

Military OneSource Podcast — Settling In and Making Connections After an OCONUS Move

Military Family Readiness Programs

Episode transcript

Intro voice-over:

Welcome to the Military OneSource Podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department with tools, information, and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit militaryonesource.mil.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. Today we're going to talk about moving, specifically moving overseas. Here's an acronym for you, maybe it's a new one for you: OCONUS. It's shorthand for moving overseas, outside the continental US, all right? So that's going to be our focus today. We are joined by Stephanie Holets. Stephanie is stationed with her family in Germany at Army Garrison Stuttgart, but she is actually an Air Force military spouse, so it just goes to show the military can send you anywhere. Adventures abound. So, Stephanie, welcome to the podcast.

Stephanie Holets:

Thanks, Bruce. I'm excited to be here.

Bruce Moody:

We're glad to have you with us today. We're going to talk about moving. You've moved a bunch of times, but let's get a sense of who you are. Again, you're in Germany. You're joining us today from Germany. You're at Army Garrison Stuttgart. You're an Air Force spouse, and you work at Army Community Service. What is it that you do there?

Stephanie Holets:

Well, I do lots of things. I am the relocation readiness program manager. So, overseas, that's a huge program. And really, for anyone who's really not terribly familiar with military family programs, every branch calls it something a little different. So, here on the Army side with relocation in Stuttgart, I provide comprehensive support for military and civilians and even DOD contractors, whether it's their first or their 20th move, basically connecting them with resources and information to help them navigate their move either to Stuttgart or from Stuttgart.

So, maybe digging into some details; for example, I provide them with various pre-arrival information. We have the lending closet, where folks can rent for free various kitchen items, or sometimes some installations may offer baby items, like high chairs and car seats. We provide newcomers orientation and briefings. We offer cultural adaptation classes for language, for just getting to understand one's German neighbors. We have grocery store tours. We run a foreign-born spouses program to help maybe spouses who are learning English for the first time integrate into military life and help perfect those skills. So we do a little bit of everything and anything that touches the military life cycle while folks are PCSing in and out.

Bruce Moody:

Well, there we go. That all explains why you are joining us today because this is something that you do for a living, and this is what you've done in your personal life as well. You've moved four times. You've PCSed. So if you're new to the military, folks, and you hear PCS, it means permanent change of station. Don't get hung up on remembering that because everybody is just going to refer to it as a PCS.

Stephanie, you've moved four times. So what was different this time around with moving overseas?

Stephanie Holets:

Well, two main things come to mind for this. So, first of all, I had been working in military family programs for quite a while now across two branches. So when we got orders to Stuttgart, I thought, "Hey, I'm the expert. I know how to move. I know where all of the skeletons are. I know exactly what to do to PCS successfully, smoothly. We're going to move my family easily, no problem." I'm eating my words now because with any move, there are always things that crop up no matter how many times one has PCSed.

And the second piece, of course you mentioned that this is chatting really about OCONUS moves. And that's the biggest piece, is although they're exciting and there's so many things to look forward to with OCONUS moves, it's going to throw a lot of new obstacles and new challenges in someone's way, and it certainly did for my family.

Bruce Moody:

There's a lot to it, which is what you were alluding to. What is the death-by-a-thousand-paper-cuts aspect of moving that you maybe want to touch on for people who have not had this experience before?

Stephanie Holets:

Yeah, absolutely. So there are the big rocks. There's knowing how housing will work and ensuring and finding childcare, enrolling kids in schools. So even if all of those things are perfectly in place and someone's got a plan, and I did, right, I had those things in place, I worked really hard to get those in place, there are still just those little things—with moving to a new country, being from a different branch and maybe families going to live and work with a sister service. Things like just getting a new driver's license, which is required, I believe, in all OCONUS locations. Having to also get an international driver's license and have that set up, official passports, regular tourist passports, maybe PCSing and expecting one climate and realizing that there's some kind of heat wave and all you've got is one suitcase full of winter clothes. Adjusting kids to sleep, living for sometimes months in a hotel, getting set up with self-service, and then, of course, the language barrier.

