



Maria Sauerwald and her children Naomi (from left), Nicolas and Leif head home after talking with the American Forces Network at Hanau Army Community Service. Dad, 1st Sgt. Charles Sauerwald, deployed with the 5-7th Air Defense Artillery in January. Photo right: Chris and Samantha Nazarovech describe their feelings and apprehensions about the war to AFN.

Photos by Karl Weisel



Helping families cope with separation

ACS staff and programs assist families in dealing with anxieties, practical concerns

By David Ruderman and Karl Weisel
104th Area Support Group Public Affairs Office

As soldiers across the 104th Area Support Group deploy to Operation Iraqi Freedom, families deal with separation and apprehension.

Army Community Service staff members are doing everything they can to help families cope with practical concerns and grapple with the unknown.

"We find stress among the families due to the limited contact with the spouses," said Pam Belanger, ACS officer for the 414th Base Support Battalion in Hanau. "We try to provide them with the appropriate resources, comfort and reassurance. We connect them to the right person to get the right answer."

That usually means referring people to Family Relief Groups or Family Support Groups and rear detachment commanders, who have access to the latest accurate information from units in the field.

"We're finding people glued to televisions and radios. Lots are still waiting for their husbands or wives to deploy. It's the element of not knowing [that causes anxiety]. We try to limit rumors," she said.

"We're getting our families prepared for whatever may come up," said Bridget Sanders, Baumholder Army Community Service deployment readiness, mobilization and outreach coordinator. "Things are going really well."

ACS centers have become hubs of activity, sources of information and social centers to which family members can turn. The Hanau ACS officially became a Family Assistance Center about a month ago, said Belanger. She and her staff are getting calls for information, and not just from family members in Germany but also from spouses in the United States who went back after their spouses deployed.

"I had an ex-wife who called today on behalf of her daughter. We've had parents call us asking, 'Have you heard anything about the 130th [Engineer Battalion]?' We're depending a lot on the FRGs and the commanders."

Community spouses drop in on an ongoing basis. Maria Sauerwald brought her four children into the office March 25 to speak to American Forces Network reporters about their experience coping with the war and separation. Her husband, 1st Sgt. Charles Sauerwald, of Battery E, 5-7th Air Defense Artillery, deployed in January.

"In January it was supposed to be only a month," she said. "I guess the hardest part is just the kids, everyday life, not having him to tell them to behave. It just gets very stressful having to be mommy and daddy. I was really upset. Now I wouldn't say I'm used to it, but I'm able to deal with it. At first I was crying every night, but with the kids I can't let them see me like that or getting depressed."

While her sons Nicolas, 11, and Leif, 7, attend elementary school, Maria has 5-year-old Serena and 22-month-old Naomi at home with her during the day.

The Sauerwalds have been in the community since September. It's his 13th year in the Army, but this is their first deployment separation, she said.

Sauerwald manages to volunteer at ACS during the day and talks to her husband's parents every week or so. She and the children speak to Charles via telephone and have "visited" through the Video Tele Conferencing arrangement, which Maria found very positive. "I wish they could do that once a week, especially for the kids, because they can see him and they know he's physically OK. It's hard though because after that you miss him even more," she said.

She considered taking the children to the United States, but decided to stay in Germany because of the financial hardship it would entail and because the boys are engaged in school. ACS and her church are her greatest support during the separation, she said. "We believe in God, and God does things for a reason. I believe he's going to bring him home soon."

Maj. Bill Boice, S-2/3 for the 104th Area Support Group, has also had his hands full with three children while his wife, Maj. Gillian Boice, is deployed with the 709th Military Police Battalion. She is the executive officer for the battalion, which is attached to the 3rd Infantry Division in Iraq.

She deployed with the 709th to Kosovo from April through November of last year, "so we only had her at home for about three months," said Boice. "This is the sixth time my wife and I have been apart because of deployment. It's not a whole lot of fun, but we're very, very used to it."

Their three children, Bear, 12, Bethany, 10, and Trevor, 6, attend Department of Defense Dependents Schools in the Hanau area. "My oldest gets off the bus at 3 p.m. and he stays there. The youngest gets there about 15 or 20 minutes later. We have a normal routine. They come home, drop their books, have fruit or a snack and do their homework," said Boice.

"We write letters every day. She left on the second [of March]. She left at 7:30 a.m. that morning and I haven't heard from her since. We got an email from her battalion that they arrived safely in country, and that's been it. With us, no news is good news," he said.

Boice said he relies heavily on the unit's FRG to stay informed. "It's kind of a support group, but it's good because it's people from your own battalion. They send out messages every three or four days. This one is three pages long," he said, pointing to the most recent email.

