

THE SOLDIERS' WIVES CHARTER

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TOWARDS A CHARTER FOR SOLDIERS' WIVES

The Army, in conjunction with the other two Services, is supposed to protect society as a whole. In fact, however, all those under arms are males. The women's forces play a subsidiary and "supportive" role, providing largely administrative facilities for the "male" army. Since women associated with the army proper are almost exclusively in the role of "wife", it is not surprising that they are neglected by a bureaucratic organisation run by and for men. When they are taken into account, it is not because they are deemed of intrinsic personal worth — it is because men cannot do without them. And as the army must please the "men" — lest they leave — wives and families are provided for, albeit grudgingly.

The situation of women.

Materially, married soldiers are usually well provided for. Married quarters, though they may be in short supply, are good, even excellent. Pay is also good. By and large, no-one ever complains about these things. What upsets most women is the insupportable attitude that the female sex is tolerated only because they are "required" by the men.

Let us look a little more closely at this concept of being "required". The rank structure of the men finds its mirror-image in the ranking of the men's wives. Thus we have the concept of "Officers and their Ladies; sergeants and their wives; other ranks and their women." This is a famous phrase which, when mentioned, is intended as a joke. Unfortunately, given the real situation in the army, it does not seem humorous to women themselves — the phrase is all too true. Thus the Colonel's "lady" will usually be saluted by the sentry on duty as a mark of respect. The officers' wives generally feel that it is their "duty" to organise and lead social activities, take charge when the men are away on exercise and lead social activities — trying to "help" wherever they deem it to be needed. The wives of the "Other Ranks" resent this patronising attitude; there is a great deal of ill-feeling towards the "superior" wives. Most ORs' wives feel — usually with some justification, it appears — that they are discriminated against. This applies in almost every field: housing, education, health and welfare services, social activities, shopping, banking, etc.

Let us examine these by turn.

Housing.

This must be examined first, because housing policy operates the major segregation from which all others follow.

Officers' quarters are always separate — sometimes to the extent of several miles — from those of the Other Ranks. They are, in new areas, always the first to be built, and they are always better — more spacious, of a pleasing aspect, in a well-cared-for area and so on. They are usually immediately recognisable as officers' quarters for these reasons. Almost everything inside an officer's quarter

is different from the ORs' equivalent — for reasons of principle rather than of practicality. Thus officers may be provided with differently-coloured and designed crockery, saucepans, teapots, brushes, chair-covers, curtains, carpets, lamp-fittings, furniture, household linen, etc. There is not necessarily any difference in quality in these things — we must hasten to add — for blue curtains are just as useful as red ones, as indeed white tea-sets compared with pink. In fact it is hard even to attempt to justify these differences, except on the grounds that the officers and their families must under all circumstances and at all costs be confirmed in their knowledge that a gulf separates them from the Other Ranks and *their* families. One might have thought, however, that having one's house set apart from those of the lower orders would have sufficed for that purpose.

The higher the rank, the more "perks" there are available. Obvious ones — such as increases in salary, status and prospects — allow of extension into less obvious areas (extra furniture, cosier accommodation for manoeuvres, domestic help, etc).

A word should be said on domestic help. Most help of this kind comes in the form of "batmen" or, in some cases, "batwomen" (though in some overseas postings, all ranks are provided with the means to acquire domestic ancillaries). Majors and above are entitled to a batman each; officers of the rank of second lieutenant, lieutenant and captain are not officially entitled to have their own batman, though two junior ranks often share one between a small number, and captains often use their rank to prevail upon a private to do the job. Batmen — it must be pointed out — are private soldiers of the unit concerned. They are supplied to the officers by the army free of charge, their job being to clean, press and polish every item of the officer's kit, keeping it in tip top condition at all times and for all occasions, official or otherwise. Batmen for majors may be required for only two or three hours a day; those of the higher ranking officers are full time. Batmen's duties, however, are not always — or even usually — confined to cleaning kit. A batman will also probably find himself "asked" to clean windows, floors, carpets and boilers, and in fact to help the mistress of the menage with any heavy, dirty or unpleasant work. This aspect of a *Man's Life in the Army* seems not to be over-emphasised in the Army recruitment advertisements. Quite often, the same type of work is done by Other Ranks' wives for officers who are married but not entitled to a batman. Batwomen may also clean, wash, mend and take care of children and babies, rather after the fashion of a Victorian "nannie".

