

The Air Force Spouse: From Past to Present

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Air Force spouses, and perhaps especially commanders' spouses, have traditionally shared a strong sense of responsibility for the welfare of the Air Force community. Moreover, they have acted upon their feelings by volunteering for all sorts of charitable activities and by participating in the social life of Air Force units and the local community. This tradition of helpfulness continued for so long that it came to be taken for granted and, until recently, was even considered a fundamental obligation.

Commenting on the situation, Edward Aldridge, Jr., former secretary of the Air Force, said, "Over the years, there has developed a set of attitudes that spouses of military members in certain leadership positions are expected to fill preconceived roles in terms of volunteer work, social functions, and membership in social organizations to ensure the career success of military members. This set of attitudes had gained such widespread acceptance as to constitute unwritten 'policy.' "

The historical reasons for this tradition are easy to understand. Military organizations have almost always consisted mainly of single, male members. Even up to World War II, a comparatively small number of officers were married, and for that reason, their spouses' role was important. They were in charge of the social life of the base where their husbands were stationed, and they worked together to help meet community needs.

By the late 1980s, conditions had changed so much that the Air Force had more than 385,000 spouses, and 64 percent of its members had family responsibilities. Many of the spouses, including those of commanders, now wanted to pursue their own careers by seeking employment outside the home. Unsurprisingly, concerns arose during this period of spousal transition.

On 3 August 1987, the *Air Force Times* reported that two Air Force spouses were pressured to quit their outside jobs in order to participate in base activities. One week later, that same newspaper reported that, in a letter it received from the two top Air Force officials—Gen Larry D. Welch, the chief of staff, and Secretary Aldridge—those leaders assured Air Force wives that their holding jobs would not affect the careers of their husbands and that the Air Force supported the work aspirations of spouses. The officials went on to describe the Air Force as a family community that reflected American society and then said, “Accordingly, we do expect the spouses of commanders and others in key leadership positions to *participate* in activities which support Air Force activities. Regardless of where and when the spouse works, there are opportunities to participate in the Air Force community in a constructive way.”

This was the Air Force’s first official written policy on spousal employment. Reaction to it was interesting. People who heard or read about the policy statement described it as unclear, contradictory, or ambiguous. Many believed that it was an endorsement of the traditional *unwritten* policy that expected wives of commanders and senior leaders to forgo employment opportunities and careers in order to participate more fully in Air Force activities. The statement that spouses are “expected to participate” caused uncertainty about how much participation the Air Force expected, what it required, and when in the military member’s career that participation should begin.

On 15 September 1987, Secretary Aldridge and General Welch announced the names of members of an Air Force Blue Ribbon Panel appointed to examine issues affecting Air Force spouses. The panel’s charter was to examine the range of activities in which spouses have traditionally participated; identify the extent and causes of pressures and conflicts between employment or career aspirations and participation in the Air Force community; and recommend how to resolve or minimize those conflicts. (This author served as an adviser to the Air Force Blue Ribbon Panel.)

On 22 October 1987, the secretary of defense signed a Department of Defense (DOD) policy statement on *Employment of Spouses of Members of the Armed Forces*. Subsequently, the DOD issued a Department of Defense Directive (DODD) addressing, *Employment or Volunteer Work of Spouses of Military Personnel*, 10 February 1988, and Air Force Regulation (AFR) 30-51, *Air Force Members’ Marital Status and Activities of Their Spouses*, 6 June 1988.

The three documents are clear and unequivocal. The policy statement of the AFR, adopted almost verbatim in the published policy recommendations of the Air Force Blue Ribbon Panel, reads in part,

It is Air Force policy that the choice of a spouse to pursue employment, to be a homemaker, to attend school, or to serve as a volunteer in Air Force or local community activities is a private matter and solely the decision of the individual concerned. No commander, supervisor, or other Air Force official will directly or indirectly impede or otherwise interfere with this decision.

The panel's recommendations go even further, stating that the Air Force should actively support the career and employment aspirations of spouses. In addition, the panel recommended that the Air Force promote among civilian business leaders the importance and benefits of hiring military spouses and that it encourage the Civilian Personnel Office to actively promote hiring programs that place military spouses in government jobs.

These policy statements, directives, and recommendations, as well as provisions of the regulation, boded well for the Air Force spouse's freedom to decide whether to pursue employment or career aspirations or to participate in Air Force community activities. Ideally, the Air Force spouse—male or female—should not have to worry about whether these personal decisions will have an adverse impact on the Air Force member's career, or whether the spouse will come under external pressure from any source.

How did this newfound freedom of choice work in actual practice? Not perfectly, at least not yet, though perceptions and practices have definitely improved. Time-honored traditions and their associated values do not just disappear overnight. According to several spouses recently interviewed for this paper, the policy of 1988 is being implemented (or not implemented) in different ways. Some spouses have suggested that senior leadership is fooling itself if it thinks that simple verbiage from the secretary's office will change the way spouses (male/female) are utilized or perceived in some organizations. Ultimately, transition and implementation of the policy in the field is the responsibility of squadron commanders and the commanders above them. Their attitude and behavior will affect the policy's speed of implementation. It is also true that different sets of circumstances create different needs and make different demands on spouses. One need only imagine (or remember) the differences among isolated stateside locations, overseas tours, large

metropolitan areas, alerts, extended tours of duty, deployments, and classified missions to understand that sometimes Air Force spouses will face unique and unexpected demands.

