

French Army – Family Psychological and Social Support

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The French Army is permanently engaged on different theatres of operations. Our units are regularly projected and the professionalism of our soldiers is recognised.

But it is important that their close relatives, confronted with the absence of a loved one, are supported within our units and backed up when they wish so.

As of 1996, the French Army created the recruitment retraining and quality of life departments (BRRCP), which constitute a proximity support for the families.

The Army currently wants to improve the efficiency of the set up by developing the aid to parents and couples. Indeed, in order to meet the expectations of the families, it bases its reflection on three inquiries carried out during the year 2005:

- The consequences of missions outside the national territory on the families (ARIA);
- The expectations of Army personnel in terms of social allowances (EMAT/CRH) (Army Staff/Quality of life);
- The aid to the families of military personnel in operations outside the national territory (EMAT/CRH).

This support set up comes within the scope of an approach aimed at establishing a contract between the institution, the military and his/her family. The objective of the command is to define the nature of the provided support and to be able to carry out its engagement.

This moral and formal contract will result in a still more solid relation based on confidence and on a cohesion spirit.

Thus, the Army Staff/Quality of life is carrying out a reflection on the organisation of the accompaniment and the psychological and social support of the families of the military personnel when in operations outside the national territory and in short duration missions.

The psychological and social support proposed to the families of military personnel deployed outside the national territory and in short duration missions participates in the operational capability and remains a priority of the military condition, fully assumed by the command and under the responsibility of the commanding officers.

Indeed, the military must go to the theatre of operations knowing that his/her family will be assisted, if needed, by the military institution.

In order to meet the expectations regularly expressed by the families, the Army is developing the aid provided to parents and couples and complementing the existing set up.

The support likely to be provided to the families before, during and after the mission encompasses the following domains:

- moral support (command, presidents of category, chaplain, associations);
- social accompaniment (social worker);
- administrative assistance (assistance to the families: recruitment retraining quality of life, human resources director, adviser for legal affairs);
- information/communication to the families (assistance cell for the families, chief of Training);
- psychological support, assistance to parents and couples (social workers, doctors, human environment officers).

Thus, the BRRCP and its assistance cell for the families (CAF) are the hub which ensures the synergy of a professionalised support set up based on the mutual aid and solidarity tradition within the Army.

1 PREPARING THE FAMILY FOR THE DEPARTURE

1.1 Organisation of information sessions about the mission

These information sessions are imperative and are aimed at presenting the mission and the life conditions in the theatre (presentation of the site, the mission and its duration, the living environment, the working tempo, the communication possibilities) in order to reassure the families and thus at meeting a wish expressed by the families in various inquiries.

The military himself is a major actor of the set up because he communicates with his family.

They also make it possible to prepare, with the “rear base”, the administrative support of the families:

- By listing with them the important documents to have such as the official family record book, passport, identity card, powers of attorney over bank accounts, medical file (social security, insurance company), insurance policies (home, car), tax declarations;
- By checking the filiations, the telephone numbers (both at home and cell phones) the address of the place of residence, the temporary address of the spouse, the e-mail;
- By presenting the support mission of the legal affairs adviser of the BRRCP and of all the concerned actors in the rear base;
- By reminding that it may be advisable to inform the teachers of the departure of the military to enable them to better understand and manage possible changes in the behaviour of the children at school;
- By giving information in terms of insurance, especially on contracts being compatible with the risks of a mission (whole life and disablement insurance). Indeed, it is necessary that the military measure the risks and protect themselves against them while preserving the interests of their family, being aware that the responsibility of the State (medical and social protection) mainly depends on the status of the couple.

Individual departures:

The Assistance cell for the families will make sure that the military follows all the steps prior to any mission (treasurer, human resources director, Assistance cell for the families, social worker, legal cell,

president of category) and that his/her family is regularly contacted and invited to the social and cultural activities during the entire mission. Moreover, it would be desirable to “provoke” a visit of the family at the BRRC before the military leaves.

1.2 Intervention and role of the social worker (ASS)

- An updated list of the personnel deployed in operations outside the national territory or short duration missions is systematically communicated to the social worker and the latter is informed on the individual departures.

The social worker contacts the spouse, parents or any other persons designated by the military by letter, by phone or on the occasion of a collective information session.

- The ASS is qualified to carry out collective and individual social actions in order to improve the living conditions of the families through a general approach based on social accompaniment.

Listening to the families and being available for them, the social worker also proposes the specific orientations and advice for a given situation. This person works in close collaboration with the various actors taking part in the social environment of the unit, respecting of course the professional secrecy.

The social worker works both for the personnel and their family; and is therefore at the latter’s disposal, if they agree, before and during the mission of the personnel, then when he comes back.

He receives, informs, supports and accompanies the families, in case of social, family, financial and psychological difficulties.

