



Kansas City Blog

News, events and happenings in Kansas City.

Guard and Reservists Spouses – Hope Springs Eternal

Your Reservist spouse is gone again, and being a single parent has been tough. Anything can be a crisis, from not being able to locate your daughter's hair ribbon for her cheerleader's uniform ten minutes before the game, to downright life-threatening events. Example: You've been diagnosed with stress-related singles and after a week of house confinement you get out in your car to run a few errands with one of your teenaged daughters who's just been squabbling with her sister about whose boyfriend is the biggest dork.

As you're stopped at a traffic light on the way home, it begins to pour rain and you tell your daughter that you'd better get home because people drive crazy in weather. At that very moment a pizza delivery vehicle hits the car behind you, setting up a chain collision with you in the middle. After hours in the ER, you discover you "only" have a whiplash, and a smashed-up car.

Talk about having a very bad day. And where's your wife? In Kuwait.

That was the situation faced recently by Brian Myatt of Clovis, CA, who works graveyard shift as an airline mechanic while his wife, SFC Lisa Myatt of the 1106th AVCRAD is deployed in the Middle East. So, overall, how's he handling it all?

"There's always some crisis going on, and all I can do is take them one at a time and deal with them the best I can," says Brian Myatt. With the help and support of his mother, his daughter's godmother, and his wife's unit's family support group, Brian fields problems as they come.

As Guard/Reservist spouses go, Brian is a bit unusual because of his gender, but not his attitude. Tylitha Paden, wife of SFC Terrance L. Paden of the New Mexico National Guard, says that while her husband was deployed to Iraq, the Albuquerque beauty salon she owns, along with "talking to God, working so I don't have to think, and Friday nights at the movies," helped her cope. Annie S. Williams of Madison, AL, wife of Maj. Michael D. Williams who spent 10 months in Kuwait, also credits prayer and their daughter's interests with keeping her steady and

busy: “I filled my time with extra-curricular activities. . .gymnastics, dance, Kindermusik, piano, children’s choir.”

H is for Hope

If there’s anything that characterizes well-adjusted spouses of guard members and reservists, it’s hope. These are people whose emotional focus is about the size of an email inbox, for whom “you’ve got mail” is the sweetest music in the world. Communication, like the most ancient definition of faith, becomes for them “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”

Hope alone isn’t enough. But the rest of the letters of the acronym of HOPE demonstrate how these spouses – and experts who analyze such spouses – can advise others on how to flourish during the deployment of a guard or reservist mate.

O is for Order

For Williams, life is more manageable when orderly. While many spouses swear by keeping a calendar to count-down days until deployment is over, Williams soon abandoned it because “time seemed to pass by more slowly.” But she kept the memory of her husband alive in her daughter’s mind by constantly sending and receiving photographs, talking on the phone, and watching videos of past family events where her husband and daughter interacted.

In the absence of presence, so to speak, sometimes something as mindless and simple as numbering letters can be comforting. “You can’t control what goes on where your husband is,” says “Ask April” advice columnist April Masini about deployed spouses, “but you can keep him in your life and you in his by writing regularly, whether or not you hear from him, and numbering your envelopes and letters so he will know if he missed one or not.”

For Myatt and for Williams, who is an elementary school teacher, often keeping order meant keeping ahead of chaos. Each had previously depended upon their spouses to help with getting kids to school and extracurricular activities while themselves maintaining full-time employment. Rearranging schedules and enlisting help from friends and relatives worked for them, but others aren’t so lucky. While many studies examine the career and financial cost of deployment for a guard member or reservist, “what’s often overlooked is how many spouses compromise their own jobs and careers to support their military spouse,” says Dr. James A. Martin, Col., US Army (Ret.), a Bryn Mawr College professor and the senior social work officer in the Persian Gulf Theater of Operations during the first Gulf War. “Childcare requirements when a spouse deploys is an example where civilian employers need to be more understanding.”

P is for Pro-Active

No doubt about it – having a deployed spouse is stressful. Myatt's shingles and Paden's persistent skin rash join what experts say are other symptoms of separation anxiety that include loss of appetite or eating constantly, unexplained weight gain or loss, stomach pains, and disruption of sleep patterns. An axiomatic part of guard and reserve deployment is financial and career uncertainty, with nerve-rattling accompanying repercussions when statistically one-third of deployed personnel must take a cut in pay to complete their service obligations long-term and away from home.

And then there's the toll on marriages and relationships. Dr. Walter Schumm, retired Colonel in the Army Reserve who now is professor of Family Studies at Kansas State University, says there's "not very much research on marital satisfaction as a function of deployment," but debunks the myth that only weak marriages crumble under a scenario such as he saw in Desert Storm. He cites a study that showed a 21% divorce rate and an additional 6% of stable marriages at risk during deployment.

