

4-1-2011

The Difficult Reintegration of Soldiers to Society and Family After Deployment

Beth Wegner
College of DuPage

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai>

Recommended Citation

Wegner, Beth (2011) "The Difficult Reintegration of Soldiers to Society and Family After Deployment," *ESSAI*: Vol. 9, Article 41.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol9/iss1/41>

This Selection is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at DigitalCommons@C.O.D.. It has been accepted for inclusion in ESSAI by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@C.O.D.. For more information, please contact koteles@cod.edu.

The Difficult Reintegration of Soldiers to Society and Family after Deployment

by Beth Wegner

(English 1102)

Throughout the history of humans, there have been countless wars, enemies, and men who have fought them. For our soldiers now involved in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) in Iraq and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan, deployments are long and often frequent. A time that soldiers dream of and look forward to while downrange is coming home, however, the reality of coming home is often different than what they had idealized in their heads. People change during a deployment. The spouses left behind had learned how to manage on their own, leaving the soldier feeling unneeded upon arrival home. Young children view the deployed parent as a stranger, while older children may be shy or resentful. The soldier returning home may be angry, tense, nervous, or traumatized from events downrange. Throughout history, soldiers returning from combat have experienced difficulty reestablishing relationships with family, despite the best efforts of the military to prepare them. Their families concern and understanding, though well intentioned, is usually not enough. The distance caused by the time away and the soldier's inability to leave the trauma and mindset of combat behind them can make the return home from combat stressful and difficult for both the soldier and family.

During World War I, soldiers returning home who had trouble reacclimating to civilian life were determined to have "shell shock" (Ritchie 11). Soldiers who returned disturbed from World War II were deemed to have something "not yet diagnosed, nervous", which was later changed to "battle fatigue" (Ritchie 11). By Vietnam the diagnoses of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, was coined. PTSD is still a common diagnosis for troops returning home with psychological injury sustained from combat. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, "time spent in a war zone changes people", but importantly, that "most service members will successfully readjust with few major problems" ("Returning from the War Zone" 2). Problems are common upon return home from a combat zone and are perfectly normal reactions, not necessarily PTSD.

Many soldiers have problems reintegrating to society after their return home, but there are differences between simple reintegration problems and PTSD. Most soldiers experience some issues with reintegration upon arrival home, including but not limited to nightmares, flashbacks, anger, feeling nervous, helpless, or fearful ("Returning from the War Zone" 2). These emotions are completely normal, according to LTC Michael Doyle, an Army doctor who writes about re-entry and reintegration after combat, who states that "distress during this time is expected and should not be medicalized" (Doyle 369). Most service members are able to function normally after a few weeks of being out of the combat area. There is cause for concern though that what is initially thought to be simple and normal reintegration issues can develop into PTSD. "If after several months your service member is still not adjusting well, it may be because of a combat stress injury" ("Returning to Family after Deployment" 6) and the help of a psychiatric professional should be sought. Although PTSD, a serious concern for returning soldiers, is covered more in the media and medicine, the issue that confronts most troops when returning home is the issue of reintegration. There are three factors to reintegration, "the single soldier and his/her assimilation back into a garrison environment; the married soldier and his/her assimilation with his family; and the family of the deployed soldier" (Doyle 365). For many service members it is a struggle to re-acclimate themselves to the life they left behind. Soldiers returning home after long periods of time in a combat zone or multiple deployments have to start the reintegration process by accepting the fact that they have changed.

Soldiers who have deployed before and come home with little to no problems expect the same again, but according to the VA, "things actually become more difficult" after multiple deployments ("Returning from the War Zone" 1). Greg Fulton, a 1st Sergeant from the National Guard's 951st Engineer Company out of Wisconsin, describes reintegration and the return home from a combat zone by saying, "Getting back out of that environment and back into a normal life, I guess it's shocking" (Verburg 3). The problems facing the individual soldier during reintegration include physical symptoms such as trouble sleeping, upset stomach, headaches, sweating, rapid heartbeat or breathing, feelings of numbness or the inability to feel happy, along with mental or emotional symptoms like nightmares, flashbacks and memories, nervousness, fear, being easily upset, feelings of rejection, guilt, and anger ("Returning from the War Zone" 2). Upon arrival home the soldier may also feel like they are somewhat out of place, alienated, or have an overall feeling of things being strange (Armstrong 136-137). The type of reaction to reintegration does seem to differ somewhat across gender lines. Research has shown that females returning from combat tend to experience more anxiety than their male counterparts, who tend to show more signs of anger (Demers 5). Many veterans have problems with loud noises or surprises during the first few weeks since they are reminders of the noises of combat. There are also problems with driving, as a soldier returning from OIF/OEF may still be looking for suicide bombers or IED's (Doyle 2005).

