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Christophe Pajon

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*Impact of Deployment on Families Perceptions by French Air Force Personnel*

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Christophe PAJON

Address:

Research Center of the French Air Force (CReA)

Team "Military History and Sociology"

Ecole de l'air

Base aérienne 701

F-13 661 Salon Air

Phone: +33 (0)4 90 17 82 59

Fax: + 33 (0)4 90 17 81 89

Email: christophe.pajon@inet.air.defense.gouv.fr

Author's note : The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the French Ministry of Defense, or the French Air Force.

*Impact of Deployment on Families by French Air Force Personnel*

This paper examines some of the effects of demands imposed on the families by the French Air force, and, especially, the absences of the airmen (women) from home because overseas deployment. As part of their job, airmen and –women are often required to be away from their family. Reasons and situations are multiple.

On the one hand, the professional mobility - every 3-4 years for officers and 7-8 years for non-commissioned officers) - implies sometimes a so-called by the French militaries “geographical celibacy”. The family will not follow the military who has to work in another base. On the other hand, and that is our subject, for 10 years, about 11 000 French service members (over 15 000 in 2006) are permanently deployed away from their families for at least 2 months (max. 6 months<sup>1</sup>) in military operations (*Operations extérieures*). Due to this quick turnover, about 40,000 members are deployed each year to accomplish overseas operations.

But they are not alone to serve outside the “*Metropole*”. If we include the “sovereignty missions” contingents in overseas territories or those deployed in several foreign countries (the most of them in Africa, “presence missions”), each year there are over 35.000 French militaries living simultaneously for at least 2 months outside France (European territory). In these last cases, families have sometimes the possibility and decide to move on another base. It is generally the choice of those who are affected in Guyana, Tahiti, Caribbean islands, etc... Thus, the families of French soldiers have to sustain physical separation for many reasons. Therefore, the Military Institution always is a “greedy” one as for family life. Today, in spite of its colonial history and overseas military experiences, the family support system developed by the French armed forces seems to respond imperfectly to the family demands, particularly when the active duty personnel is sent overseas for military and war operations.

This report is generally assumed in the French air force, and confirmed by an on-going study on which is based this paper. The 40 semi-guided interviews analysis<sup>2</sup> reveals several families complaint types. It can be synthesized in two highlights: the lack of information about the

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<sup>1</sup> In 2001, the French MoD decided to limit individual deployment duration to four months, every twelve months, excepted for Afghanistan – 6 months. The Army is the first that tries to respect this rule. Whereas Air Force Pilots have to respect training obligations, Air force Squadrons are actually deployed 2 months.

<sup>2</sup> 40 interviews on the Air base “701 – General Pinault” (Salon-de-Provence, France). The researchers were welcomed and mentored by the History and Sociology team. Colin Melanie, *Le militaire en OPEX et sa famille*, University de Nancy, CReA, 2008 ; Richard Tiphany, *Epouser la carrière militaire : les dilemmes familiaux des personnels de l’armée de l’air*, University of Provence, CReA, 2008.

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mission, the location and the duration of the mission, the isolation feeling of the family during the mission. These critics lead up to propose an explanation for the actual, or perception of, family support system maladjustments. According to the most of family sociological analysis, social evolutions of the family roles and structures are explanatory keys. Indeed, the impact of this macro-social phenomenon on military families can not be neglected. However the social evolutions develop in a specific social context in the Air Force. The Air Force culture and the evolutions of social military networks after the end of the compulsory service (1997) may also explain some feelings and perceptions of the families of deployed airmen (women).

After a brief overview of the French air force deployments and military family characteristics, the second part focuses on the current system of family support (official support procedures and organizations) and its limits.

### 1 – More deployments or more needs: what change in French Air Force military life?

Like most of the European armed forces and their components, French air force undergoes a downsizing tendency. The 2008 White Paper and the parallel personnel management policy confirm this personnel decrease propensity. Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the French armed forces have to cope with this “scissor” effect. Unlike the Army, the French Air Force was not so stressed by these changes. While an important part of Army manpower procurement was based on draft, Air force was already a quasi-All-Volunteers Force. But, , according to the White Paper project, until 2014 the Air Force face its most important personnel decrease of about 24 %.