He carries out or participates in collective information or prevention actions of any type proposed to the families.

Due to his/her training, the social worker is the privileged interlocutor of the CAF’s commander in terms of information, orientation or organisation of the collective actions related to the parents or couple.

1.3 Developing a documentation adapted to the garrison and the mission.

The documentation to be given to the families includes all the names, addresses and phone numbers of the actors or organisations likely to facilitate their daily life.

- “Family guide of the soldier deployed in operation outside the national territory”: this leaflet must be adapted by the units depending on their specificities and it must include the useful addresses and phone numbers of the regiment (ASS and social echelon, chaplain, privileged point of contact at the CAF, unit of the spouse, duty officer, administrative services, legal affairs, medical service, doctor, Human Environment Officer (OEH), president of category, interlocutor at the Military Health Service and health insurance.)

This leaflet which provides information and advice to organise the family life during the mission will be sent with a letter from the commanding officer to the spouse, and for the personnel who are single, to the person of their choice.

- Information on the “local life”

A comprehensive documentation is usually developed in the local newspapers (free of charge). The CAF will have this documentation available for the families. They include administrative, legal, fiscal advice, addresses and phone numbers of the concerned organisations and addresses of child-minding structures (at usual and unusual hours) or those of neighbourhood craftsmen for repairing works.

2 INFORM AND COMMUNICATE DURING THE MISSION

Recent events have shown that it is of paramount importance to protect the families against the harmful effects of information spread without hindsight by the media.

The communication effort with the families must be based on regularity and reciprocity in order on the one hand to strengthen the link of confidence between the military institution and the family and, on the other hand, to enhance clear and serene exchanges which would not be over dramatised.

2.1 Create the conditions for privileged communication

The following actions enhance communication meeting the expectations of the military's family.

- ***Information sessions on the mission with the commanding officer:***

Information and questions and answers sessions will be organised during the mission in order to defuse the possible anxiety of the families. They will describe the conditions of the mission.

- ***Set up of a “freefone number” available to the families:***

Activated in case of crisis after prior contact with the DiCOD (Defence public relations organisation), this number enables the families to rapidly obtain checked information or to be oriented toward the most adapted personnel to obtain help.

- ***Set up of an answering service:***

The answering service spreads information recorded by the Human Environment Officer (OEH) of the theatre on the daily life of the military.

The feeling of absence is thus lessened.

- ***Dissemination of newspapers, videos, photos on a website*** identified by the families, abiding by the law on privacy.

- ***Awareness of the personnel and his/her family of the importance of their personal communication: internet, phone calls, letters.***

The distance intensifies the emotional aspect of exchanges. It is therefore important that the personnel and his/her family are aware of the importance to maintain a harmonious communication and not to minimise the importance of the epistolary correspondence, in complement to the modern communication means.

2.2 Watch the impact on the families of possible information spread by the media in order to correct, readjust or complement them if necessary.

The Assistance cell for the families will particularly focus its attention on the reports (TV, radio and press) related to the mission and will provide acknowledged information when necessary in order to avoid that unfounded rumours circulate, be amplified and induce a tense and suspicious atmosphere within the military community.

The aim is that the family be completely confident in the military institution for the quality and credibility of the information it provides.

3 MAINTAINING THE SOCIAL LINK

Activities for the benefit of the families are organised by the Assistance cell for the families.

3.1 Organisation of activities for the benefit of the families

- Social or cultural activities;
- Meeting places;
- Cyber cafés at the disposition of the families who do not have an internet connection at home.

3.2 Organisations of activities for the children during the week-ends

- The spouse in the “rear base” can then “relax”.

3.3 Enhance the link with the associative environment

It is important to maintain a link with the world of associations. Indeed, the associations are actors outside the institutional field which may help the personnel and their family.

- *The associations of the Ministry of Defence (ARIA, ANFEM, FCSAD, association of branches etc.):*

These associations continue the action of the BRRCP by organising activities for the benefit of the families.

- *The civilian associations (their addresses can be obtained at the town councils):*
 - school support;
 - cultural, sport associations.

4 SUPPORT TO THE PARENTS AND COUPLE

The family of the military, confronted with the absence of a loved one, experiences a special emotional situation.

Therefore, it is important to inform the families and to help preventing the problems related to the absence of the military as spouse and parent, by organising awareness actions conducted by specialists (child psychiatrists, psychologists, marriage guidance counsellor, specialised associations).

The chief of the Assistance cell for the families, with the Human Environment Officer will previously meet the specialists in order to prepare their intervention by presenting them the specificities of the military profession and of the mission.

These conferences will be organised at unit level or proposed by the social organisations within the framework of the actions funded by the community’s social and cultural actions (ASCC).

They are aimed at enhancing the exchanges and debates as well as helping understand some behaviours without systematically denouncing them as behavioural “disorders”.

