

REINTEGRATION:

Impact on Airmen Safety

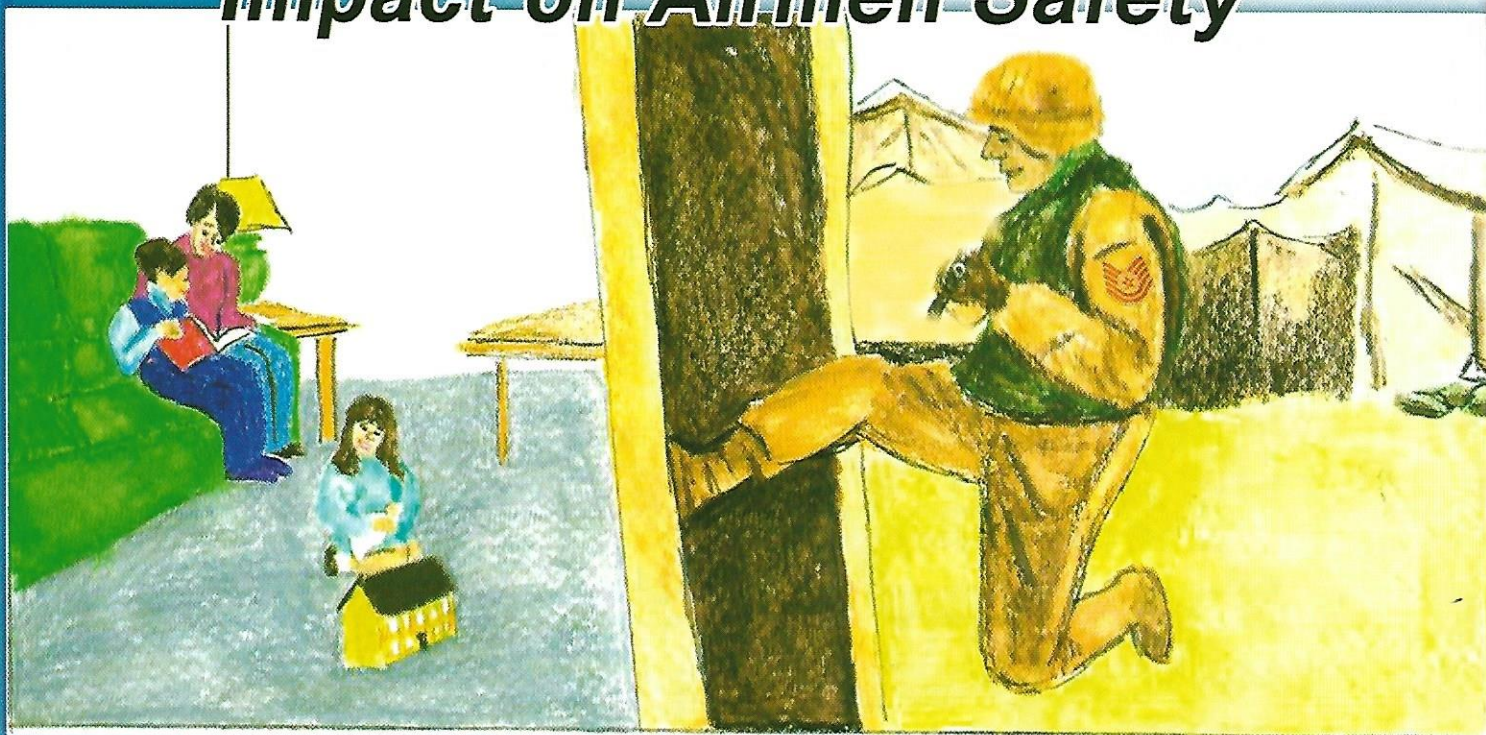


Illustration by A1C Buddy Rodgers

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Editor's note: Off-duty risks are not the only risk factors our Airmen need assistance with during the reintegration process; work place safety issues must also be addressed. Our Airmen may have performed duties not normally associated with their specialty, i.e., working on different equipment or products. In any case, it is critical that workplace safety procedures and processes are incorporated into the re-integration process. We will discuss this in our next issue.

In the military, reintegration is recognized as the re-incorporation or merging of military members back into a "normal" life after deployment. Any merging back into "reality", whether for a single or married member, can impact the safety of the individual and their family.