Officers, unlike ORs, are not recognised as being married until they are 25. This is another example of the belief that officers are a completely different "type of person" from the OR. (Presumably the officer is capable of restraining his sexual appetite, whereas the OR is not!). Nonetheless, some officers do marry before this age.

Social Activities.

Because of the apartheid housing arrangements, a segregation in all social relationships automatically develops. Many examples could be cited of wives experiencing different treatment in accordance with their husbands' rank, though this will always be denied officially.

In some of the smaller units, particularly those abroad, there is very little

provided by way of entertainment. There may or may not be a video normally available. Bingo or Tombola is played regularly in some units, and some larger ones abroad may have a theatrical society, though these are not so common. In BAOR there is a "Wives' Club" which meets fairly frequently and is supposed to involve all the wives. A typical meeting may have a speaker on some non-controversial topic, or a cookery demonstration. This is usually followed by tea and cakes, and then perhaps some bingo. About half the contingent will be officers' wives — a totally disproportionate number. Once at the Club, all the usual barriers find expression, the officers' wives sticking together in cliques, the ORs' wives doing the same. The "Us and Them" attitude dominates everything. The Colonel's Lady usually makes a visit to everyone during the course of the evening, "mixing with the ORs' wives" and making the usual pleasantries.

As a rule, officers' wives do not work, though some who are qualified teachers may teach in the local schools. Most of their leisure activities are centred on the Victorian ideal of "virtuous idleness". They organise coffee mornings (among themselves) to raise money for unit funds or local charities; they organise handicraft and sewing meetings for one or two mornings or afternoons a week before the annual fete or open day. At other times, social activities include sight-seeing expeditions, gossiping over cups of coffee or lemon tea, playing bridge and entertaining friends at cocktail parties or dinner. All these activities are of course confined to members of their own class. ORs' wives are never invited to these private parties.

Consequently there is very little real social contact between officers' and ORs' wives. What little there is is painfully patronising and usually uncomfortable for all concerned. What superficial contact there is takes place at the larger organised occasions, such as the annual bazaar, Christmas and summer dances. At these times there is a prevalent atmosphere of condescending "we're-all-jolly-well-in-it-together-aren't-we?" and a hypocritical air of benevolence which is totally absent throughout the rest of the year.

It has already been mentioned that wives reflect the rank structure and duties of their husbands. Wives of company commanders, for example, (Majors) are expected to help their husbands by visiting the ORs' wives and encouraging them to attend meetings such as the Wives' Club ("where we can all get to know each other"). They also enquire after families, give "interviews" and "advice" whenever "problems" arise for the wife, and are generally supposed to make themselves available for pastoral care when necessary. We do not know, however, of any occasion on which an ORs' wife felt impelled to ask for the help or advice of a "superior" wife in this way. Most wives, though, are subjected to ritual "visits" from time to time despite this. These supposed "social calls" are completely one-sided. We do not know of a single case of an ORs' wife "dropping in on" an officer's wife, without first having been asked to do so.

Services

There is much discontent, mainly among ORs' wives, about the numerous ways in which women are reminded of their inferior status. This is a nebulous and

intangible area, in which it is not always easy to pin down the exact nature of the oppression involved. It is always difficult to describe emotions; feeling and sentiment are the subject-matter more of poetry than of political documentation such as this. And it is always difficult to prove that instances of discrimination on the basis of rank have occurred, though this will not be denied by anyone who has ever been involved with the army. There is no rule to which one can point as the cause of an instance of discrimination. Nothing on such matters is written down. The "official attitude" is always beyond reproach. So it is hard to document the extent to which these discriminations operate. Yet they pervade every aspect of everyday life, and are usually taken as a matter of course by wives who have had long experience of life in the army. Although she has signed no contract, the wife of the soldier is as much "in" the army as her husband. Here are just a few examples.