Often, many of the conditions cited above are not unusual, describing everyday life for many members of the Air force. The duty of commanders, supervisors, and other Air Force officials to comply with the policy, in force since 1988, is clearly spelled out (along with penalties for noncompliance). Before publication of the regulation addressing this issue, the role of Air Force members' spouses remained unclear. Now that role is whatever they want it to be, free from pressures of any sort, either on themselves or their spouses, who are military members. This situation can only lead to a better Air Force, expediting an invigorated approach to volunteer programs and enhancing opportunities for those who genuinely wish to participate in Air Force community activities, as well as for those who wish to seek employment, be a homemaker, attend school, or pursue other interests.

A key point of this paper is the recognition that spouses afforded these options of choice will be more likely to participate voluntarily whenever they can in those areas of Air Force community life that interest them and that will benefit from their meaningful contributions. Prior to the Blue Ribbon Panel, part of the problem related to spousal involvement in Air Force activities was the perception that spouses were expected to participate. Part of today's dividend is the spouse's freedom to "pick and choose." This development has contributed to more willing and better participation by a variety of spouses instead of their simply going through the motions to satisfy a perceived requirement. By encouraging spouses to develop and pursue their own personal interests, the Air Force validates their worth. Thus, the shapes in the puzzle have been shifting, resulting in the promise that spouses are now in a better position to realize their full potential.

It is gripping to note how things change slowly, until one day we realize they have changed significantly. Within the last 20 years, the perception of the role of the spouse within the Air Force has been tantamount to a sociological revolution. This now also includes male spouses, although in significantly smaller numbers, who have become "Mrs. Mister."

Heeding the work of the Blue Ribbon Panel and noting the changing attributes and needs of both the civilian sector and the Air Force, the service's leaders took steps to further empower women, enabling them to perceive

themselves as architects of change within the Air Force community. Thus, volunteerism, participation, and dual-income families clearly affect today's spouses. Without their spouses' support, patience, understanding, caring, and love, many service members—and, for that matter, Air Force civilians—would not be where they are today.

Volunteerism has always been and remains a key aspect of the Air Force—and American—way of life. Most people have a need to give back some of the best that life has given them. Today, the Air Force needs an active, involved volunteer program, but the key word is *volunteer*. Commanders must ensure that volunteer programs are not abused, but at the same time they should foster the spirit of reasonable volunteerism. It is essential that the spirit and intent of spousal volunteerism be maintained, supported, recognized, and appreciated.

Spouses should participate in current Air Force activities to satisfy a particular need and to help make the Air Force a better place for its people, not to enhance their personal status or to improve their position or rank. Because spouses differ, their aspirations vary. Thus, spouses, in consultation with their families, should decide what role, if any, they play. Suzie Schwartz, spouse of Gen Norton Schwartz, the current Air Force chief of staff, speaking recently at Maxwell AFB, Alabama, during a Key Spouse Forum, made a telling point: "Find your passion. Find something you're good at. Find that way you can give back." This is the essence of participation. Some of the more active areas of spousal interest and participation include becoming involved with Airman and Family Readiness Center programs, the Red Cross, schools, and chapel; clarifying the role of the spouse; and working spousal, officer/enlisted, and family issues. Many spouses I have encountered in spousal courses endorse Air Force-sponsored programs that assist in these activities. Spouses simply want to be taken seriously. They believe that spousal courses recognize their need to grow and better cope with a career and home-management responsibilities. Also, this type of development helps them better fulfill the "team partner" concept. However, given the quickening pace of Air Force family life, finding time to "help out" is a problem to many spouses. They are well aware that balancing a career and family plus "helping out" takes good planning. Furthermore, modern life in a globally engaged Air Force is more stressful for everyone. The leadership challenge involves finding ways to blend organizational goals with personal goals so that everybody wins.

Today's spouses receive help with federal employment through new programs such as the most recent Office of Personal Management rule that allows the direct hiring of spouses of active duty, Guard, and Reserve personnel (called up for more than 180 days). (Individuals who desire more information on this and other new programs should call or visit the Airman and Family Readiness Center, an employment-assistance counselor, the Civilian Personnel Office, or the USA Jobs Web site.)

Dual-income families are an Air Force reality today. The number of such families has grown rapidly in the Air Force within the last 20 years. A recent survey for NBC Universal gives new meaning to the power of the purse in the civilian sector, where 65 percent of women reported being their family's chief financial planner, and 71 percent call themselves the family accountant. Additional research data reveals that, currently, 3.3 million married couples in the United States have only one earner—2.4 million more than in 1970. This national trend has an impact on Air Force families as well. Survey data indicates that military-spouse earnings constitute about 48 percent of the total family income. Approximately 40 percent of Air Force spouses work outside the home today—a percentage that will probably increase. For some spouses, a paying job is now an economic necessity. The recession has fueled this need.

In summary, Air Force spouses are increasingly stepping out of their traditional role. But in some cases, the more things change, the more they remain the same. In a recent family-oriented article, Gen Stephen Lorenz, commander of Air Education and Training Command, made a compelling statement that summarizes the points made in this paper: "Our lives need balance, and our spouses help provide that balance." How true and how critical this is. Many spouses whom I interviewed have learned—sometimes the hard way—that military service is more than a job. Iraq and Afghanistan are more than places on a map. They represent mortality, acute pain, and unbearable instability, affecting not only families but also entire missions. Although spouses are now free to redefine and limit their roles, I have found that many spouses still feel a sense of commitment to other Air Force spouses, families, and units. Our spouse volunteers are the best because their hearts are in what they do. They may not always be good at it, but that does not really matter because they are doing their best. As one seasoned spouse observed, "When a husband and wife love each other and love their jobs, they want to support each other and give what they can—they want to make themselves a team." I believe this is true because, essentially, they are Air Force spouses and

helpmates; what unites spouses on these issues should matter more than what divides them.

About the Author

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