

“Mandatory Fun” - Why Attending Army Social Functions Can Help You

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Army life is full of social functions. Every time you turn around you've got an invitation to a family readiness group meeting, a coffee, or a hail and farewell. In our household, social functions are comically referred to as “mandatory fun”. It's no surprise to a soldier that they have to attend; the Army essentially “owns” their time. So they attend, without fail, even if they have to scurry out the back the minute they sign the attendance roster.

The general feeling amongst spouses is that social functions are not something they really can't wait to attend. Most spouses do end up attending out of obligation or duty. Sadly, their initial attendance isn't out of excitement. However, most will agree once they attend they do have an enjoyable time. There are several different reasons you might want to attend such functions, and having fun is just the icing on the cake.

The biggest reason for spouses to attend functions is to meet other spouses. You need a social structure of support. We're all in the same boat. Alma Powell once quoted, “As wives, if we do not know one another, how will we be able to support one another, and stand together in times of need?” How true that rings to me. If you've ever been through a deployment, ever moved to a new duty station, or simply ever signed a marriage certificate with a soldier, *you know* what it means to have that support in your corner. This is an invaluable way to network. Who knows you might end up meeting your best friend.

As an Army wife you are always hearing about the guys at work. You hear about SGT Smith, and LTC Johnson. You hear about the current field problem and the work in the motor pool. Social functions are a way for you to put faces with names. They are also a way for you to learn the Unit Command. Why would you want to know them, you ask? This is something you'll really be glad you did for several reasons. Most importantly, you will always know what not to blurt out after having a few drinks, because you'll know who's coming toward you, or better yet, you'll know when to stop someone else from the same embarrassing moment when they have someone coming up behind them! However comical that might seem, you know it happens. On a serious note though, you'll know the Command. God forbid anything ever happen to your soldier, or you ever need anything while he is away, you'll know who they are and who to call. It never hurts that they'll know who you are as well. This knowledge can do nothing but help you in the long run.

You will learn at each function more and more about the Command Climate. What is Command Climate? It's the tempo, personality, and general overall feeling of the Command. Sometimes you get an upbeat Commander, sometimes you get an uptight Commander. Sometimes you get an organizational micro-manager, and sometimes you get the class clown. You need to know these tendencies so you can adjust how you will relate your personality to the Command.

Not to emphasize this least because it is certainly one of the most important; social functions can be an information resource. I believe President Reagan coined it the “trickle-down” theory. This is what happens at some social functions. Information is “trickled-down” to the families from the top. Not to say we are the bottom, we all know we are the glue that holds the whole outstanding system together! Unfortunately enough, and definitely not a big SURPRISE to us, we are NOT in control. Therefore, usually, we are the last ones to receive official information. Your lack of attendance will mean you will find out what is going on in the Unit through your soldier. Do I really need to go there?

Attending the function gives you, the spouse, an opportunity to ask questions. There are just some questions you might feel the need to ask yourself, or maybe your soldier just wouldn't ever ask them for you. Your attendance at the function affords you the opportunity to have your question(s) answered straight from the “horses mouth”, so to speak. I always say if you don't ask, you'll never know. If you don't let the Command know what you need, or express yourself to them, how will they ever know how to change or better the organization? Please do not read this as you need to take this opportunity to give your Command “a piece of your mind”. Civilization need not be a new concept. You should approach this as a networking opportunity in which you can better yourself, your family, and the organization by being a positive influence and communicator.

In addition to being an information resource, the function might also provide Army resources and volunteer opportunities that are available on your installation. There are tons of resources and opportunities available on even the smallest Army post. Most people do not know that they even exist. If you think about it, how does the Army market their programs? It's not with colorful home-delivered flyers, personal phone calls, or fancy marketing strategies. Inevitably, they do it through social functions and other existing Army programs. I rest my case.

Coffees, Hail and Farewells, FRG meetings, Training sessions, Unit Organizational Days, Fundraisers, Briefings, and even Formal Balls are all places where you learn so much about the Unit and the Army's Traditions and Values. It gives you a sense of pride and accomplishment to be part of something bigger than yourself.

Let us not forget the two special reasons to attend; time with your soldier, and time away from the kids. Laugh if you will, but we need our time too. Grab a babysitter, go have some grown-up time, scurry away at your leisure, and go take an extra two hours or so with your husband. You deserve it. Oh, and don't forget, these functions *can* be fun!