"In general, the reintegration program we developed has many parts, one of them covering safety concerns," said Dr. Thomas Appel-Schumacher, USAFE Family Plans and Programs. "We want our troops who come back from a long-term deployment to obtain a sensitization to their 'new' environment and try to gradually become accustomed to new rules, new ways of doing things, and new expectations."

It is important for commanders to effectively reintegrate Airmen after they return from deployments because the stress experienced in combat is very real and can affect an Airman's everyday life. The experience of war can affect other aspects of home life as

well, such as driving skills, recreational irresponsibility and personal judgment. Airmen can feel invincible or exhausted after surviving war and, therefore, lack good judgment at home.

Stress from a stressful situation can cause a wide range of reactions. Combat stress reactions, such as **behavioral and physical changes**, can range from recklessness to brutality. Feeling stress during war is, as referred to by a Navy psychiatrist, "a normal reaction by a normal person to an abnormal, horrific situation." Sometimes a person can witness an event so severe or experience a threat so prolonged that the body may continue to maintain that state of high alert long after the experience.

The signs that someone is suffering from combat stress can be physical, mental, emotional or behavioral. These reactions can last between a few days or a few weeks. When recognizing any of these symptoms, it is important to be alert to how severe the symptoms are

and how long they last. If these symptoms interfere with the person's ability to do their job or interact with other people, it is important to get professional help.

"We push the *Wingman* concept to have buddies

PHYSICAL SIGNS

- ⇒ *exhaustion*
- ⇒ *insomnia*
- ⇒ *nervousness*
- ⇒ *nausea, frequent urination or diarrhea*
- ⇒ *numbness, tingling or loss of body/limb function*

watch out for each other, not only in drinking behavior but also to look out for signs of depression, suicide ideation and risky behavior," according to Dr. Appel-Schumacher.

Driving hazards are among the most important safety issues addressed during reintegration. Airmen can be distracted with memories and dealing with "real life" which can affect the abilities of a safe driver. Fatigue can be a major contributor to an accident so it is important to be well rested before getting behind the wheel. Seat belt usage should be reinforced because unbelted operators and passengers continue to suffer fatalities. Excessive speed is also a factor in car accidents, where driving over the posted speed limit will only save a few minutes but may cost a life.

Indulgence in alcohol can affect a returning Airman's everyday life. Driving under the influence is an important issue to tackle because of the affects it has on the Airman's life, as well as the affect it may have on a career. It is important for Airmen to assess Operational Risk Management (ORM) while drinking in order to return home safely.

"We want them to know that alcohol tolerance could be down somewhat since they have not had the opportunity to drink very much while away in the desert, so they may be affected greatly by just one or two drinks," according to Dr. Appel-Schumacher. "We [also] caution them about drinking and driving, make sure they have a plan and a designated driver before they begin their evening."

Motorcycle safety is another danger that Airmen risk when reintegrating into their "normal" life. Due to a feeling of invincibility, Airmen may feel that protective

gear for motorcycle riding is unnecessary. It is always important to wear the appropriate helmet and outfit for motorcycle riding, as well as review road rules for changes. The motorcycle and equipment should also be inspected since it may have been a while since the last service. The use of excessive speed can be enticing, but it is important for Airmen to be aware of personal limits especially after being gone for long periods of time.

Sports and recreation are also safety concerns among returning service members. Whether playing intramural sports or working out at the gym, an Airman can overexert muscles or sprain joints due to a difference in lifestyle or climate. Whereas an Airman may have been able to run five miles without straining, the change in exercise may leave him panting after one mile. It is also important to stretch and give the body time to readjust in order to avoid unnecessary injuries. Wearing appropriate sporting gear and

the use of protective equipment can lessen or eliminate sports related injuries.

BEHAVIORAL SIGNS

- ⇒ *carelessness or recklessness*
- ⇒ *anger or aggressiveness*
- ⇒ *staring into space*
- ⇒ *inability to work*
- ⇒ *increased alcohol or drug use*
- ⇒ *misconduct or wrongdoing*
- ⇒ *unresponsiveness to others*

The best approach to dealing with these challenges is a gradual one. Airmen complete reintegration preparation training and a medical assessment to discuss any exposure to traumatic events to prevent negative, long-term stress reactions 30 days before returning home. Airmen attend safety briefings regarding sexual assault, alcohol and suicide, as well as driving safety. Airmen also attend briefings on successfully reuniting with spouses, friends, children and co-workers.

Reintegrating into "normal" life after a deployment is difficult. It is important to USAFE to inform Airmen and their families of potential safety issues after deployment through reintegration programs.