	<i>Army</i>	<i>Navy</i>	<i>Air Force</i>
1965	365 000	67 000	<b>113 000</b>
1975	331 522	68 315	<b>102 078</b>
1985	299 826	67 040	<b>96 547</b>
1995	239 117	63 820	<b>89 185</b>
2005	135 868	43 195	<b>63 112</b>
2014 (WP 2008 project)	131 000	44 000	<b>50 000</b>

***Table 1: Personnel Reduction by component since 1965***

In spite of this change, France attempts to sustain military commitment in international affairs at the same level. And the Land-, Sea, and Air- components do not equally share burden (See

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Table 2). It logically depends on specific ways to accomplish their task. The achievement of French air force missions did not systematically necessitate service member overseas ground deployment. This explains partially the fact that the classical distinction combat/support troops is stronger within the French Air Force than in other components. The Supply and life support can be provided by men and women faraway from the war zone. Pilots and flying personnel may sometimes come back home after the mission<sup>3</sup>. According to Stephane Abrial, former Air Force Chief of Staff, in 2007, «(...) Air Force had 3 500 airmen and -women deployed all over the world. One third is in charge of overseas sovereignty missions. One third is charged of presence missions in countries with which we have Assistance Agreements. The rest is devoted on a daily basis to overseas operations with 80 including 20 combat aircrafts”.

	Operations' Name	Land	Air	Sea
<b>Chad</b>	Epervier	790	312	10
	Eufor (except OHQ)	1 171	160	10
	Boali	255	0	0
<b>Asia</b>	Heracles	21	230	311
	Pamir	1 685	303	64
	Epidote	35	1	1
<b>Ivory Coast</b>	Licorne	1 651	90	26
	Onuci	181	2	2
<b>(RCI)</b>	Corymbe			185
<b>Lebanon</b>	Daman	1 525	11	248
<b>Balkans</b>	Trident	1 726	19	15
	Astree	80	1	4
<b>Others</b>	-	127	50	4
	<b>Total</b>	<b>9 247</b>	<b>1 179</b>	<b>880</b>

*Table 2: 2008 Overseas Operations Deployments by component (Source: French MoD)*

<sup>3</sup> The French Air Force Base providing French ISAF Air Support was previously located at Dushanbe (Tajikistan). The decision to move a part of the Air-component to Support Base BAGRAM seems to be based as much on personnel management as on tactical considerations. The 1999 Kosovo campaign experience partially explains this choice. Combat pilots landed on bases located in Italy after war missions over Kosovo. This could have affected their combat motivation.

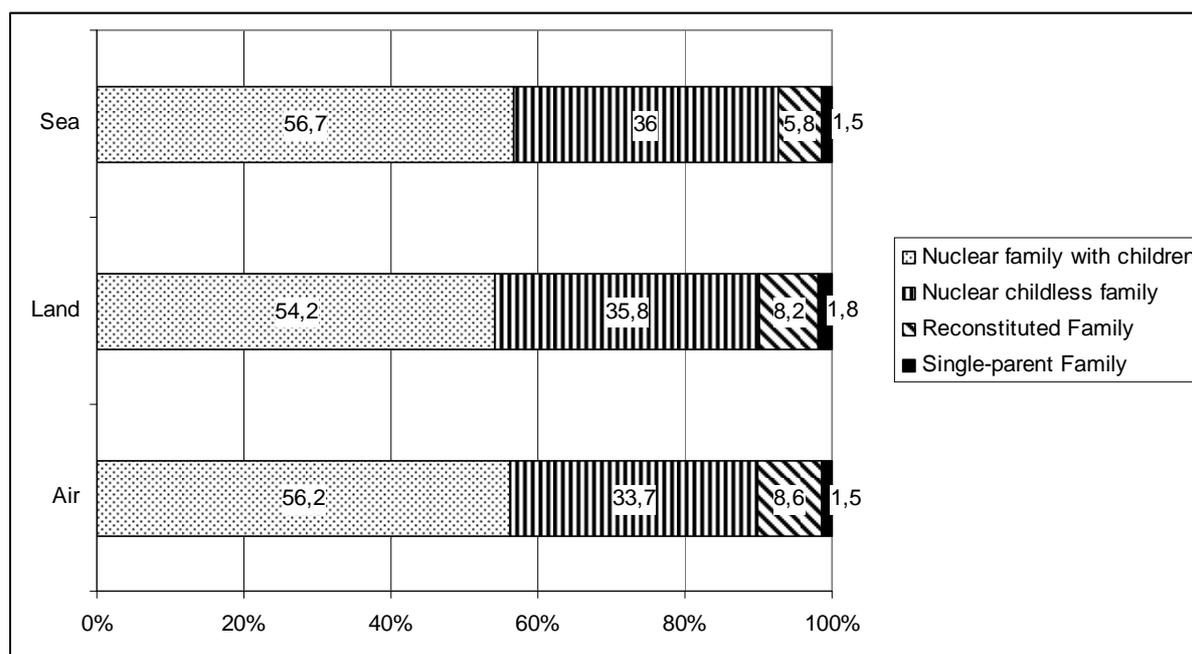
### What kind of family in Air Force?

