

These Boots

A spouse's guide to stepping up and standing tall during deployment

Transcript of audio recording with Jacey Eckhart

Military OneSource

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Track 1: Challenges and rewards

I think I was blinded by the plastic shoes. When we were dating, the only time I ever saw my 22-year-old boyfriend in uniform, he was wearing those crazy, shiny, plastic shoes. You can't walk to the 7-11 in those shoes, much less work 20-hour days or march across the globe. So I think I deserve a little leeway in thinking that our military life was going to be a lot like everyone else's civilian life. I had no idea that deployment was coming, because I never once saw that guy in combat boots. I do -- now -- often, through 18 years of marriage, and 14 moves, and 5 deployments, and 3 kids, and a career spent writing about military families.

I have seen that guy in combat boots more than anybody would ever want to. Which would be fine, except that my boots don't exactly match his. I am not a combat-boot-wearing kind of gal. I admire those women who are. I respect them. But I'm the kind of gal who prides herself on never having run since puberty. I'm the kind of gal who zips into those big black boots and I consider that an outfit. So it's only when I see his boots together with my boots that I think these are two great things that do not go great together. Except that he and I, we are two people who go great together. He is a military guy. In his head, and in his gut, and right down to the bottom of those crusty boots, he is a guy who actually prides himself on making world peace his business. I love the way our military life has meant that we've had adventures in Japan and in Hawaii. And that we've been on the white beaches of Thailand. And that we've been in the ruined elegance of New Orleans. This has been a wonderful life for us.

So when I think about these boots, I'm not thinking about that old Nancy Sinatra song. You know the one I'm talking about? I don't look at these boots and think these boots were made to walk all over him. Or to walk out on him. Instead, these were made for stepping up, and stepping out, and stomping all over this deployment. All over all of the challenges in our lives. Exactly the way he does. Except that my

challenges at home during deployment are a lot different than his. In fact, they're different than they have ever been before. The war on terrorism has put an end to the standard deployment that we've prepped for in the past. Deployments now can be short, long, close to home, in the United States, or all over the world. You can have lots of time to prepare for it, or none at all. So it takes a different kind of strategy to get through a deployment.

I'm Jacey Eckhart. I have been writing for, speaking to, and interviewing military families for the past nine years. I work for The Virginian-Pilot in Norfolk, Virginia. It's one of the largest military communities in the country. I've also published a book, *The Homefront Club, the Hard-Headed Woman's Guide to Being a Military Family*, published through the Naval Institute Press.

Fortunately what this means for all of us is that I have been collecting all the ideas that have helped successful military families cope with deployment for years. Because you have to work your way through it. I won't lie to you. This is not going to be easy. Things that are worth doing are hardly ever easy. But these families, these successful military families, will tell you that it is in your power to become a better person, and a better spouse, and a better family by overcoming this challenge.

Overcoming this challenge. Now I bet that sounds a little bit cheerleadery to you. Thankfully, there is no regulation that says you have to be a cheerleader for all the military stuff. You don't have to agree with the politics that sends your husband or wife all over the world. You don't even have to wear a red, white and blue spangled sweater. All that is required of you is that you behave like an adult. That you hold firm to the vows of your marriage and the responsibilities of parenthood. And you were planning to do that anyway. So let me see what I can do to set you on your way.

Track 2: Predeployment

The first thing you need to know is that deployment doesn't begin the actual day the unit leaves. Instead you start with a predeployment period. What they often call work-ups. Now work-ups must seem like an excellent idea to those guys at the Pentagon because they send everybody out there on work-ups. In the Army, in the Marine Corps, this means they go to the field and they practice using their weapons, and they drive their little vehicles all around. In the Air Force it means a lot of extra flying time. It means getting used to the idea that you're not going to sleep very much for months at a time. In the Navy it means they get to take all the tiny little ships out of the back of the amphibious ships, and drive around and pick up the Marines. And it's all so neat-o. The only problem is that these work-ups also bring out something in military families. This is the way we start collecting all those crazy-making reminders that a great big change is coming. And that's OK. Because if your unit gets the advantage of work-ups, it offers the family a period of time to get all the important stuff done first.

Now here are five things that we've narrowed down but you really need to do in the months prior to a deployment.

Track 3: Rallying friends

The number-one thing is: rally your friends. Now I know that you thought that I was going to start with paperwork. And I'm sure I'll get to paperwork. But every military spouse will tell you the same thing. The thing that gets you through a deployment is your friends. Especially those blessed other military friends who get it, who understand why we're doing what we're doing. You need at least one friend who is available to go places and do things when you are. Now if you have a circle of other friends, you may have the patterns of your life kind of set up. They are not available on those long empty Sunday afternoons you have. They are not available on

holidays, because their spouse is there. They're doing family activities. This is the time people report that they feel the most alone. Having a friend, especially one from the command who has the same free hours that you do -- that can be a huge boon. You don't have to have everything in common with this person. They do not have to be your best friend. You're looking for a companion. Someone to go and do with.

