

Hearing on Military Families

Bill Number: Oversight

Hearing Date: June 2, 2003

Witness:

Holly Petraeus

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Fort Campbell, TN

Testimony:

Good afternoon. I'm Holly Petraeus, wife of Major General David H. Petraeus, the Commander of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) and Fort Campbell, and I'm here today to speak to you as an Army wife of almost 29 years.

You have asked "how has the Army taken care of its soldiers' families during this deployment?" My experience here at Fort Campbell has been a very positive one. The key element has been good communication between the deploying units, the military and civilian staff remaining here at Fort Campbell, and the volunteer Family Readiness Group (FRG) leaders. There has been a commitment to leaving high-quality officers back as Rear Detachment Commanders, and that has paid dividends. The Rear Detachment Commanders are our link to the units overseas, as well as having the power to resolve many issues here at home.

Among the military remaining here on post, the Installation Commander has conducted bi-weekly information meetings with senior spouses and key FRG leaders. These have been a great venue for bringing up issues that concern us, and for hearing what the installation is doing to address those issues. Also, the post hospital has been very responsive to family concerns. They made every effort to bring in Reservists and civilians to quickly fill the gaps left by deploying doctors. They've done some special things for the moms who give birth while the dads are deployed, and they've also started up a fitness program for family members. The five chaplains who remain here have also done a wonderful job, continuing to run the regular religious programs while offering deployment-related counseling and also running a very successful charitable effort, Operation Helping Hand, which is used to help family members where Army Emergency Relief cannot.

On the DoD civilian side, the people in Army Community Services (ACS) have been super. They run our Family Assistance Center, a "one-stop shopping" for family members who need assistance while the soldiers are deployed. They also coordinate deployment-related training such as Army Family Team building. Other civilian activities which have played an important role have been: Morale Welfare and Recreation (MWR), which has worked with local charities and sponsors to provide some very well-attended free family functions such as monthly Family Fun Fairs; Child Development Services which runs our post day and after-school care; and our Fort Campbell Schools, which have not only addressed deployment-related issues with their own students, but have provided the local off-post school systems with training on how to handle deployment-related problems.

I have to mention also the invaluable service of our volunteer FRG leaders. They are the command's link to the families, and although they are dealing at home with the same

deployment issues as everyone else, they dedicate a substantial portion of their free time to reaching out to help others.

Now, as to the question of what could be done better: I do feel that the Army is asking a great deal of our FRG leaders. They have no official status, but they bear a lot of responsibility. When Secretary of the Army White was here in April, he suggested that some of the key FRG positions should be salaried. These volunteers dedicate their time and often their own money, too, keeping in communication with family members over a far-flung area, and they should not only receive some reimbursement for that, but also have the status and protection of being official DoD employees.

I'd also like to see more money available for child care during deployments. Young soldiers' spouses' will not come out for meetings and social functions if they cannot bring their children, and if we are to reach them with the information they need we must ensure that free child care is available on-site. As deployments go on respite care is also important. We are stretching our dollars and using charitable donations as well, but more funding in this area would be great.

Another thing I think the Army (and all the services) can improve on is casualty notification, not so much for fatalities but for seriously and very seriously injured. This has caused a lot of heartburn for us here during this deployment, because of the lack of timely information coming from overseas. Sometimes the first notice a family has received has been a call directly from a doctor at a military hospital overseas, although there has been no information about the casualty sent to the division casualty office. On one occasion, a soldier who had been sent home for convalescent leave called from Nashville Airport looking for a ride – and that was our first indication that he had been returned to the US! The problem has been particularly bad with soldiers treated in the Navy system. It has been almost impossible to get information on their status or their whereabouts. As you can imagine this has been very upsetting for the families. In this automated age we should be able to do a better job of tracking who is where and letting the family members know in a timely manner.

On a larger scale, I'd like to address what Congress can do for us. Number one in the minds of many here is that we need more soldiers on active duty, particularly in certain key specialties. In recent years the Army has downsized while adding on more and more overseas missions. The obvious result of this is that many of our soldiers have been deployed repeatedly over the last few years. In this group, for example, my husband has been deployed 16 of the last 24 months and Gricell Medley's has been deployed 15 of the last 17 months. Many families in our Chinook helicopter battalion, our Military Police battalion, our logistics and our special operations units can tell the same story. This unrelenting pace of deployments is a retention issue. Families will not be willing to go it alone forever, with little relief in sight. By the way, I know that a House Committee is currently looking at the possibility of making some European and Korean tours unaccompanied unit rotations, and I can tell you that to the families that will be perceived as just one more deployment added to the load that they already bear.

I would also ask Congress to let us keep our on-post schools. I know they are being reviewed, and I would like to say that they provide a high-quality and consistent education for our children who move from state to state, where the quality of education varies and where the local school districts are underfunded in the area of impact aid. A

number of our schools here at Fort Campbell have achieved Blue Ribbon status, and they are valued accordingly by the families.

In closing, I'd like to thank Sen Alexander for coming here today to let our voices be heard. I'm proud of the way our military, our families, and our local communities have worked together during this deployment, and I'd like that to be the main message that you take away today. Thank you.