The problems adjusting to civilian life after combat so common they can be found in multiple works of literature. In the short story "The Red Convertible", by Louise Erdrich, a young man from a Native American reservation goes off to war only to return home unable to communicate with his family and feels out of place on the reservation (Erdrich 394-400). The young man, Henry, has problems reintegrating upon his return home. His brother Lyman notices the changes in his brother, saying that Henry was different, watching footage of the war for hours on end (Erdrich 396). Henry also exhibited signs of being jumpy and mean (Erdrich 396), common symptoms in soldiers returning home from war.

While Henry's problems may seem like they are caused by a unique set of circumstances resulting from his return from war to a Native American Reservation, or magnified from being a Vietnam prisoner of war, reintegration issues are also seen in a typical young man named Harold Krebs from a small town in Oklahoma in Ernest Hemingway's, "Soldier's Home" (136-145). In "Soldier's Home", a young man joins the military during World War I and returns home after many of the others in his home town, only to have his parents still treating him like a child and urging him to put the war behind him and move on (Hemingway 136-145). Krebs is not concerned with the civilian world and finds most of the daily life activities and others around him to be of little importance upon his return home. He begins spending time alone, sleeping late and reading books, seeking solace in trying to make sense of what he experienced in the war by reading everything he can about the battles he fought in (Hemingway 140). Krebs family is concerned with his behavior and uses the other boys in his town as an example for him, telling him that the other boys who returned home from the war were able to put it behind them, beginning to settle down and contributing to the community, and that maybe it is time for Krebs to get back out into the world and begin doing the same (Hemingway 142). This concern is viewed as overwhelming and interfering for Krebs, and results in him wanting to leave again.

The issues that Krebs is experiencing are normal issues that soldiers experience when returning home from a combat zone, both in the time period following World War I when the story was to have taken place, and for today's returning veterans. The family expected Krebs to come home the same way he was when he left for war, a young man who is interested in life and girls, but war changes people, and it has changed Krebs. His family continues to push him to return to the things he enjoyed before the war and to return to being a member of the community. Though their intentions are good, they cannot understand why Krebs is withdrawn and quiet. During this time period, in the 1920's following World War I, not much was known about reintegrating our returning

soldiers to civilian life. However, for troops currently returning from a combat zone or deployment, there are resources available to help them through the tough transitional period from deployment to the life they left behind.

For soldiers currently returning home from deployment there are many resources available to them to make the reintegration process easier. The military has been doing a good job of educating troops about the issues they will face during reintegration from the time that they are notified of deployment. The armed forces have recognized that reintegration is "vital to readiness- as important as getting soldiers ready to deploy is their recovery after deployment" (Doyle 362). Before leaving for a deployment each soldier is given a psychological screening to see if any problems are apparent before combat and this test is repeated upon returning home. Soldiers also go through a reintegration screening while still on deployment (Doyle 365). Once soldiers have returned home it is important to find ways to reintegrate. While it is normal for a soldier home from combat to want to spend some time alone, there are many healthy things to do to make the reintegration process easier. The soldier can resume previous activities or hobbies they enjoyed before deploying, try relaxation techniques if anger has been an issue since returning home, and stay connected with friends from the combat zone while spending time with family and friends also ("Returning from the War Zone" 7). The reintegration process is not one the soldier has to face alone though. There are many services available to the returning service member that they can use whenever they have questions or feel like reintegration is becoming too difficult. Among these services available to all military are websites such as Military OneSource, a location for information for all types of military questions, a local veteran's center or veteran's medical center, and the US Department of Veterans Affairs ("Returning from the War Zone" 14-15). Soldiers who are returning home to an active duty situation can also find resources on their local base such as a military chaplain or mental health services.

Soldiers returning home who have spent time on deployment with the National Guard or Reserve may not have quite as many resources and options available to them to help cope with the reintegration process as their active duty counterparts. Many reserve or guard components go through the initial phases of return, screenings and paperwork at a local base, but then in as little as four days, are released to return home, which may be to an area with limited to no military support (Doyle 367). These soldiers lack the military environment that has become so familiar to them and is available to active duty soldiers. The reintegration process may become more difficult for these soldiers as resources are not as readily available to them as their active duty counterparts. In these cases reintegration is largely taken on by their local communities and a Veterans Administration hospital close to their home (Doyle 367).

For all returning soldiers, the symptoms and problems caused by reintegration are completely normal and expected upon arrival home from deployments or a combat theater. For most soldiers, they are in a combat or deployed situation one day, and home the next ("Adjusting to Civilian Life after Combat Duty with the Guard or Reserve" 1). In previous wars, before air travel, soldiers had time to decompress and wind down on the return home because they would have been traveling by ship. Currently, soldiers are home typically within a time period of one to two days after leaving the combat theater of operation, leaving them little time to readjust to and prepare for civilian life. This quick change can cause many problems for troops returning to family.