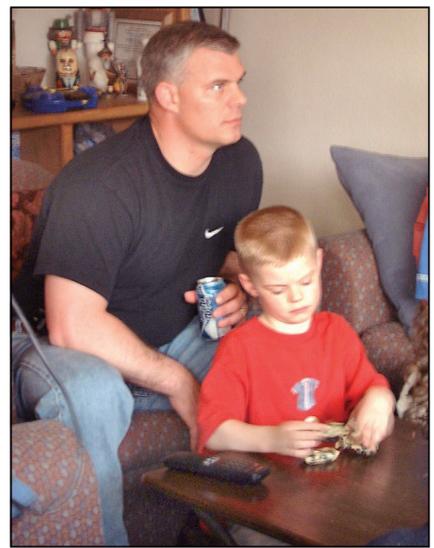


Photo by Anemone Rueger

Maj. Bill Boice enjoys some family time after work with his son Trevor. Mom, Maj. Gillian Boice, deployed with the 709th Military Police Battalion to Kuwait in March.



Photo by Karl Weisel

Mercedes Acuna braids her daughter Genelle's hair as Gescille looks on in the background.

Mercedes Acuna was also focused on her daughters' well-being as they readied for the deployment of her husband, Sgt. Gerald Acuna of Company A, 127th Aviation Support Battalion, in the near future. "My husband just got back from BNCOC [Basic Noncommissioned Officers Course], and now this. They're kind of used to Daddy not being around. They know about the war. They see it on TV and we explain that Daddy's just going there to help."

This will be the first deployment separation for the family, which has been in the community since last June. The girls, Gescille, 7, and Genelle, 5, both attend Argonner Elementary School. The Acunas decided to stay in Hanau rather than return to family in California when they learned of the coming deployment.

"I have a good job here," said Mercedes, who works as an administrative assistant at ACS. "It helps me out. I kind of know what's going on. I don't see why I should go back. Why give up housing?" She also feels attached to the families she helps on a daily basis, she said.

"Maybe that's why I don't feel like going," she added. "There's a real sense of community here with the military family. If you go home, they're not going to understand as well as your neighbors who are going through what you're going through. Because it's my soldier that's going out there. That's all we can do now basically, is be there when he comes back."

Community children, like their mothers and fathers, face the uncertainty of not knowing if or when they will see their absent parent again. Several Hanau youngsters described their feelings about the war and the role of their parents for American Forces Network viewers during a taping session at Hanau ACS March 25.

"My dad's going to deploy in late April," said Chris

Nazarovech, age 10. "That makes me feel sad because he's going to be gone for a long time. We see a lot about the war on TV," added Chris, explaining that his father, who is with the 127th Aviation Support Battalion, "fills up helicopters and works at a desk. ... I'm worried about my dad dying. I know he stays by his friends so he won't get hurt."

"It makes me feel angry and sad because people are dying," said his 11-year-old sister Samantha. "It makes me angry because Iraqi people could make peace and sad because soldiers are dying. My mom tells us what to do when my dad's not here. I know that if I need someone to talk to I can go see a teacher or the principal. I'm not worried because we're in a safe spot. If we were in America it could be dangerous because of Saddam Hussein."

"My friends talk about the war," said Gescille Acuna. "They think people are going to die in the war. I talk to my sister about that. I watch the news on TV with my parents. I see lots of stuff about the war. That scares me that people die and I'm scared my dad is going to die. Sometimes my sister doesn't play with me because she wants to watch TV, and I get sad. I tell my mom, and my sister gets in trouble and she starts crying."

"I'm worried about my dad because he's going to be gone for a long time," said Serena Sauerwald. "I tell him that I love him."

"It's been OK," said her brother Nicolas, adding he does a lot of things around the house to help out his mother.

"I help her cook, but sometimes she says no," said Serena.

"They each have their own way of dealing with missing their father," said Maria Sauerwald.

"They're doing OK," said Boice. "It's difficult. My daughter, when the news comes on, she doesn't watch it. She leaves the room."

Belanger and her staff work in the schools as well to address the emotional health of community children. There is a wide range of responses to the deployments and the war in Iraq, she said. Among the older children "some are very concerned, while others are more interested in what's going on at the Culture Club [a Hanau music venue]. Some say 'I've got one parent less to listen to now,' or 'My mom's a pushover.'"

A wide range of resources to community members of all ages is available at all ACS centers in the 104th ASG, said Belanger. Ongoing family readiness planning sessions, including a one-hour briefing and attendance at an Information Fair featuring Baumholder community services, are aimed at ensuring families feel a sense of belonging to their community while their soldier spouses take up arms in and around Iraq, said Sanders. "That's why we're here. We want people to feel comfortable — that they can come to us and we'll answer any of their questions and take care of them. We want them to know that ACS serves as a clearing

house for information and support."

ACS centers across the 104th ASG can be reached by dialing mil 111 or the local civilian area code and prefix followed by 111, said Belanger. "After hours that number is turned over to the Emergency Action Center. If it's an emergency we can handle, they'll contact one of us."

She also urged family members to establish Army Knowledge Online accounts to streamline email communication with their deployed soldier. ACS can help spouses set up AKO accounts, she said.

"Hanau is home. We're providing them the resources they need and sometimes just a hand to hold," said Belanger.

"I guess the hardest part is just the kids, everyday life, not having him to tell them to behave. It just gets very stressful having to be mommy and daddy. ... At first I was crying every night, but with the kids I can't let them see me like that or getting depressed."