And all of these things, again, I would not say to scare anybody, but they are considerations, and they're things that someone moving from one OCONUS location to another may not be an expert on. Again, there's just a million new things to add to your moving checklist when you go OCONUS.

Bruce Moody:

When people talk about moving overseas, a lot of times they'll talk about, well, culture shock. I really want to hear your thoughts on this because culture shock, you've alluded to this in a number of ways. Culture shock, folks, just so you know, that can include being from one service and being stationed on an installation run by a different service. That's a culture shock in and of itself.

But then you also alluded to some of the things that you do in your job, is do things like grocery store tours because it's very, very different when you go overseas. And if you don't really know what to expect, it can just make things more difficult. And maybe you can talk about culture shock, how that kind of presents itself and how you deal with it.

Stephanie Holets:

So it's a really, really good question, and I think it's something that we don't talk about enough in military communities. And I think, especially, people are very unlikely to admit that they're facing culture shock.

So when I'm talking to folks who come in my office or friends that I'm just meeting, new acquaintances or neighbors, a lot of times it's—the way that I phrase it is an expectation/reality divide. Folks get their PCS orders to overseas and inevitably they think about like, “Oh, next week I'm going to be in France, and the week after I'm going to be in Germany, and then I'll travel all over Europe and it will be wonderful. I'll eat all these new foods, and it will be this fairytale experience.” And really, they get here, and they realize that it's difficult. And so folks, again, no matter how excited they are, they get here, and they realize that it just takes quite a bit of work to get their life set up. And it sometimes takes three to six months to start taking those trips and feeling really comfortable in their environment, and sometimes longer.

With culture shock, specifically, maybe people have experienced that if they've gone maybe to some kind of study abroad trip, if they've done a lot of foreign travel. But a lot of what I see is people get here, and they're excited and they get things set up. And sometimes it's more of that six months to a year where people really get settled, that's really when they become homesick. So culture shock is not simply always that initial, you know, “entering a new country and just feeling overwhelmed.” That can present as feelings of anxiety and depression later on once someone's been here for a while. And that can be really challenging to people because they don't realize that what they're experiencing is very common, and really as long as they're staying connected with friends and neighbors and really just using the services that are provided to them by the military, they can really combat a lot of those issues.

Bruce Moody:

Let's talk about those connections. And those could be with spouses, parents, peers, through perhaps the programs that you offer, informal channels. I really want to talk about what those connections have to offer people who are dealing with an overseas move. What is it like trying to make connections with other spouses and parents and peers through various programs or informal channels when you're making an overseas move?

Stephanie Holets:

Okay, so coming from three prior CONUS locations, always living in the United States. I've always lived in the U.S., and though there are often really excellent base resources and programming and clubs and organizations, sometimes attendance isn't always the best because a lot of times people can get what they need off base. Sometimes people never come on base. Honestly, you meet people OCONUS, and sometimes military spouses, their ID cards have been expired for a while because they really just aren't using a lot of base resources. And then you come overseas, and you realize unless you speak that language, that's your community. And for a lot of military families and civilian families, that's something really unique, so you get people sometimes in their 30s and 40s and even 50s who've really never been integrated in the military.

So a lot of times coming OCONUS, everyone's on that even playing ground. Nobody knows anybody, and folks are a lot more open OCONUS, at least in my experience, to

just really wanting to make friends quickly and being extremely welcoming and open. So anytime you run into an American in Germany, in my experience, whether it's on or off base, everyone's just really happy to see you and talk to you and welcome you to Germany. That's really, really positive and exciting.

Additionally, the MWR, so Morale, Welfare, Recreation, events held through the Army—and the sister services have these same types of events—they're bigger, they're better and they're extremely well-attended. So, for example, one of the things that I did when I moved here just to meet people is I took a couple of the MWR tours, and basically they go all over Europe, sometimes just an hour or two to go visit a castle or a museum, and sometimes they're fairly far away. So I took some of these bus trips, and I met other newcomers to the Stuttgart area, maybe people that I never would've met through any other means. And those are always really, really fun and exciting trips because you're knocking out some travel, maybe adding a new country to your list, but you're also meeting people in a really organic way.

