable or quantifiable research findings. The meaning of the diverse experiences of spouses would not have been done justice through a reduction to quantifiable data. Rather, the aim of this study has been to provide insights and understanding of a unique phenomenon: to say, 'this is what it was like to have accompanied my military spouse on an overseas posting; to pack up my home and my family; to give up my job, my social and family support; and set up "home" in another country'.

The ADF maintains its own diverse cultural, demographic and personal constructs. The impact of these constructs extends beyond the serving member to their entire family. The current study reveals common themes that spouses who accompany their husband on a military overseas posting may experience. Most significantly, the relationship between the acceptance of sacrifices made for the good of their husband and their family, and resilience and adaptation is evident.

For military spouses, life leading up to and during an overseas posting presents a unique journey, and it is one that benefits greatly from supportive relationships, knowledge and preparation, and a willingness to do whatever it takes to lead their family through the journey. Given what we understand about the idiosyncratic challenges faced by military families, it is vital that those who work in community organisations that support the ADF and its members be culturally competent to meet the unique needs of these families during these times of transition.

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