You are queuing in a long shopping queue at the checkout desk. An Officer's wife rushes up and joins the front of the queue rather than the end, giving the impotent wives a wide grin and an apologetic "I'm in an *awful* hurry!" No-one dares to challenge her.

In BAOR NAAFI will cash cheques, but the amount you can cash varies according to rank. Sergeants and below are allowed a fixed amount, which is raised from time to time, whereas warrant and all other officers are allowed up to twice as much, irrespective of creditworthiness. Wives, of course, are allotted the same rank as their husband.

A private's wife who was expecting her husband back from an exercise began to worry when he was overdue for several hours. However, as this is by no means uncommon, she assumed that the exercise had been extended. She suspected that all was not well when, next day, she noticed that a friend of her husband who had been away on the same exercise was back. Taking the matter higher, she made enquiries. "Your husband has met with a slight accident. He has been in hospital for three days. Didn't you know?"

In military hospitals abroad, a notice is pinned over each patient's bed stating name, religion, date of admission and doctor's name. It is interesting to note that women are not "Mrs. Brown" or "Mrs. Smith". They are always "Wife of (w/o) Pte. Brown" or "Wife of Major Smith", etc. The same applies to children, who are "Son of Captain Taylor" etc. In some military hospitals it is "understood" that the wives of ORs, when these are patients, will make tea and tidy the rooms for officers' wives. Sometimes, officers' wives will be kept in separate wards, with various "extras", all at no additional cost.

There are many examples given by ORs' wives of inferior treatment from army doctors, dentists and hospitals. It is of course difficult to prove such allegations, and of course complaints of this kind are common in civilian life, too. Nevertheless, there would appear to be grounds for a close investigation into this important aspect of life in the army. A particular complaint from ORs' wives is that they have to stay on the waiting list for treatment a disproportionate amount of time. In other words, this is another form of "jumping the queue" by officers, who seem to think that their health and lives are of greater value than those of the lower ranks. Regardless of the truth or falsity of any particular alle-

gation, the problem is that wives of the lower ranks feel a permanent sense of frustration and impotence, and there is simply no-one to whom they can take their grievances. Officially, of course, they should report cases of queue-jumping to . . . the CO or one's officer's wife. But if these are felt to be the very class of people who do the queue-jumping, it is small wonder that few complaints are received.

Particularly repugnant examples of more vicious discriminations are abundant in army units overseas. Here, isolated from the parent society, the army has rules all its own. Civilians who possess professional qualifications (e.g. in teaching, nursing etc) have to be employed by the army in their schools and hospitals abroad. Teachers who sign contracts to work for the Service Children's Education Authority are given the status of Captain. Qualified nurses can obtain a commission in the Queen Alexandra's Nursing Corps. But what happens when a private is married to a woman who subsequently gets one of these jobs and thereby gains "officer status" by virtue of her professional status? This problem is felt to be so "embarrassing" that it is avoided if at all possible - by refusing to give such women the jobs for which they are qualified. Sometimes, however, the need for the skill is so great that the army must, reluctantly, give in. This never happens without a struggle. If the qualification entitles the holder to wear badges of status, the wife in question may be asked not to wear them, or (in a hospital) even to wear the uniform of a ward orderly! Wives who are qualified teachers may be given temporary appointments, but these are very difficult to obtain, even though the employing authority is "crying out" for teachers. Teachers with many years' experience are rejected because of the "embarrassment" suffered over rank.