There's great events, huge Fourth of July events, winter events, really any and every holiday, the Halloween events are bigger and better than anyone's ever really seen CONUS. There's just a lot of excitement, and things are very busy, and it's very easy I think to get plugged in and have the opportunity to meet Americans.

Additionally, the ACS offers programming specifically for this purpose. And one of the things that we do is a host-nation tour. And our translator, she's a local German citizen, and she's also now has a U.S. citizenship. She teaches people to use the public transportation system, and while she does that, she takes them to downtown Stuttgart for a big tour. Most OCONUS locations do something a little like that. And while it is a tour and while it is education, the really fun and interesting side effect of this is that people make new friends, and I see it every time I attend one of these tours. Folks start out as strangers, and by the end of the tour, they're exchanging phone numbers, they're getting their kids together for play dates, they're talking about job opportunities, they're sharing local information about maybe where to find housing.

So, again, any new event that a newcomer attends on base is just another opportunity for them to make new friends and build connections. And that might be new to a lot of military spouses moving OCONUS, especially if they haven't been involved in the past.

Bruce Moody:

That's a really good point. They may have not been involved. There are a lot of people who are maybe new to the military and they're stateside, they're just not going on to the base very often. They have their life off base. It's different when you go overseas. Your life is really centered on the installation. You may live out in town, and you may shop out in town and explore and everything, but you have much more engagement and connection to your installation when you're overseas.

What I would like for you to talk about is, for example, Army Community Service, or if you're in the Navy, the Fleet and Family Support Center, whatever the installation is, perhaps you knew it to be of a certain type of a service stateside, but it's very, very different in its offerings when you're overseas. Even things that they already have, like the new parent support program; it does things to help combat isolation, so if you would, talk about how these family support centers overseas specialize in helping families connect when they're overseas.

Stephanie Holets:

Yeah, absolutely. That's primarily our goal, right? Of course we've got to meet our general job requirements, but how we do that overseas, of course, is always with that in mind. How do we get people in the door? How do we get people connected and happy to be here and excited to be here and hopefully maybe a little sad that they're leaving, but that is always at the forefront of every decision that we're making in terms of what classes to offer, what kind of programming to plan for the next year.

And you mentioned new parent support. I'm so glad that you did. So unlike in maybe other branches, I know the Air Force did not offer a new parent support within their family programs. Here in the Army, new parent support falls under ACS, so I get that early morning welcome, a lot of new parents with kids coming in to join some of their classes and play groups. Here in Stuttgart, the program is run by two nurses and a social worker, and they do a ton for our community.

So the play groups, they've got something called Littles and Lattes, so it's basically for kids like two to four. Parents can bring their kids in, and we have a giant family room in our ACS. Kids can play. We've got great toys, really unique things that parents probably don't have at home. Kiddos can play and get socialized and so can the parents. We've got moms and dads both coming in for this particular play group. We've got baby yoga, you saw that today. That's a great class. Got tummy time classes.

Of course, they offer the typical "baby bump" sort of pregnancy 101 class, but what's really unique about their programming relating to pregnancy here is they do hospital tours of the local host-nation hospitals. Of course it can be, as you can imagine, pretty intimidating to give birth in a foreign country, not speaking the language. And that's why it's really useful to meet with these ladies, go to the local hospitals, learn how to advocate for yourself, how to perhaps ask for a single room, if one's insurance will cover that. There's just a lot of new things, regardless of if it's someone's first child or their

fourth child, there are just a lot of things that are different when you move that aren't so scary once you have some exposure to them.

So in addition, with a new parent support program, and this is great, too, I see a lot of moms who walk in, they've just moved and they're very pregnant. One of the great things too about new parent support is they do home visits. And they can drive all over our local area and go directly to home, chat about sleep, talk about lactation support, just parenting, siblings, potty training, whatever it might be. So our staff members can come to families' homes and hopefully just, again, provide that support, and they also speak to some of the other events that are happening on the installation for parents and families to hopefully get them better connected.

