

■ THE U.S.

# The Living Room War

As the American military shrinks, family violence is sharply on the rise

By MARK THOMPSON WASHINGTON

**J**EROMY WILLIS, U.S. AIR FORCE ENLISTED man and ex-Army marksman, had been trained to kill the enemy. But when the cold war ended and his base faced closure and his career began looking less secure and his marriage came under strain, the enemy started looking a lot like his wife Marie. First he tried to kill her with a flaming propane torch. Weeks later he tried to strangle her. She fled to her mother's home in Rhode Island, and the Air Force confined Willis to his base in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. But when Marie returned there to press charges against her husband, he had somehow learned of her supposedly secret appointment. Outraged that she was ruining his career, Jeromy confronted Marie inside the waiting room of the base legal office early last year. He fired a pawnshop pistol into her chest. As horrified witnesses watched her yellow dress turn crimson, she screamed, "Jeromy, no!" And then he fired a second round into her brain.

Marie Willis became another victim of an alarming increase in domestic violence on America's military bases. The rise in abuse of spouses and children, researchers and the Pentagon believe, may be connected to the painful reduction in U.S. fighting forces following the end of the cold war. In 1986 there were 27,783 reported cases of violence in military families; last year there were 46,287. Now, a confidential—and unprecedented—Army survey obtained by TIME suggests that spousal abuse is occurring in 1 of every 3 U.S. Army families each year—double the civilian rate. Each week someone dies at the hands of a relative in uniform, and nearly 1,000 formal complaints of injury are lodged against family members in the service. It is not known whether a similar increase in domestic violence is taking place in Russia and other coun-

tries that have scaled back their military forces with the end of the cold war.

Over the past year, there has been gory evidence of carnage on the American home front. A soldier in Washington State killed his wife, packed her body into a suitcase and threw it off a bridge. In Southern California a Marine who was a hero in the Persian Gulf War shot and killed his newly divorced wife and their five-year-old daughter. In North Carolina an airman hacked his wife to pieces, wrapped her remains in plastic garbage bags and stored them in the refrigerator. In Hawaii a sailor killed his baby daughter, stuffing her into a duffel bag and tossing her into Pearl Harbor. A soldier in Germany, angered at his wayward spouse, decapitated her G.I. lover and placed the severed head atop his wife's nightstand.

The problem isn't limited to spouses. Child abuse is also on the rise, leading the Pentagon to create a child death review task force that will eventually probe all child deaths in the U.S. military to determine if abuse is to blame. "After a child dies, people say it was an accident," says Army Colonel Will Hatcher, who is helping to launch the program. "But we want to go back and check." For several months the task force has been examining child deaths at the Fitzsimons Army Medical Center in Colorado and at hospitals at the Bremerton naval base in Washington and Travis Air Force Base in California. The new Army survey offers an unvarnished and quantifiable look at the problem. "The rates of marital aggression are considerably higher than anticipated," declared the researchers, who have questioned more than 55,000 U.S. soldiers at 47 bases since 1989, and continue to do so. The growing number of victims seeking help "is soon likely to exceed treatment resources."

And the problem isn't restricted to low-level or poorly performing soldiers. "Often those in the most responsible and stressful positions," the report says, referring to noncommissioned officers, "appear to be more likely to be involved in abusive episodes."

The Army's efforts to curb such violence—through counseling and other help—are rarely mandatory.



**HAPPIER DAYS:** Marie Willis having lunch with her son in South Carolina

COURTESY MARIE T. NELLO

That, says the study, leads to two critical failings: few soldiers take advantage of the help, and the worst abusers don't participate. Researcher Peter Neidig, whose company, Behavioral Science Associates in Stony Brook, New York, is conducting the Army survey, believes similar levels of domestic abuse exist in the other services. While Neidig believes the Army is ahead of the civilian world in confronting the issue, Army officials admit they are just beginning to understand the extent of the problem. "We were being very reactionary," explains Delores Johnson, who heads the service's program to combat such abuse. Rather than trying to prevent it, the Army emphasized medical and legal help after the violence occurred. "We're just beginning to take a look at what prevention means," says Johnson.