For many soldiers who return home, not only have they gone through a change personally, but they find a family that has also changed in their absence. Though there are issues that occur between soldiers and their parents, siblings, and others, the main issues occur with the immediate family the soldier returns to including their spouse, partner, and children. One of the concerns a service member has about returning home is that their spouse has changed and that there could be new tensions on the relationship ("Returning to Family Life after a Deployment" 1). Time and distance also do damage to a relationship. Upon return home some couples experience a "honeymoon phase" ("Returning from the War Zone" 4) where everything seems better since they are

together, while some husbands and wives confess that they feel like strangers to each other ("Returning to Family Life After Deployment" 3). For some troops these changes in the relationship may leave them feeling like they are starting over again, rather than coming home to the person and relationship they left behind during deployment ("Adjusting to Civilian Life after Combat Duty with the Guard or Reserve" 1). In addition to the feelings that each other have changed, the spouse left behind has gained a new independence from managing everything themselves that may put additional strain on the relationship.

In the absence of the soldier, many spouses learn how to run a household alone and do the work of both people. This can include paying bills, daily chores, and the discipline and raising of children. These are common changes in the absence of a spouse and difficulties and arguments can arise when the soldier returns home and tries to resume roles they have previously had. The spouse who had been left behind may have found that they enjoy taking care of things, like paying the bills, and may feel that they do a better job at it. Once the soldier returns home there is a time period of "re-sorting" the responsibilities of the household and how the workload is divided (*Returning to Family Life after Deployment* 5).

Though some of the problems that face a family upon the return of a deployed service member may seem insurmountable, there are many ways for spouse to reconnect and get to know each other again. It is critical that the couple find time to spend together and reopen the lines of communication. During a deployment there isn't much time to talk, an occasional e-mail, phone call, or video conference. The couple must now relearn how to talk to each other and solve problems together. There are several things that are suggested for a couple to do together to make the reintegration process go smoother. It is important for the couple to make time to talk and listen about the experiences they both had during the separation that can help them understand the changes they see in one another ("Adjusting to Civilian Life after Combat Duty with the Guard or Reserve" 2). Communication on a face to face basis may be somewhat difficult after the deployment ("A Soldier and Family Guide to Redeploying" n.p) but can be overcome. Another important step to making the reintegration process between the couple go smoothly is for each partner to be willing to try new things or a new routine ("Adjusting to Civilian Life after Combat Duty with the Guard or Reserve" 2). The spouse left behind during the deployment has a different way of doing things in the absence of the soldier and both people need to be lenient and compromising in how things will be done now that the soldier is home. Both the soldier and the spouse left behind need to feel like they are needed and appreciated, so compromise is crucial. Even when the reintegration phase seems to be going well, it is still important not to rush the reunion because the couple needs time to regain the closeness, both physically and emotionally, that they desire ("Adjusting to Civilian Life after Combat Duty with the Guard or Reserve" 2). Not only does a couple's relationship and life go through a lot of change during a deployment, children are also affected in many ways from the parent's absence.

Reconnecting with children after deployment can be a much harder task than reconnecting with a spouse, and the ways of handling these problems is often dependent on the child's age. Many soldiers returning home from deployment have dreamed of their reunion with their families, but the children that they left behind are not the same children who are there upon return home. Babies that were left behind have turned into toddlers, children into teenagers, and teenagers into more independent adults. A problem that many parents have when returning home from a deployment is that their children may not seem quite as happy to see them as they had hoped, and that small children are reluctant to hug them ("A Soldier and Family Guide to Redeploying" n.p). The type of reaction given to the returning parent varies greatly by the age of the child. Children who are under a year old may cry when being held by the parent who left and toddler children may not recognize or know the parent upon their return ("A Soldier and Family Guide to Redeploying" n.p). Children in this age group also go through developmental changes while the parents are gone, and it can be challenging for the returning parent to see changes such as newly developed skills such as talking or

walking as positive and not something else that they have missed ("Adjusting to Civilian Life after Combat Duty with the Guard or Reserve" 2). Reactions are different among older children, where children between three and five years old may seem scared of the returned parent, and children age six to twelve years old may make demands on the returning parents time and need more attention than younger children ("A Soldier and Family Guide to Redeploying" n.p). The oldest children, the teenager, may seem like they don't care that the parent has returned, or may be more temperamental ("A Soldier and Family Guide to Redeploying" n.p). Children of all ages may be fearful to let the parent out of their sight in case the parent leaves again (Shaffer 2). As difficult as these changes are for a parent to witness and arrive home to, there are many ways to ease back into the family relationship and reconnect with children.

