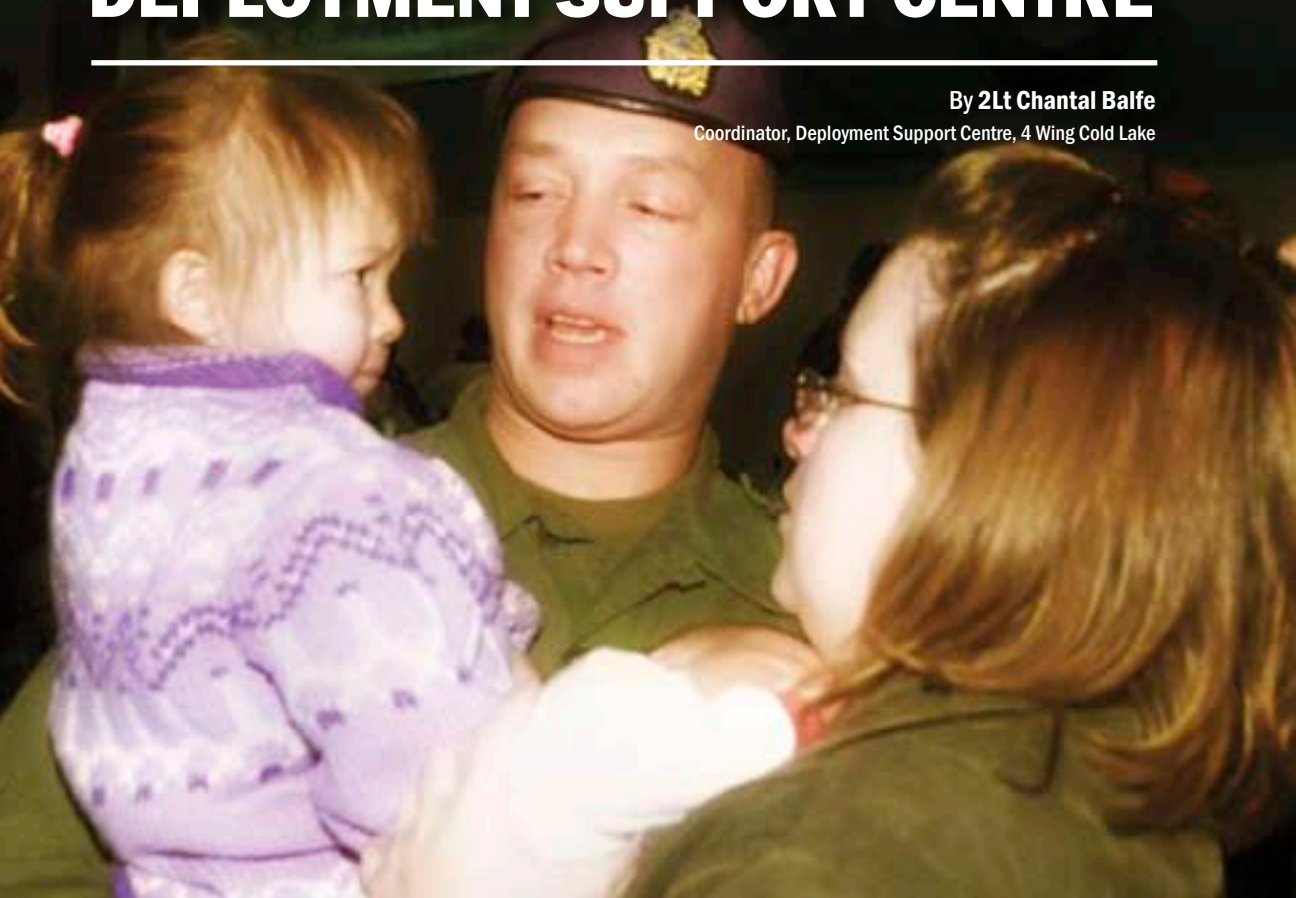


STAYING STRONG TOGETHER

**- 4 WING ESTABLISHES
THE AIR FORCE'S FIRST
DEPLOYMENT SUPPORT CENTRE**

By 2Lt Chantal Balfe

Coordinator, Deployment Support Centre, 4 Wing Cold Lake





“My mission is, and I give you my word, that we will be taking care of your families and dependants.”

- Colonel J.J.P St-Amand,
Commander, 4 Wing Cold Lake

From Camp Mirage to Kandahar, Alert to Inuvik, the reality of today’s Air Force is that our airmen and airwomen are called upon to upgrade, maintain, and exercise their warrior spirit more often than ever.

An effective network linking families, professionals and the chain of command can reduce the long-term impact of prolonged absences. To that end, 4 Wing has established a full-time Deployment Support Centre (DSC) to help families deal with the impact of repeated deployments and absences from home.

In comparison with the Army and Navy, Air Force deployments are generally smaller, more frequent and on shorter notice. The 24/7 operational tempo does not cease when a unit deploys, and the holes left by deployed members are not normally filled. Thus, there is no large body of personnel left behind to provide full-time family assistance.

Staffed by military members, the 4 Wing DSC was modelled after the Army’s existing concept, but changed significantly to reflect 4 Wing’s 24/7 operational nature. “Most deployments in the Air Force have very little lead-time and leave significant shortfalls in our operational capability,” says Major Mark Schneider, Officer Commanding the 4 Wing DSC. “In the Army, personnel that don’t deploy become the rear party (RP) to support the families left behind, but in the Air Force, our ability to provide family support in addition to filling the operational shortfalls is challenging.”

The biggest challenge is to develop a sustainable rear party. Fortunately, the Air Force has much of its support infrastructure already in place.

“We maintain 24/7 operations centres, duty officers and chaplains on call, and the local Military Family Resource Centre has a dedicated deployment support coordinator,” adds Maj. Schneider.

The DSC acts as a central coordinating and referral agency. Clients are briefed to contact the DSC for deployment information and support services. It is staffed by two military members and one civilian administrative assistant and is comprised of five components: the DSC core staff, the deployed members, the families, the chain of command and the sponsors. The RP consists of the unit Chief Warrant Officers and assigned military sponsors.

“The creation of the DSC has provided a centralized service agency for the deploying members, their families and the sponsors. The reduction in red tape to obtain deployment services has realized a positive impact all our clients,” says Maj. Schneider.

During a deployment, a military sponsor is assigned to look after the needs of the member, the immediate family or extended family if the deploying member is single.

Sponsors are key component of the Air Force RP – which fluctuates in size depending on the

numbers of members away. They are a continuous human resource that can be tasked to assist families when required.

Sponsors receive an assignment letter that details the duties and assistance expected of them. "Selection of the sponsor is critical as the sponsor, the deploying member and the family must all be agreeable to the assignment," says Maj. Schneider. "The sponsor works closely with the family and advocates for the deployed member for the duration of the deployment."

The sponsor programme is unique to the Air Force; it provides ongoing, continuous family care while maintaining the current operational tempo at the Wing.

"The sponsors are the key to our success," says Maj. Schneider.

Under the authority of the commanding officer or wing commander the sponsors can be excused from duty to assist the families during a crisis such as extreme weather. Additionally, the sponsors are an important link to keeping the families informed of events, unit family days and deployment related activities. "Essentially," he adds, "they are the families' connection to the chain of command and to the deployed member." ■

The 4 Wing DSC is the first official full-time facility of its kind for the Air Force.

Commissioned from the ranks, 2Lt Chantal Balfe is the Deployment Support Coordinator at 4 Wing Cold Lake.