The Army study, which is designed to identify groups at high risk of domestic violence, found evidence that abuse tends to escalate at bases scheduled to shut down. "We're very interested in that," Johnson says, "because we're in the middle of





**AFTER THE KILLING:** While his wife screamed, "Jeromy, no!" Willis, an Air Force enlisted man, fired a bullet into her brain

Army man says. "So you wait till you get home and take it out on her and the kids." Another soldier will say of his wife only that "we abused each other." In fact, the Army survey suggests spousal abuse usually involves violence by both partners. But women, it notes, are far more likely than men to be injured.

The military has reacted to the problem by creating counseling programs and discipline boards. Military families are told to report any instances of domestic violence they witness, even if it occurs outside their family. But few abused spouses are willing to risk their family's financial future by seeking help through Army channels, because such complaints often end up on the desk of the abuser's commander. "The military needs to do something to ensure the confidentiality of spouses so the wife can go and get help without hurting his career," says Phyllis Lonneman, a Kentucky attorney representing a woman charged with the slaying of her Army husband in August after years of alleged abuse. "It doesn't matter how good or bad the military's programs are if the spouses are afraid to use them."

And the abuser's commander often isn't sympathetic to the battered spouse, according to Sadonna Polhill, who is the top caseworker at a shelter for battered women in Killeen, Texas. "They'll tell the wife, 'This is a bunch of bull—quit making these accusations because you're ruining your husband's career,'" she says. "They try to make the one who's being battered at fault." Anxiety over the careers of their husbands has led to a sharp drop in the number of women—from 85% to 50% over the past two years—who permit the shelter's staff to alert military officials to the women's visits. "A lot of that has to do with the pressures on the soldiers and their families," Polhill says. "And many are deathly afraid of their husbands."

Despite the intentions of the Pentagon, its sometimes haphazard efforts offer little comfort to victims and their families. Jeromy Willis, for example, was sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of his wife and is now serving time at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Yet Marie Willis' family remains bitter because the military ignored so many warnings that a tragedy was afoot. Her family says Jeromy was confined to base twice because he tried to kill Marie, but he was allowed to roam freely on the base when the Air Force invited and paid for her to return there and testify against him. "Abused people should not rely on the military for protection," says her father, Eugene Mello, himself an Air Force veteran. Her mother, Marie Mello, puts it more simply: "The Air Force was an accomplice in my daughter's death." ■

downsizing." Pentagon officials also say their efforts to encourage military families to report such abuse has played a role in the rising number of reported cases. Gail McGinn, a top Pentagon personnel official, says the military family's nomadic existence contributes to the problem. Most move every three years, ripping them from the support network of relatives and friends that civilian families count on when times get tough. The long absences of the breadwinner—on lengthy cruises, battlefield exercises or peacekeeping missions—add to familial stress. The U.S. military drawdown, from 2.2 million troops in 1987 to 1.5 million in 1997, compounds the problem. Soldiers and sailors who once dreamed of a secure 20-year career and a handsome pension now find themselves facing a truncated career, no pension and bleak employment prospects in the civilian world. "Everybody is wondering about what their own careers and their own finances will be, and of course, financial issues are major contributors to family violence," McGinn says. "There's a lot of

tension." Outside experts point with other factors. Compared with civilian society, the military population is younger and drawn from lower socioeconomic ranks, and consequently more violence-prone. Alcohol abuse is relatively high, pay tends to be poor and the military attracts men with authoritarian tendencies.

Also boosting the opportunity for such violence is the fact that nearly 58% of the military are married, perhaps the highest proportion in U.S. history. According to Pentagon figures, abuse is largely confined to such midlevel enlisted personnel as Air Force, Army and Marine sergeants and Navy petty officers. They're old enough to be married and have children—and the resulting debts—but often earn less than \$20,000 a year.

The men involved in episodes of domestic violence aren't eager to discuss them. But some acknowledge that the prospect of watching lifelong dreams shatter as the military shrinks can make them lash out in rage and frustration. "It stresses you out, but you can't hit the officers," an

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