This paper uses the official definition for family build up by the French MoD statistics office.

A family is at least two persons group living together. It composes:

- a couple with or without children, the “nuclear family”;
- a couple with or without children, which it is added children who were born from a former union, the “reconstituted” family
- One parent with children, the “single-parent” family.

According to this definition, 72.8% all French soldiers have their own family<sup>4</sup>. The results within the Air force are quite similar: 25.3% airmen (women) without family. 55% of military families have at least one child. The Figure 1 shows us the homogeneity of the family structures by the Land, Sea and Air components.



**Figure 1: Military families by component**

(Sources : Observatoire social de la Défense, *Les militaires et leurs familles*, Secrétariat général à l'administration, Ministère de la Défense, Paris 2003)

<sup>4</sup> 27.5 % are without family. Age is the most important factor: 57% are under 25 years old. Most of them still live with their parents (55%).

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10% spouses are military too. The homogamy is more widespread for the military women in the Air force (69.2%) and in the Navy (70.8%) than in the Army (62.2%). Men are ten times less to live with a military spouse.

But there are no significant differences between spouse professional activity of the spouse in Air force and the both other components. However there is a difference between men and women. Only 72% spouses of soldiers are in labor force (96.4% when the spouse is a man).

2 – What goes wrong? Before, during and after deployment.

### *Family Support in France and in Air Force*

During a deployment, air Force families become a large set of supports. Most of them are not directly linked to this specific job commitment: Social welfare programs (free education until 16 years old, Education Cash Assistance), Tax reductions for couples with children, family allowances, etc. Furthermore, the French MoD provides 55.000 low rent accommodations. In fact, military families choose to rent their own flats or houses around the bases in geographic limited area (30 km). MoD Child care Centres have also been created, but they could only welcome 1120 children (0-6 years old) in 2008. Then, it appears that the military families have to find rooms in civilian Centres. Finally, specific non-profit-making associations may provide financial advice, psychological counselling and cash assistance.

For families with overseas deployed spouse, French Military and Air force support is grounded on two pillars: a compensation system and families follow-up during the deployment.

First, each deployed soldier receives financial compensation. This “allowance for overseas service duties” (*Indemnités de sujétions pour service à l'étranger*, ISSE) exceed 100% of the basic salary. The ISSE amount, between 1988 and 7 644 Euros per month, depends on rank, career and familial burden. Added to the basic salary, this compensation should allow the families to cope with financial and human difficulties caused by spouse absence: day care, household duties increase, etc.

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Rank	Basic Gross Salary per month	ISSE per month
Brigadier General	5 096 euros (7490 \$) <sup>5</sup>	7 644 euros (11237\$)
Colonel	3 578 euros (5259,7\$)	5 368 euros (7891\$)
Lieutenant Colonel	2 993 euros (4400\$)	4 490 euros (6600\$)
Major	2 655 euros (3903\$)	3 983 euros (5855\$)
Captain	2 216 euros (3257\$)	3 325 euros (4888\$)
First Lieutenant	1 828 euros (2687\$)	2 742 euros (4031\$)
Chief Master Sergeant	1 942 euros (2855\$)	2 913 euros (4282\$)
Senior Master Sergeant	1 773 euros (2606\$)	2 660 euros (3910\$)
Master-Sergeant	1 444 euros (2123\$)	2 166 euros (3184\$)
Staff-Sergeant	1 357 euros (1995\$)	2 036 euros (2992\$)
Sergeant	1 407 euros (2068\$)	2 111 euros (3103\$)
Airman (woman) 1 <sup>st</sup> Class	1 325 euros (1948\$)	1 988 euros (2922\$)
Airman (woman) Basic	1 325 euros (1948\$)	1 988 euros (2922\$)