Conclusion

The above are just a few examples of the kinds of issues which cause internal friction within the army. Some of them are of rather minor importance; some amount to a scandalous degree of discrimination. It is always difficult to put across the full extent of rank-and-file class-consciousness to outsiders who have never experienced it. In many ways, the women are worse off than the men. They, after all, in most cases did not choose to be involved with the army, they did not even sign on. Very often, when they first find themselves - through marriage - involved in the army, they are completely unprepared for the situation in which they are placed. Any doctor who has practised from within the Army, particularly if he or she has worked abroad, will confirm this. Women are opposed to a situation in which their husbands are "government property", unable to fulfil their family responsibilities because the state has always the prior call. When their husbands are away on manoeuvres or courses (three or four months a year are spent away from home in the average teeth arm unit, not counting duties which take the soldier away from home for 24 hours at a stretch: about one week), women at home are left completely alone with their

families and responsibilities. Means of communication between soldiers and wives during exercises are notoriously poor. Cases of illness, hardship, or other difficulties involving the family are frequent, and there is little by way of help or sympathy forthcoming from the authorities. The wife, of course, has no say in whether her husband will go away on exercise or not. He can be sent anywhere, any time, without the family, and there is absolutely nothing she can do about it. The predominantly masculine atmosphere in the messes, the frequent (compulsory) mess meetings and their accompanying stag nights, the stag "farewell" parties and games evenings, and the extremely restricted number of places in any camp where women can actually go - all these reinforce the inferior status of women. Indeed, if a wife "misbehaves" while abroad (and it needs little imagination to guess the kind of offence implied), then a wife can be sent back to the UK by her husband's CO. Her married quarter can be withdrawn at any time by the army authorities. These drastic measures are only taken rarely, but they are taken. Cases of the forcible repatriation of wives and their children are known to us within the recent past. The women's husbands, of course, may remain behind, perhaps for years, in the same unit. Is there any other walk of life in which husband and wife can be forcibly separated in this way? Moreover, the decision in such cases of "misbehaviour" rests entirely with the relevant CO. He can combine in his own person, with complete impunity, the roles of police, judge and jury.

These are some of the emotional and personal forms of suffering which army wives are expected to endure without complaint. But there are economic grievances, too - particularly in the case of wives overseas. Unless you speak the local language fairly fluently, you cannot work in the surrounding community. Consequently, the range of jobs available is strictly limited to such ones as cleaning (messes), batting, being a shop-assistant or clerk for NAAFI - or secretarial work, for which there is a great amount of competition since it is always scarce. This means a loss in earnings for many families: had they been in the UK, wives would have worked.

The lack of work abroad also means that there is, for most women, a tendency towards preoccupation with children, gossip, and the injustices of the system. This is particularly acute abroad, but prevalent among army wives everywhere. There are strong community sentiments among British personnel in camps whether in the UK or abroad. In most garrison areas, people tend to "live in each other's pockets". There is no privacy; everyone's house is the same, and furnished with the same army furniture; everyone is aware of his or her salary, since all are on the same pay scale. In a real sense, then, "one-upmanship" is difficult: it depends on material possessions such as cars, washing machines, vacuum cleaners, etc., and other items which the army as such does not provide. This is particularly true among wives of the same rank. Indeed, the only way they can convince themselves - it would almost seem - that they are separate individuals is by acknowledging distinctions of this kind. But by far the greatest status symbol is not a new Hoover or television - it is your husband's rank. No amount of electrical gadgetry will make up for another stripe or step up the ladder of promotion. It is often said in the army that the women are more rank

conscious than the men. There is evidence to support such a view. Women's sometimes obsessive preoccupation with rank leads to the most destructive petty jealousies and rivalries between them. All are united, however, in their condemnation of the officer caste.

It must, finally, be stressed that all those in authority in army life are officers or civilians of officer status (which amounts to the same thing since these live separately in their own messes and mix only with the officer caste). These officers have power over your husband, the education of your children, your family health and even your entertainment. Teachers (as noted earlier— are accorded the status of Captain; gynaecologists, paediatricians, surgeons and other highly qualified medical staff may be majors or even colonels. It cannot be emphasised too strongly that this situation reinforces time and time again the old "Us" versus "Them" concepts along class lines. The situation is the cause not only of much unhappiness but also of many injustices against which there is no possibility of redress. The few typical examples mentioned here are significant not in themselves, but only for what they say about life for women in the army in general. Such injustices will, of course, continue unless the whole system is radically altered.

A group of army wives

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