

Separation Allowance and the Soldiers and Sailors Families Association (SSFA)

Prior to WW1 the number of married soldiers per regiment was limited. No soldier could marry without the permission of their commanding officer and then only if he was of good character, had served for at least seven years and had savings set aside. Of every hundred soldiers, only six would be granted permission to marry, although another nine would marry without leave. Those who married with permission were said to be on the strength of the army. When the regiment moved, the wives, boys under fourteen and girls under sixteen were given travel expenses to accompany the soldiers. If the regiment was sent outside of England, however, only a small percentage of the soldiers were permitted to bring their families and there was much competition to be allowed on the troop ship. In some cases, women would stow away to follow their husbands. In few cases, those left behind were allowed to remain in barracks where space allowed, but more often, the families left behind had to seek alternative housing at their own expense but were paid separation allowance by the Army.

The official history of separation allowances stated that the issue developed from the existence of the 'Married Establishment' that was officially recognised in the Royal Warrant of 1848, although it had existed in a less definite form previously. The regimental married establishment from the mid nineteenth century to 1914 was a restrictive system, and the official but abysmal treatment of soldiers' wives who had married 'off the strength'. In 1871 General Ayde considered marriage an inconvenience to the flexibility and efficiency of the Army. Women were regarded as expensive and distracting instead of useful, even essential, suppliers of both services and goods. In the mid-19th century a parliamentary committee judged British Army wives as a 'great evil and difficulty'; the Naval and Military Gazette described them as 'a serious impediment to the public service'. The Navy, for its own reasons, had never paid separation allowances.

The advent of WW1 meant it was no longer viable to differentiate between those wives on or off strength and anyway all barrack accommodation was required for the mass enlistment then taking place and so all wives lived off camp. Separation Allowance was then paid to all married soldiers and their children. Sailors, who previously could not claim the allowance were now able to do so. Prior to the onset of war separation allowance claims for legally married soldiers whose spouses were on the regimental married establishment for the whole of the Regular British Army, was no more than 1100 claims. With the immediate changes, by November 1914 separation allowance claims had reached over half a million. SSFA was enlisted to assist wives and dependants claim the allowance as there was no other existing administrative structure available. This did, however, cause occasional problems as one of the criteria for claiming separation allowance was that the wife should be 'of good character' so it was subjective and required moral judgements by the SSFA representative. In December 1914 the Home Office, likely, at the behest of the War Office, issued instructions to Chief Constables to keep a record of soldiers wives with a view to ensuring money was not spent on alcohol. The Chief Constables refused and the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, together with the Chief Constables of Manchester and Glasgow, amongst others, made their feelings known to the press.

There was a general feeling that the exact provision for wives and families of soldiers should be widely known and this was published in newspapers

Separation allowance –

for wife, 7s. 7d.;

wife and one child, 8s. 9d.;

wife and two children, 9s. 11d.;

wife and three children, 11s. 1d.;

wife and four children, 12s. 3d.

Compulsory allotment from soldiers pay (on going abroad). –

for wife, 3s. 6d.;

wife and one child, 4s. 1d.;

wife and two children, 4s. 8d.;

wife and three children, 5s. 3d.;

wife and four children, 5s. 3d.

If there is no other source of income the Soldiers and Sailors Families Association allows.

for wife, 1s. 5d.;

wife and one child, 1s. 8d.;

wife and two children, 1s. 11d.;

wife and three children, 2s. 2d.;

wife and four children, 2s. 6d.

Making a total weekly income of. –

for wife, 12s. 6d.;

wife and one child, 14s. 6d.;

wife and two children, 16s. 6d.;

wife and three children, 18s. 6d.;

wife and four children, 20s.

When the rent is more than 5s. a week, an additional grant may be made by the Soldiers and Sailors Families Association

Army Order 440 of 1914, promulgated on 1 January 1915, made provision for 'Separation Allowance for dependants of soldiers other than wives and legitimate children during the present war'. Such dependants represented a 'member of a family' that included:

(a) The soldier's father, mother, grandfather, grandmother, stepfather, stepmother, grandsons, granddaughter, brother, sister, half-brother, half-sister, ('grandson' and 'granddaughter' will include illegitimate children of whom the soldier is the grandfather and the illegitimacy of the soldier himself will not affect the position of his parents or grandparents).

(b) A woman who has been entirely dependent on a soldier for her maintenance and who would otherwise be destitute; and children of the soldier in charge of such person.

Women in a common law relationship with a soldier became entitled to separation allowance and were identified in official documents as unofficial wives.

The necessary documentation in order for a soldier's wife to draw separation allowances

from the GPO was similar in format to a chequebook and was called a draft. Each book contained 13 drafts on a quarterly basis of 13 weeks each. This task was particularly labour-intensive and each of the 13 drafts was filled out individually with the same information. The completed drafts were then sent to the appropriate paying post office that kept the draft book. The wife of a soldier nominated the appropriate post office within the UK where she collected her weekly entitlement on production of an identity card, also prepared by the respective Army Pay Office. This system continued throughout the period of the Great War. It was assumed at this time that there would be less chance of fraud if the nominated post office retained the draft book. Often the rate of allowance was insufficient for the family and a 'top up' would be paid as indicated above.

The peacetime administration of separation allowances was made monthly and in advance to the entitled dependant of a soldier who was on the regimental married establishment but unaccompanied. However, by the second week of the war the frequency of payment was reduced to weekly. The Army Pay Services did not anticipate the change from monthly to weekly payments; however these changes were made due to public pressure placed on the Secretary of State for War.

The reason for the rapid change in scope and depth of separation allowances was due in part to the recruitment needs. During the first two months of the Great War, there was growing optimism that the war would be over by Christmas, despite the predictions of both Lord Kitchener, the Secretary of State for War, and David Lloyd George, then Chancellor of the Exchequer. The widening of the scope of separation and other allowances during the first few weeks of the Great War undoubtedly enhanced morale within the Army and encouraged voluntary recruiting.