**Table 3:** “Allowance for overseas service duties” by rank

(Source : Giscard d’Estaing V., Olivier-Coupeau F., *Mission d’évaluation et de contrôle (MEC) sur le coût des opérations militaires extérieures, notamment sous mandat international*, Rapport d’information de l’Assemblée nationale n° 1790, Juillet 2009)

Secondly, the military institution accompanies families with administrative and formal procedures. Thus, the families have to meet one of the base social workers before and after the deployment. In this manner, they collect basic information about the family situation, and make a financial report when deployed service members come back. These meetings formally take place in “departure- and comeback paths”. Thus several meetings are organized in order to inform families about the official support offers, the deployment area and the mission. This is the opportunity to provide an official “Overseas operation guide for families”. For the moment, each armed forces component develops its own.

On French air force bases, the Personnel Condition Office must also manage the difficulties of the families of deployed service members. For example, one of its tasks is to organize family meetings during the deployment. The goal is to create social links between the spouses, to fight isolation feelings and to favor mutual experience exchanges.

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<sup>5</sup> Exchange Rate : 1 Euro = 1,47 dollar (September 2009)

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Finally, there is no psychological Support cell devoted to the families. The different actors have to detect the stress or distress situations by the families of deployed soldiers. The psychological office of the military medical center could take care of the most serious cases. In comparison with the other two components, the air force support procedures seem less formal. Whereas the Army created a “families support cell” on each base as sole actor, the Air Force System seems less receptive and efficient according to the interviews.

*Air Force families support limits: before, during and after deployment.*

The deployment experience narratives of the 18 interviewed families reveal patterns and similarities. First, the deployment problems for families are temporally defined. The difficulties evolve depending on whether it happens before, during or after the deployment. Then, the families generally use the terms rear-base/front-base to distinguish the specific way to live through the deployment period. We will adopt this spontaneous framework to present the major results of the interviews analysis.

Before the deployment: even if the airmen and women deployment is on average shorter than in the Army (4 months instead of 6 months), it involves physical separation and emotional strains in sending soldiers off to war. One spoken cause of this stress is the lack of information about the location and goals of the missions. The deployed service members’ spouses would like real information meetings that offices or social workers do not provide. The services in charge explain this situation by the shortage of means and the specific Air force deployment modalities. If a Fighter Squadron is deployed as unit, some soldiers join alone the deployed French forces on operations zone. So, it seems impossible to organize individual meetings, even if families ask for it. More serious dysfunction, the interviews reveal that the local family support services are not systematically informed about “individual” deployments. The militaries themselves have to come in order to warn the responsible services.

*“There was a problem with the social worker on the base. They contacted me one week after my husband came back.”*

*“I have never seen them once at Salon. My husband saw her before his last deployment, but I have never met them. They just called me to say that my*

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*husband would come back one week after. That was useless. I personally can understand because I am military too. But for a civilian wife... ”.*

The expressed lack of information should be linked with two consequences of the soldier absence. First, the parents have to explain the absence to the children. Depending on the age, the challenge is more or less difficult. But, the support services could be very helpful in providing an adapted description of the operation. Secondly, the “rear-base” can perceive the lack of information like a lack of interest for the deployed soldier families. This can reinforce their isolation feeling, while the spouse may already be afraid of the no-return hypothesis.

Also, the deployment possibility can cause negotiations inside the couple. The deployment frequency is not the same for all air force jobs. In professional specialties, there are more deployment volunteers than proposed posts. If all Air Force members are officially volunteers for overseas operations, sometimes there are un-spoken ways to avoid a deployment decision. Thus, the couples can sometimes discuss the opportunity of deployment. The negotiations generally lead up to weigh financial advantages/careers advancements and family life/couple stability.

