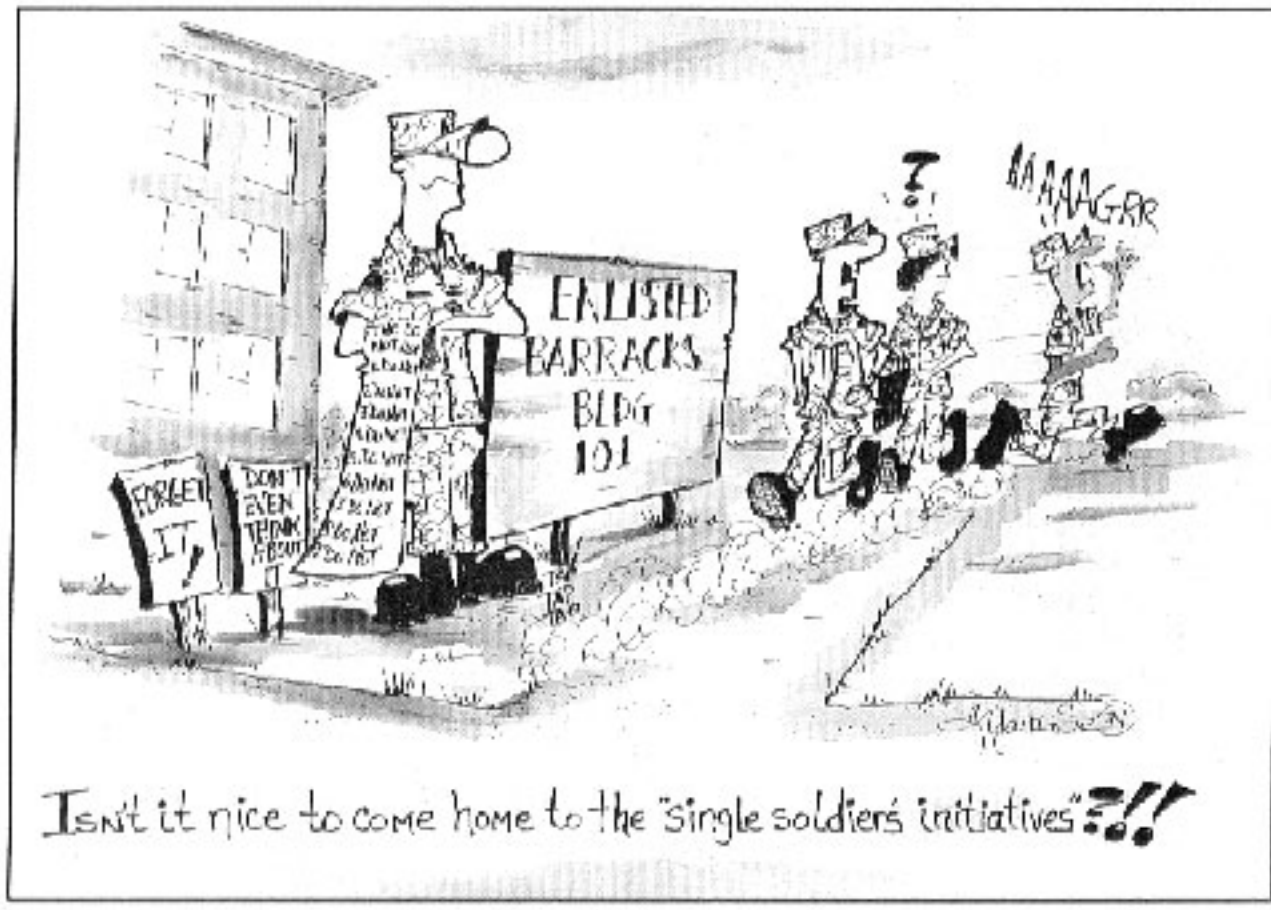
Single Soldier Living

An opinion



By CSM Robert A. Dare, Jr.

I'm fully aware that this article will cause some controversy and disagreement, but I believe the time has come to change our way of managing single soldiers living in the barracks.

Senior leaders call today's soldiers dependable and reliable. But, many of those same leaders are hesitant to change their views toward these same great soldiers as it pertains to their home, the barracks.

I think it's important to realize where we are today—62 percent of the enlisted force is married. I suspect that percentage will get higher. However, I think it's time to change our attitudes and policies that govern how the other 38 percent—the single soldiers residing on an installation—are required to live. It seems to me that we continue to harbor outdated and counterproductive views on this subject because of habit and tradition. The barracks appears to be the last bastion of identity to "the old Army."

I was stationed in Germany when GEN Saint, then USAREUR commander, mandated the institution of "Single Soldier Initiatives." I witnessed this program's tremendous success. It makes far more sense to demonstrate trust and confidence in soldiers in all aspects of their lives rather than in limited events such as tactical training.