Another kind of friend you're going to need -- you're going to need a friend to console you, you're going to need someone who will listen to your heart. This woman will have to be able to hear how your beloved is missing your anniversary, and what a tragedy it is. They'll have to listen to how many times the e-mail went down. And every time you hang up with them, they will have to remind you how lucky you are to be married to this guy, how great you go together, how you're doing a great job. This is your friend of the heart. Mothers are excellent often at this. Sisters. And it can even be a long-distance person.

Then if you're kind of like me, you need one other kind of friend. Maybe everybody doesn't need this kind of friend. But you need a friend who's tough. You need a friend who stands up and says, "Get over it. You knew he was in the military when you married him." You need someone to kick you in the head when the pity party goes a little bit too far. Funny how I have so many people lining up for that particular friendship.

One of the problems people have is -- especially when we move as much as military families move -- we don't have this many friends. It's tough to make friends. That's no excuse. You need to get out there and start working it now, before the deployment, while you're still feeling like yourself. OK? Because you'll go into a whole different deployment mode. Well, while you're feeling like yourself, work is an excellent place to make friends. Your apartment is not a good place to make

friends. There's just not enough traffic through there. Moms make friends at play-groups, and at play-dates. People make friends at command-sponsored picnics and parties. Lots of times those are kind of an artificial atmosphere -- do you know what I'm talking about? However, if you see a person at one of those parties, and then you run into her again somewhere else, you have the beginning of a relationship. So don't worry that you're not making great friends right away. You're really just trying to find people to know. Weight Watchers is a fabulous place to meet military spouses, especially from other commands. Because a lot of people report that when they deploy, one of their big goals is lose weight. So it's a great place to meet other people who are so pro-active that they're trying to lose weight in a professional setting. I find Starbucks, if you go to Starbucks regularly all the time, you'll start seeing people that you know. So what you're hearing is you're going to make friends through your routines. So if your routines are to go home and to stay home, that is not a place you're going to make friends. You need to start now.

Track 4: Visiting the unit

The second important thing you have to do before the deployment is visit the unit. I know it feels very retro, and very June Cleaverish, but it really is important to attend any function or pre-deployment briefings that the command offers. Even if you've already been to so many of these things that you could teach them in your sleep. Before the unit deploys, it's helpful to see the other people who are playing the game. To meet the people your spouse will be working with and eating with. Because there's a lot of things that you know about people by meeting them that you don't get by just hearing from them. And also you become a real person to them, not just somebody who's on a form, but an actual, honest to goodness person.

This is also the place where you must get contact information. They should pass these things out like peanuts. You must have a phone number -- a contact phone

number. This is not your spouse's cell phone number. I cannot say this clearly enough. Even if you have his number, you need the official name of his command. Not what he calls it, or the unit, but the official name of his command. You need to know his boss's name and rank. You need to have a phone number in the United States of an official person.

Now for each service that's going to be a different person, but at that command function, they'll tell you who it is. And if they don't tell you, ask. And they'll say, "oh yeah, let me tell everybody." But you have to have a phone number. Also, you have to meet your command's ombudsman, that's what it's called in the Navy. In the Marine Corps, the volunteer who's been trained to help families is a key volunteer. The Army calls the same person the Family Readiness Group Leader. In the Air Force, it's a key spouse. Whoever that command sponsored person is, the go-to person, the ask-the-question person, get her name or his name. A lot of really good ombudsmen are male. And get their phone number.

Now, you need to put all this information in a safe place. Although it is quite tempting to tattoo it on your body because it's really, really important information, it is not actually attractive nor recommended. So please just put this maybe in more than one place. The other reason to visit the unit is because we often gauge the people in charge really, well, just by seeing them in public. Your commanding officer's wife? She might be funny. Approachable. The kind of person you can instantly read as, "Oh, I can call her." You might see that ombudsman or key spouse and think, "Wow, she's a lot more professional than I thought she'd be and I know that she'll be able to answer this question." But you can't rely on your spouse's impressions of people. You need to go there and find out for yourself.

Track 5: Visiting family

The third thing you need to do is you've got to visit his family. It is traditional and customary for the guy to go back and visit the family before he deploys. And, certainly, for women when they deploy too. OK. Here's the tough part. You've got to try to schedule this four or more weeks before the deployment. Preferably more. Although your service member's parents will be volunteering to come visit you the week before the deployment or insisting that you come the week before the deployment? Or even to see the unit leave? Do not let this happen. You feel for these people.

I love my in-laws. And one of the things I love best about them is they have a sense of place. OK? Those extra two weeks, they're not going to actually do them any good. Six months or a year is six months or a year. The stress the family is under during those last two weeks before the deployment? That is not for anyone else to see. That is not a problem that you need. So I recommend that you avoid this fight. I want you to go home and take a marker and draw a box around the two weeks before the deployment. Do not accept commitments during this time. Do not accept visitors. If there's going to be a volunteer opportunity there? You're going to bake cookies for something? Not in that two weeks. These are sacred for your family. Because so much has to happen during that time. Work, real work as a family.