Bruce Moody:

Let's change the conversation a little bit and talk about military spouse employment. So for this particular move, you had your employment lined up prior to your move. That's not always the case for military spouses. So what has been your experience in managing your career or finding employment when you've PCSed, including securing a job while you're overseas?

Stephanie Holets:

Sure. I'll give you a little bit of extra background, Bruce. I was a new military spouse. I got married a month after I graduated from college, probably like a lot of military spouses, and I was completely new to the military. I'd never had a family member in the military. The area where I'm from does not have a lot of military in it. I knew nothing about it.

Though I got a decent job as a 21-year-old using my degree, I wasn't very happy with my career at that point, but I had no idea what kind of family employment support that family programs for the military offers. I had no idea. And then one move later, so five years later, we're in a new location, and I was actually at a newcomer's brief with my husband, and I finally was introduced to military family programs and the employment support that they provide. I met with an employment counselor there, and that's how my government career started.

And meeting with him really started that new chapter of my life and of my career. And it was really cool, too, because I struggled a lot as a new military spouse, just getting connected with friends and with the community and feeling comfortable. And it's really nice because now I'm able to essentially be the person I needed when I was a new military spouse, and that's such a gratifying way to spend my day.

And with all of that said, my first position was as an employment counselor, an employment readiness program manager with the Air Force. So I'm very, very, very familiar with the challenges that military spouses face and not just me. And just the unique challenges that moving OCONUS can present. So, shameless plug for employment readiness, OCONUS spouses, and really CONUS spouses as well, everybody should be in contact with their gaining installation's military employment program

manager because they are a wealth of local information, and they are oftentimes that difference maker in almost all cases that I've seen spouses work with this program.

So one of the things that I'd really love to mention that's new for military spouses moving OCONUS, last year there was a memorandum of agreement, so an MOA signed by the DOD. It was between the Department of Defense and the State Department, allowing military spouses who are employed by government agencies potentially to telework overseas if their job permits it. And this was huge because there are so many spouses who work in federal service who really did have portable careers, but they just simply weren't allowed, potentially because of risk, to work overseas from home.

But since this was signed and implemented, I actually met two military spouses in the past month who are now able to work OCONUS because of this. But I just happened to run into them, so who knows how many more of these spouses are walking around USAG Stuttgart. One works for the Department of Energy, one works for the Coast Guard as civilians, and it's something that is really innovative and really speaks to how much the federal government is prioritizing military spouse employment.

And then a second piece here, OCONUS, and this is really important for spouses, is that usually people can't run home businesses unless they are registered as something called a home-based business. And basically, home-based businesses might cover everything from providing ABA therapy to children with sensory processing disorders. It could be something like baking cakes and selling on Instagram or Facebook. It could be photography. It could be providing virtual assistance services. But this process basically keeps everything legal and everything good and solid for tax purposes when people are living and working overseas, so that's something really important. If any spouse is listening to this thinking they're going to take their business overseas, definitely a possibility, but they've got to run through that HBB process with the employment program manager at ACS or whatever sister service program that they'll be working with.

So those are two really, really maybe different things new on the employment horizon for OCONUS spouses.

Bruce Moody:

Really interesting point. I'm so glad that you spent some time talking about spouse employment. We have a bunch of links in the program notes specifically addressing spouse employment, so please check those out. We also have additional links for preparing for a move, particularly an overseas move. But of course, at any time, you can use the 800 number or the toll-free number that we have to call Military OneSource anytime and just say, "Hey, I have questions about a move," and they will get you going in the right direction.

Stephanie Holets, we're so glad to have had this opportunity to speak with you today.

Stephanie Holets:

Thank you so much, Bruce.

Bruce Moody:

We appreciate it, and I really hope people have benefited from hearing this conversation, and we encourage you to share it maybe with somebody who's getting ready for a move. And I want to remind you all that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. If you have questions or comments, maybe you have an idea for a future episode, you can use the link in the program notes to send us a note. And be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life.

I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for joining us. Take care, bye-bye.