Single soldiers required to live in the barracks are often subjected often to policies that only apply to them. These policies encompass everything from daily room inspections that conform to some unnecessary and mundane SOPs, to the inability to have guests. Rules which restrict certain types of alcohol and limit possession to a six-pack of beer. These rules can't be necessary for readiness or they would be applied to all soldiers, married, single off-post, and single residing in BEQs and BOQs.

We tell a corporal to take his fire team 500-1,000 meters forward of our defensive position and provide early warning to the entire unit but neither he nor his soldiers can have a mixed drink in their barracks room.

We trust a specialist to handle thousands of dollars in the cashier's cage at finance each day but she can't entertain a male friend in her room during her off time.

The soldier residing in the barracks is prey to every CQ and staff duty NCO who needs a quick detail because a leader didn't plan properly.

Since these rules are specific only to the unmarried, barracks residing soldiers, it's not difficult to understand why there's the perception of unrealistic and unfair procedures by single soldiers.

You'll get no argument from me that communal living requires some rules for the good of all occupants. And so the checking of common areas for general cleanliness and healthy conditions is a must. My experience tells me that given the latitude and trust, soldiers will not only live properly but will do more for barracks maintenance and appearance than any facility engineer could ever do.

Traditionally, NCOs have had the responsibility of enforcing barracks SOPs and standards. That came from past NCO roles to provide beans, bullets and barracks maintenance. Today, our NCOs actively participate in assessing, planning, resourcing, and executing training. There is rarely enough time in a day to do that, let alone ensure that all

> *"Our standards of conduct on and off duty apply to everyone...and should be applied equally."*

"Military housing is inadequate at best and getting worse. We have a very bad situation that was developed over the last decade or so, and it's widespread. Junior enlisted servicemembers and officers bear the brunt of the housing problem and are often forced to live off base. Worse, housing allowances paid to service members are inadequate to rent decent housing." *HON. William Perry, Secretary of Defense*

By CSM James Skellion

Quality housing is essential to the Army, its soldiers and their families. Some initiatives already in effect include a change to the mandatory **Family Housing Assignment Policy** (AR 210-50), which requires only key and essential military and civilian personnel to be housed on post or a government-owned facility. This policy change aims to ensure voluntary occupancy of on-post family housing; provide additional on-post housing for junior grade soldiers; and help eliminate poor quality and/or unneeded family housing.

Key and essential designated housing should be kept to an absolute minimum in CONUS because it's the right thing to do. Housing is an emotional issue that directly impacts on morale, productivity, recruitment, retention and loyalty. However, the most important fact is that soldiers who need on-post housing will get it.

Soldiers unhappy with their home environment can't "be all they can be." But, if soldiers believe leaders are doing everything within their power to ensure they and their families are living in a decent and safe neighborhood, they'll give their hearts and souls to accomplish the Army's mission.

We must remember that family and home are the primary reasons soldiers lay their lives on the line during combat. Therefore, the Army's vision for housing in the 21st Century is affordable, comfortable, convenient housing that promotes a sense of pride and loyalty.

We're moving from forward deployed forces to CONUS-based Power Projection Platforms and from a larger to a significantly smaller force. We're facing smaller, more diverse threats as opposed to a single large threat. This will change Army installations into deployment platforms from which we launch our forces. These installations must be able to project, sustain and reconstitute a ready and capable force anywhere in the world. Further, they must provide soldiers and their families and civilians a living and working environment equal to the mainstream of society.

Today's soldiers (more than half of whom are married junior enlisted) and their families expect more in housing.

The family structure and needs of today and tomorrow require Army leaders and planners to use ingenuity and creativity in building, renovating and managing housing in the future.■

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the left sleeves of a soldier's uniform are facing out of a wall locker. NCOs can learn to inspect soldiers and equipment outside of the barracks. Pre-combat checks, when done to standard, do more for teaching attention to detail, and have a much greater impact on readiness than could any room inspection.

The OPTEMPO of today's Army provides ample chances for NCOs and officers to train their team, develop discipline and camaraderie, and nurture unit integrity and morale. Good NCOs can identify soldiers with problems by appearance, attention to detail, and execution of tasks, as well as the normal day-to-day conversation that takes place in small units.

A unit isn't a building—it's a formation of men and women. Requiring every member of the unit to be at a prescribed place, in a prescribed uniform, at a prescribed time, prepared mentally and physically to execute the day's events is the real measure of discipline and readiness. Our standards of conduct on and off duty apply to everyone and the latitude for each soldier to exercise individual responsibility should be applied equally, without regard to marital status or place of residence.

Soldiers not residing in the barracks are accorded the opportunity to go "home," get out of their uniform and relax in privacy. This is not as true for soldiers in the unit area. I submit that we have the ability to move the focus of attention from company area to training area and never lose our edge.

We can no longer support the traditional concept of housing single soldiers and monitoring their private lives. It's time to demonstrate to our soldiers that we mean it when we tell the public that our soldiers are the most dependable, reliable and capable soldiers ever. Let the chips fall where they may and deal with the offenders rather than the mass. I think the naysayers will be amazed at the results.■

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