Besides, the objective of these conferences is also to prepare the “after”, that is the return of the military, which is a sensible “reaccustoming” period for the couple as well as for the entire family. This phase is all the more important since the quality of what is going to be shared within the family during this privileged period will define the climate of possible future missions.

4.1 “Support to parents” conference

The families have expressed the wish to attend conferences organised by professionals on the following topics:

- How to handle the absence of the father or the mother;
- Explain the anxiety signs of the child;
- Explain the stress, anxiety and depression symptoms;
- Prepare the return and avoid the desynchronisation of the family.

4.2 “Support to couple” conference

These conferences, with an educational objective and animated by a marriage guidance counsellor, will address the following themes:

- Handle the absence of the spouse;
- Handle the “repeated” absences;
- Communicate with the spouse during and after the mission; make a list of all assets used to communicate and analyse their effects (internet, professional phone number, cell phone, letter);
- Be again in couple.

The marriage guidance counsellors may be free lance or be employed in the CCAS, or in centres for the medical protection of children. It is advisable to contact these organisations.

In each town council, marriage and family guidance counsellors are here to listen to the families, to provide advice and information within the framework of the relational, affective, family and couple life.

4.3 Knowing the organisations specialised in psychological support

The absence of the military may induce anxiety, tensions, a feeling of isolation among the family; the support of competent organisations may provide some help in this regard. The Assistance cell for the families will constitute a databank for the families, including the names and addresses of specialised organisations and of professional personnel agreed by the DDASS (social and sanitary directorate):

- *The educational psychological medical centres* (CMPP), comprising child psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers, are present on the entire territory. You can go there with or without appointment.
- *The family arbitration (support of the couple undergoing a crisis)* is ensured by specialists such as psychotherapists, therapists and marriage guidance counsellors (most of the time free lance).
- *Specialised associations* provide their expertise in the support to parents.
 - the School of Parents;
 - Fil Santé Jeunes (health care for young people).

5 PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT AND ACCOMPANIMENT IN CASE OF CRISIS

5.1 Intervention of the Human Environment Officers

The Army has constituted an OEH network who ensure the link between the theatre and the garrison.

Their mission begins before and during the cohesion session during which they envisage and implement all information for the moral, among which the liaisons with the rear base and the CAF.

During the operation, they take into account the whole dimension of quality of life which encompasses all material and social aspects of the life in the theatre as well as the relations with the rear base.

After the operation, they have to inform the command on the encountered difficulties.

5.2 In case of serious crisis:

The commanding officer may ask the Army psychological support and intervention cell (CISPAT) to set up a team of psychologists:

- By message GUERRE EVEN or EVEN GRAVE (“war event” or “serious event”);
- Intervention time: D+1 to D+15 after the event.

An opinion may be asked by phone to a psychologist in the field of mental health:

- During and after the working hours.

5.3 Set up of a crisis cell in case of serious event

The events in the Ivory Coast have unfortunately reminded us of the absolute necessity to anticipate and prepare the setting up and implementation of a crisis cell under the responsibility of the commanding officer, and to plan its action.

The composition of a standard cell is the following:

- The commanding officer and the second in command (steering of actions to be carried out);
- The commander of the BRRCP assisted by the commander of the Assistance cell for the families;
- The social worker;
- The director of the financial and administrative services (contact with the communication directorate in the theatre, transcription of death certificates on the official family record book, recovering of personal effects, loss of property by destruction, relation with the CTAC [paying organisations] etc.);
- The director of human resources (relief of personnel, statutory positions of the wounded);
- The chancellor (messages in case of serious event, recovering of death certificates, commendations, decorations etc.);
- The doctor;
- The Human Environment Officer;
- The executive officer assisted by the officer in charge of communication (contacts with the media, answers to condolence or support messages, organisation of visits of authority, ceremonies etc.);
- The president of category;
- The chaplain.

It co-ordinates the support of the families in the broadest sense:

- Moral and psychological support;
- Social accompaniment;

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- Taking into account of medical, administrative and legal situations;
- Support of the wounded (status, payment, career path, possibility of redeployment);
- Support of the widows and parents regarding the organisation of the funerals;
- Handing over of the personal effects (official delegation);
- Organisation of the travels and accommodation of the family within the framework of visits in hospitals, or participation in a ceremony (see CABAT);
- Relations with the media.

The officer in charge of communication in the cell is in charge of handling the relations with the media while preserving the privacy and tranquillity of the families.

The handling of the dead in operations and the welcoming of the families may be defined in the framework of the organisation of a national homage ceremony in Paris. In such a case, the cell set up by the unit would be in permanent liaison with the crisis cell possibly set up in Paris, under the authority of the Military Governor of Paris (GMP), who is responsible for the co-ordination of all the carried out actions.