During the deployment : When a member of the household is away from home for a period of time because of work-related travel, the weekend work, or unexpected overtime, spouses remaining at home must shoulder an increased burden of household duties. For the military, this absence is part of the job. The spouse marries his wife or her husband and his/her job at the same time. And the interviews show a high level of acceptance for deployment by the spouses (especially when he/she is a military).

Nevertheless absence duration and frequency affect the family life equilibrium. Four topics have been identified:

- 1 Isolation feeling: this feeling takes two forms. It becomes a “desertion” feeling for the rear-base, the family, and culpability for the front-base, the military. The deployed airmen or –women estimate themselves as powerless if something happens at the rear-base.
- 2 Couple stability: because wife and husband are far away for two, four or six months, they have to develop other ways to overcome the conflicts. In most of the cases, they

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favor the communication: phone at least once every two days; mail; email; the webcam use seems not very widespread.

- 3 Burden sharing: the spouses as rear-base have to deal alone with all the household duties, sometimes in addition to their civilian jobs. The opinions of spouses and deployed militaries can differ. The deployed airmen (women) often estimate that the burdens are equally shared with the rear-base. In case problems occur, he/she will try to find a solution with the rear-base.
- 4 Rear-base Stress: Spouses and children are concerned due the deployment risks.

After the deployment: the interviews analysis shows contrasted opinions. If couples see benefits in the absence (a way to recover his/her autonomy for a limited time, to revitalize the life of the couple), most of them admit that the comeback was not only an intense emotional moment. That was the time for unforeseen difficulties, time for reproaches. Even if during the deployment there are no explicit difficulties, the next months after the comeback have consequences on the couple and family equilibrium. The couple is threatened. The separation or divorce option is sometimes considered.

According to the interviewed families, deployments have two major impacts on the families. First at all, stress and anxiety increase for the spouse and children. More the operations is dangerous, more the stress level is elevated. The daily news provided by TV and newspapers are anxiety factors, especially when the communication with the front-base means are insufficient. This trend is accentuated by the dysfunctions of local family support system during the deployment. Then, the absences involve a chronic tiredness by the rear-base. The family and friends networks are not always able to overcome the daily difficulties that the spouse has to cope with. After the deployment, some spouse may develop depression. If they have a job, it may cause temporary working disability. Finally, interviews stress the loss of reference for children: difficulties at school, parental roles definition after the deployment.

The synthesis of the interviewed families' compliances confirms the diagnosis. The financial deployment compensation does not generate critics. It especially points out the lack of personal family's follow-up. The information demands are central and symptomatic. The next table aggregates the most recurrent claims to the Military Institution.

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<i>Before the deployment</i>	<i>During the deployment</i>	<i>After the deployment</i>
To avoid simultaneous or close in time deployment when husband and wife are military.	To reduce deployment duration (max. 4 months)	To improve the return modalities
An official mail to the families	To inform and contact regularly the families	To organize welcome procedure for the deployed soldiers
Equal Family Support, whatever the units, professional speciality, or deployment modality (group or individual)	To improve the available communication tools	To foresee psychological support for testing operations.
To produce a concrete and adapted overseas operation brochures for the children and the spouses.	To favour local family support system	
To create a website dedicated to deployed-soldier families	To extend Railways price reduction to the spouse during the deployment	
To warn the families early enough before the deployment	To suggest systematically psychological support to the spouse and to the children	
To know exactly the deployment duration	To take news impact on families into account	
To organize real briefing meetings for the families		
To give useful phone numbers list (offices contacts)		

*Table 4: Families Requests to the military (based on interviews)*

**Conclusion**

This paper presents the first results of an on-going study. After this exploratory step, it is only possible to suggest some statements and hypothesis. First, it reveals a strong heterogeneity by the families' acceptance of deployment. It depends essentially on the careers profile (specialties and post) and deployment modalities. Secondly, The Air Force family support

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system sometimes seems to imperfectly meet to families' requests. The central families' need is clearly identified as demand for communication (about deployment duration, missions' goals, between the deployed airmen and the spouse, etc.).

These statements lead up to two hypotheses about the deployment acceptance levels by the Air force families:

- it is linked to Air Force culture of deployment and military commitment (in comparison with the other two components), even if the impact on family structures of social evolutions must not be neglected.
- The families claim for more communication is another effect of the banalization process.