For those who seem to be coping well with deployment, Schumm cites a recent study at Fort Riley and Fort Leavenworth that shows that spouse frustration was directed "more at circumstances than at their soldier," noting that "they were not happy campers but they were not blaming their husbands directly for it." However, "sometimes couples fight a lot before deployment almost as a way of making the separation easier," he says. He cautions that such emotional outbursts sometimes are unrecoverable, and relates heart-breaking anecdotes of wives angry with the uncertainty of their husbands' deployments who said or did hurtful things — with tragic results.

Schumm's good news is that, while long separations are more stressful, repeated deployment can actually have a positive impact. "Spouses learn how to cope from experience (number of deployments) but do not like their spouses being gone for so long (number of months)."

Experts are unanimous about the salutary effect of connectedness as the one essential element for keeping the home fires of mental health burning during deployment – staying in touch with the spouse, with family, with clubs and faith-based groups, with anyone who is a positive and helpful influence. For those near bases and/or large communities, such help is plentiful. But even those in rural areas can benefit from programs such as "Operation Military Kids," which allies organizations like 4-H, Boys and Girls Clubs, and local county extension services to meet the needs of children of deployed guards and reservists who might otherwise "fall through the cracks."

In addition to local community support, a robust virtual community exists in cyberspace. "Just do a Google search with the phrase, 'military spouse,'" advises Martin. "There are many military spouses supporting one another in this Internet community."

Proactivity can demand creativity. When her spouse was first deployed, Tylitha Paden couldn't find yellow rib-

bons, so she crafted some for cars, an action that led her to new friends and supporters who wanted ribbons too. She put her experience with her husband's multiple deployments to good use by sending announcements offering help for spouses of deployed soldiers through the local Churches of Christ in her area and created her own city-wide support group. She felt lonely ("after 24 years of marriage, I felt like my other half was gone – and he was," Paden says) so she sent packages abroad to servicemen and women overseas who felt lonely too.

E is for Expectations

One of the most unwieldy facets of hope is the element of expectation. For some guard members and reservists who may have somewhat cavalierly signed up for what they thought was occasional weekend warrior duty with a potential of some short-term domestic deployment, getting orders for Iraq was something they hadn't mentally signed on for. The wake-up call was deployment, one that jarred spouses, too, to the bone.

However, knowing what you can expect can be an advantage, says Dr. Z. Benjamin Blanding, a retired Army Lt. Colonel and a clinical psychologist and director of Rowan University's Counseling Center. He calls deployment and return as the "two extreme transitional life events" that are the biggest stress critical points. Knowing that most people handle the time between these events fairly well, says Blanding, can ease the last event – after all, if your spouse has already been deployed, and the separation time is the easiest of the three, then you can focus on de-stressing the reunion time.

Deployment is also the time a spouse can give the soldier a mental and emotional "free pass," according to columnist Macini. "Remember that you don't really know what's going on over there, and he may be stressed about things he's not telling you about. It's probably not about you."

The delicate balance between need and independence is hard to maintain. Annie Williams advises, "You must have faith. You must keep things going for yourself, your children, and to make your spouse proud. It is a fine line because you don't want your spouse to think that he or she is not needed. On the other hand, you don't want your spouse to worry. . .you want him or her to know that you can be counted on to get the job done back home."

In the long run, being realistic in your expectations of yourself may be the key to success. "If your military spouse is overseas, for now you are a single parent," says author Mickey Michaels, author of *Successful Divorce & Single Parenting*. "Don't try to be June Cleaver. She never had to deal with the issues that you do."

Worth it All

"Just about everywhere I go and people find out my wife is deployed, the first things they say are, 'well, God bless her and do you need anything?'" says Myatt as he muses on car crashes, teenager issues and deploy-

ment.

"I am so proud of my wife. She is a wonderful mother, wife, and American soldier. She could have retired but she chose to go to Kuwait and she will probably be sent to Iraq or Afghanistan this year. She is what an American soldier is all about, putting aside her personal needs...to serve her country and perform a mission that brings freedom to a part of the world that has never known what true freedom is."



This entry was posted in Kansas News on 06.06.2015 [<http://my-kansas-city-blog.us/2015/06/06/guard-and-reservists-spouses-hope-springs-eternal/>].

0 Comments

Kansas City Blog

 Login ▾

 Recommend

 Share

Sort by Best ▾



Start the discussion...

Be the first to comment.

 Subscribe

 Add Disqus to your site

 Privacy

DISQUS