Non-Technical Summary:
The Family and Military as Greedy Institutions: Negotiating a Work-life balance

It has long been recognised that a healthy individual needs some firm boundaries between the different areas of his or her life, which can provide the foundation of a varied life experience, greater personal choice and self-determination. The idea of a healthy balance between the world of work and personal and family life has attracted interest in the UK because of evidence that stress related to this issue can cost business up to £10bn. per annum. Employers as well as the UK government have made the area of work-life balance issues a strategic priority and the subject has also been the focus of increased attention by social science researchers.

Researchers have used the concept of 'greedy institutions' to highlight the challenges for people who seek to balance work and life. Such institutions are 'greedy' because they demand unquestioning commitment and undivided loyalty from their members. The armed services, for example, which provide the focus for this study, make extensive and intensive demands on its employees in terms of attention, time and energy. As with other area of employment - such as war correspondents, humanitarian workers, oil workers, and the police - the military requires from its personnel levels of sacrifice, frequent mobility, dealing with physical danger, and responsibilities that extend beyond the normal boundaries of duty hours and workplace. However, due to the limited possibilities for home or tele-working, their 24 hour commitment, together with their responsibility for exercising lethal force and the level of risk of death and injury - often far away from home - military personnel have an unusual contract of 'unlimited liability'.

In this study, the key research question is: to what extent do military personnel and their spouses encounter conflicting pressures from these two greedy institutions? To what extent does the evidence support the argument that these pressures have become more intense since the end of the Cold War because, while the military is more demanding than before in terms of its operational demands, the family is no longer prepared to be placed second in the order of priorities?

The study analyses the experience of deployment - a period when work life tensions are likely to be at their most intense for military personnel and their families - and the case chosen was the deployment to Iraq 2004 (known as Op Telic 5, which is the fifth deployment since the invasion in 2003 known as Op Telic). In the study, the focus was on the wives of regular British Army personnel deployed as part of an Armoured Infantry Brigade to Iraq in October 2004.

There were three phases of the investigation: Phase 1, around the start of the deployment, phase 2, mid-way through the deployment, and phase 3, approximately one month after the end of the deployment. The sample comprised 47 service wives, which was derived from a parallel study of Op Telic 5 that was investigating the health and well-being of soldiers deploying to Iraq in 2004. 193 regular soldiers took part in the Telic 5 study, of which 80 (41.5%) were married. All spouses of married participants were invited to take part in this study. Response rates were high not least because effective arrangements for cooperation with the military and with spouses were established without compromising the academic independence of the study team who are members of the King's Centre for Military Health Research at King's College London. In the study, a largely qualitative methodology was used
based on semi-structured face to face interviews were conducted with 50 British Army wives.

The key theme of the study is that there are diverging perceptions between soldiers and wives. Before the deployment, wives were concerned with the additional demands of running the home as a result of the husband's absence during deployment. Yet husbands believed their wives were more than able to cope and did not perceive any concerns on their wives behalf. When considering the affect of deployment on marriages, husbands, overall, were more concerned than their wives, who generally were more robust. Soldiers believed that their family life was more important than their service careers whereas, in contrast, wives were more inclined to place their husbands' careers as equally important to the family. So far as periods of rest and recuperation (R and R) mid-deployment were concerned, wives found it stressful having to say goodbye to husbands twice whereas husbands saw it as a vital period of release from the stress of military operations. In terms of support for personnel during the deployment, husbands believed that their wives were well supported by the unit during the deployment; while by contrast, wives favoured the informal rather than formal networks of support instead. However, wives were also convinced that it was important to have formal networks available should they be needed as 'insurance' if the informal networks proved insufficient.

The key conclusions of the study are that these diverging perceptions indicate that wives are more stoical or robust than soldiers think they are. Wives recognise the financial benefits gained as a result of their husbands remaining in the Army. The wives may have their discontents but, for them, the work-life tensions of military life are outweighed by the financial security provided by the Army - both salary & pension. In the context of an Army garrison town, wives favour informal social networks of support to provide a buffer against the stressors of deployment; and do not expect or choose the military as their first line of support. Army wives are much more tolerant of the pressures that the military place on them than the soldiers who are less happy with the pressures they think that their career, and especially deployments, puts on their families. One must be cautious from generalising from a small scale study and further research is needed to consider whether divergent perceptions would still arise in other deployments involving military families from the UK - not Germany - and drawn from units less firmly rooted in traditional garrison communities.