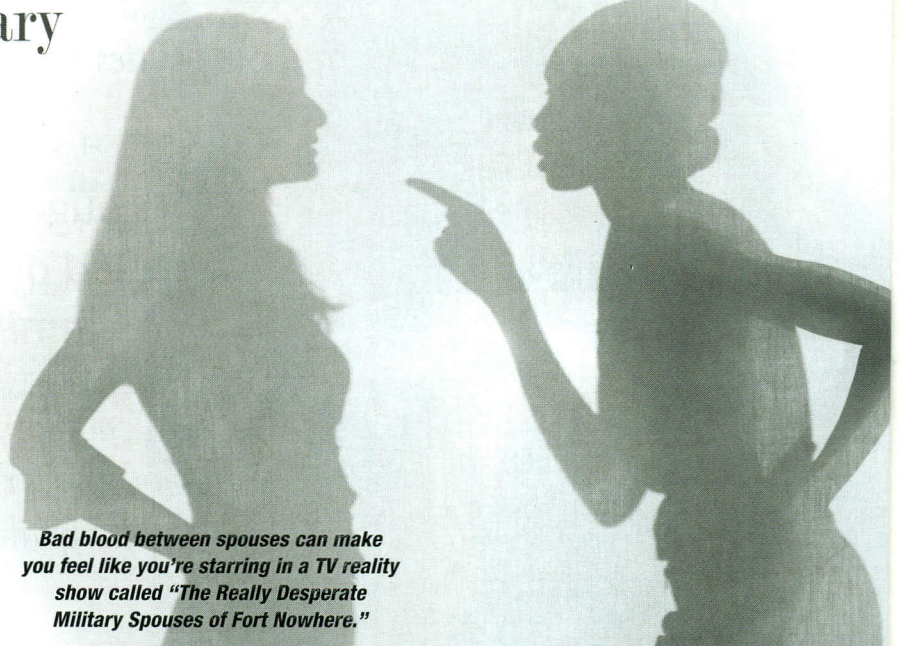


Rank Behavior

Why do some military spouses act like they've pinned on rank, too?

by Heidi Smith Luedtke, Air Force spouse



Bad blood between spouses can make you feel like you're starring in a TV reality show called "The Really Desperate Military Spouses of Fort Nowhere."

You may have heard the story: Army spouse Leslie Drinkwine was barred from contact with members of her FRG and the Army's 4th Brigade last year after an investigation concluded her behavior created a toxic unit climate. This went way beyond bad juju at spouses' club socials: Several members of the brigade allege her influence damaged their careers.

Most rank-wearers don't make front-page news. But if you've met one, you know it. They cut in line, demand access to people and places they shouldn't, and they love making others feel inferior.

"THAT'S MRS. COLONEL TO YOU!"

It's human nature that when people are anxious or insecure, they try to bolster their self-esteem on the backs of others, said Harriet Lerner, psychologist and author of "The Dance of Anger". It comes across as superiority, but desperation is right below the surface.

"Troublemakers would be causing trouble even if their spouses weren't high-ranking," said Air Force spouse Amy Noel. "Odds are, they were causing trouble before their spouse made rank and they'll be causing trouble after he retires."

Traditional military culture doesn't help. "Throughout history, women gained power from being on the arm of a powerful man," said Gloria Feldt, activist and author of "No Excuses: 9

Ways Women Can Change How We Think About Power". We know it's outdated, but it's hard to change a culture from within, she said.

It can also be about frustration: "Many of the women who claim their spouse's rank have sacrificed or compromised their dreams and aspirations for their spouse's career. They feel invested in their spouse's rank. I don't let it bother me," said Marine Corps spouse Theresa Woollard.

Wearing rank happens when spouses let their partner's accomplishments define their identity. Feldt said women sometimes hesitate to claim their own power because they associate power with dominance.

DITCH THE DRAMA

"If you're offended by another spouse's display of status or power but she's not that important to you, ignore it," said Lerner. It isn't worth pursuing. "If she's a good friend or someone you see frequently, talk to her about it in a non-blaming way." Say: "It might be my own insecurities, but sometimes I have the impression you look down on me. Is that true?" and let her respond. If the rank-pulling persists, avoid her altogether, if possible.

Most important, says Lerner: "When another spouse wears rank at your expense, it is about her insecurities. It is not about you." ♥

RANK = RESPONSIBILITIES?

Doing it right:

❖ PRESERVE FAIRNESS

"There is definitely a barrier when socializing — and it's there for a reason. Husbands and wives communicate, so secrets shared with the boss's spouse may get passed on," said Michele Gable, an Army spouse and former active duty sailor. Senior spouses must maintain personal boundaries to prevent favoritism.

❖ RECOGNIZE YOUR POWER

Others may feel obligated to say "yes" to requests or provide special treatment simply because of a spouse's rank. Senior spouses are expected to avoid even unintended coercion.

❖ SET THE EXAMPLE

"Talk to young spouses as equals and involve us in projects," said Air Force spouse Amy Noel. "You can either serve as a good example or a horrible, horrible warning."

❖ SUPPORT UNIT MEMBERS AND FAMILIES

It's not your job, but if senior spouses don't take the initiative to start or continue coordinating support groups, socials, and other unit programs, people could fall through the cracks.

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