For a parent returning home, there are many challenges to overcome in getting reacquainted with their children and earning back their trust. For some, the child may feel more comfortable with the parent who stayed home during the deployment because they have been the person the child has relied on during the deployment ("Returning Home from Deployment When You're a Mom" n.p). Though the parent's feelings may be hurt, it is important to let the child be the one to renew the trust and bond that was broken during a separation. Even when the situation isn't that the child is more attached to the parent who stayed home, the returning parent shouldn't force the child to play with them or show affection as it is important to let the child get re-acquainted and readjust in their own time and pace ("Getting to Know Your Children Again" n.p). As in the reintegration process between a couple, reintegrating with children is also a process that cannot be rushed. While spending alone time together as a couple is a way to help the reintegration process, spending individual time with children is also an excellent way to reconnect. Though the return of a parent is an exciting time for the entire family, the return process is a long and difficult road that a family must travel together.

The reintegration process is one that demands a lot of the individual soldier and family. There are emotional problems caused by the horrors of war that the soldier brings home with him, the emotional upset of the family that had been left behind, and the long journey ahead of them all in coming together again as a family. "From ancient times to the present, warriors have come home to find themselves changed in many ways they had never imagined possible- ways they may find undesirable and difficult to manage, even with help" (Matsakis 34-35). In today's military the reintegration process is made easier by outside help, a resource many soldiers of previous wars did not have access to. And though the reintegration process is a difficult one, it is common when a soldier experiences difficulty ("Returning from the War Zone" 8). Most reintegration issues are typically resolved and most soldiers are able to leave the combat experiences and deployment behind them. While there are many resources available to the returning soldier, there needs to be more emphasis on the fact that some issues upon returning home are completely normal, and the public needs to be made more aware of this. Through the support of our troops and some patience and understanding, our troops returning from combat and deployment can realize that reintegration is a process that cannot be rushed and focus on returning home and spending more time with the family and loved ones they have missed.

Works Cited

- "A Soldier and Family Guide to Redeploying". *Per.hqusareur.army.mil*. 2003. Web. 5 April, 2011.
"Adjusting to Civilian Life after Combat Duty with the Guard or Reserve". *Military One Source*. 2011. Web. 5 April, 2011.

- Armstrong, Keith, Suzanne Best, and Paula Domenici. *Courage After Fire*. Berkeley, C: Ulysses Press, 2006. Print.
- Demers, Anne. "The War at Home: Consequences of Loving a Veteran of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars". *The Internet Journal of Mental Health*. 6.1 (November 2009): n. pag. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 7 April, 2011.
- Doyle, Michael E., LTC. "Re-entry and Reintegration: Returning Home After Combat". *Psychiatric Quarterly*. Vol. 74. No. 4 (Winter 2005): 361-370. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 12 April, 2011.
- Erdrich, Louise. "The Red Convertible." *Literature and the Writing Process*. Ed. Linda S. Coleman, Susan X Day, Robert Funk, and Elizabeth McMahan. Boston, MA; Longman, 2011. 394-400. Print.
- "Getting to Know Your Children Again". *Military One Source*. University of Missouri, Lincoln University, USDA, DOD, and Virginia Tech, n.d. Web. 5 April, 2011.
- Hemingway, Ernest. "Soldiers Home". *Archives.org*. Internet Archive, n.d. 136-145. Web. 23 March, 2011.
- Matsakis, Aphrodite. *Back from the Front: Combat Trauma, Love, and the Family*. Baltimore, MA: Sidran Institute Press, 2007. Print.
- "Returning from the War Zone: A Guide for Military Personnel". *United States Department of Veterans Affairs*. VA, 2010. Web. 6 April, 2011.
- "Returning Home from Deployment When You're A Mom". *Military One Source*. 2011. Web. 22 March, 2011.
- "Returning to Family Life After Deployment". *Deploymenthealthlibrary.fhp.osd.mil*. 2007. Web. 12 April, 2011.
- Ritchie, Elspeth Cameron, COL. "Update on Combat Psychiatry: From the Battle Front to the Home Front and Back Again". *Military Medicine*. 172, 12:11 (December 2007): p11-15. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 12 April, 2011.
- Shaffer, Ian. "The Family Reunited: Helping Kids with Special Needs Cope with Reintegration". *The Exceptional Parent*. 38.10 (October 2008): p84-86. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 7 April, 2011.
- Verburg, Steven. "For Soldiers Returning Home, More Challenges Await". *Wisconsin State Journal* 9 January, 2010. n.p. Web.