

AFF guidance regarding authorised absence

The Army is currently going through changes that directly affect Army families. Moving back from Germany, new areas in the world for operational deployment and continuous training, both in the UK and overseas, are examples that require separation between the soldier and their family.

The Army Families Federation (AFF) has become increasingly aware that, since September 2013, the change in regulations regarding authorised absence means that some soldiers have found themselves being fined for being reunited with their family.

This guidance is designed to help explain the specific, inflexible, circumstances that may lead to requests for absence by the family in term time.

Operational tours

These may be for a short number of weeks or up to a whole year, anywhere in the world; soldiers work seven days a week whilst they are away. Notice of operational tours varies from a few days up to several months or a year in advance.

Pre-tour leave

This can be for a few days at some point in the month leading up to the operational tour. Depending on the notice period, this is not always given to soldiers and there is no set entitlement. If a whole unit is deploying, then often soldiers will all take this at the same time.

Rest and Recuperation leave (R&R)

For six-month-long tours a soldier will receive one period of R&R that is two weeks long, starting from the time they leave the operational theatre until they return. This means the family usually sees the soldier for approximately 10 days depending on flights.

For nine month tours, the soldier has two periods of R&R for the same length of time, and three for a year-long tour; it's important to stress that leave is a privilege and that sometimes it is cancelled or changed at very short notice.

The soldier is not usually able to choose the R&R period and has no say in the flight times. Soldiers take this leave individually.

Returning from an operational tour Soldiers often return home via somewhere else, and over a travel window of several days. The actual date is undeterminable and for this reason, families often don't tell their children exactly when the parent is returning.

Some soldiers fly in to military airports like Brize Norton and families are able to go there to meet the soldier if they wish, or the unit will collect the soldier and bring them back; other soldiers return on civilian flights. This is determined entirely on where the soldier has been deployed.

In the case of a Unit returning, there is often an organised returning event or "parade" as it is sometimes referred to. This date and time is inflexible.

Post Operational Tour Leave (POTL)

At the end of an operational tour, a soldier is given a period of POTL; this starts after they have been home for at least 10 days.

Neither the dates of the tour, when this leave starts or the ability to delay it or bring it forward are options available to the soldier. It is inflexible leave.

Training

Soldiers train locally, UK wide and worldwide. Whilst they are training or on “exercise” as it is often referred to, they do not come home; there is no R&R or POTL.

Training periods often precede an operational tour and can last for a number of weeks lengthening the time away from their families. There are also training programmes that last weeks or months in Canada and Kenya for example; soldiers train seven days a week with very limited time off.

It is common for soldiers to be given a period of leave either before or after; this is determined entirely by the unit and is inflexible.

Guidance from the National Association for Head Teachers (NAHT)

“The fundamental principles for defining ‘exceptional’ are where requests are rare, significant, unavoidable and short. NAHT believes that these new guidelines support existing government policy on school absence. They will give head teachers and parents a consistent and reasonable definition of ‘exceptional’. This will help with making individual decisions about granting authorised absence in term time.”

This is taken from their guidance: “8. Schools may wish to take the needs of the families of Service personnel into account if they are returning from long operational tours that prevent contact during scheduled holiday time.”

www.naht.org.uk/welcome/news-and-media/key-topics/parents-and-pupils/naht-issues-newguidance-onauthorised-absence/

AFF is keen that families are aware of the repercussions of taking their children out of school; particularly on their learning.

We know that mobile children often have learning gaps due to moving schools and we also recognise that there are certain times of the year that it is not in the child’s best interest to be taken out of school.

From discussions with head teachers, we realise that the child’s absence record will be taken into account and bearing this in mind, we inform every family that contacts us about authorised absence to consider all of this.

AFF asks that the decision made by you as a head teacher is an informed one, that the unit is contacted if necessary to check that the request is valid and that the child is reunited with their absent parent wherever possible.

If you have any further questions about Army family life, or anything that has been raised here, please do get in touch at educationsupport@aff.org.uk