Track 6: Paperwork

You knew this was coming so don't tell me you didn't know it was coming. You have to take care of the paperwork. Now here's a case where you need some really sturdy boots. You're going to have to wade through this paperwork. I know you don't want to hear this. I don't want to hear this. I've been through five deployments and every one of the five times, I have dreaded the paperwork. Now I tell people that, "Oh, yes. I dread the paperwork because I am so busy. I have so much to do." The real reason I

think I dread the paperwork is what the paperwork means. If I need any of the papers in that folder, it means something kind of bad has happened. It means that once again, I've wrecked the car. Or something like that. Um, and so, somewhere in my head, I've got this really squirrely part that thinks that if I don't do the paperwork? That I won't need the paperwork. Now, I personally think that's brilliant. I think it's a great idea. Right? No. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. A hundred times wrong. This is the time to strap on your waders and slog right through the task of the paperwork.

The military does try to make this simple for you. They will insist on certain things that must be done before the unit deploys. Don't blame them for this. Be glad somebody has got that prod in you because you really need the paperwork. You can pull it together in a night or two. And treat yourselves afterwards.

You need a will. You must have a power of attorney. And definitely get direct deposit or some other financial arrangement you've both agreed upon -- because he will not be paying bills from Fallujah. You are the one here and so, you know, you need to work out an arrangement. I've talked to a lot of people. Especially people who have deployed overseas recently. Money is a real issue. Because, for one, there's not a lot of things for the service members to buy. OK? And one of the things that people at home do often is retail therapy. You know what I mean? That you'll buy things and feel better. But when this leads to financial problems at the end, that doesn't make anybody feel better. So take the time and work on this stuff together now. This is the way that people who really love each other treat each other.

Track 7: Living simply

The fifth thing and the last thing you need to do before the deployment, you must resolve to live simply. Do not start a big house project. If you've let it go this long, it can wait another six months. Do not take on an extra job. Do not become the Sunday

school teacher at your church. I have already done you a favor. I have gotten rid of your in-laws you. You can thank me later. But you have to remember to think -- keep everything as simple as possible. Because you'll be under so much stress. Your family members will be feeling every emotion that anyone has ever felt. If you've never deployed before, ask some of the people in your unit who have deployed before.

One of the things that gets on my very last nerve is that when I see my husband packing his sea bag to go to sea -- he's excited. He's trying to hide it. But there's a little bit of excitement in that. He has spent his whole professional life getting ready for this moment. It's a big deal. It's exciting and he looks forward to going. He's a kind man and tries to hide it from me. But I know it. But he also gets irritable during that time. Everything we do gets on his nerves. We all feel sad or mad. Whatever you feel, it will be a very big thing I really recommend talking to other human beings that you know. Especially ones that you kind of admire. Or you think that they've got a good family set-up. Because they probably know what they're doing. They're not lucky. They're skillful.

One of the things that they'll tell you is right before a deployment, we pick fights with each other. I would look at my husband and I would think "I do not know why I am married to this man. Who is this guy? He can just leave and that's fine by me." I'm telling myself that really hard before he leaves. And I'm sure he's telling himself the same thing about me. But the minute he gets to the command, the minute he's actually gone, he calls me. "Oh, baby. I miss you so much already." It's almost like we need that space in order to have room to leave. It's normal. Don't sweat it. But also try to keep the fight as small as you can. When you start recognizing it's happening, you say, "Hey, this is the deployment fight. Let's not have it." And that can be, really, that can be enough.

So take this as an official instruction to get enough sleep. Try really hard not to pick that fight. Order pizza. Put up your feet because there's an awful lot of work ahead of you both.

Track 8: Deployment

Deployment. In the Navy, right before a ship deploys, the sailors all get dropped off with their sea bags at the gate in front of the pier. Some couples, especially the really young ones, cling to each other until the very last minute, unable to believe that they really will have to let each other go. It hurts the rest of us to look at them. Other families drop their sailor off. Say goodbye, and then hang around the pier for a while to watch the ship leave. Or they go to another place where they watch the ship actually sail all the way to the horizon. Me? I'm of the school that you slow the mini-van down for a moment, open the door, push him out the side and drive away in a flurry.

No matter how you do it -- I always think that this moment is a really important thing to see. Because it proves that every couple is different. They all handle departure and deployment in their own way. And as long as their own way doesn't include a whole lot of illegal substances, alcohol. As long as it doesn't mean that you're neglecting your kids. As long as you don't move your boyfriend or girlfriend into the house. Well, actually, as long as you don't have any boyfriend and girlfriends. All the ways that people handle this are OK. There isn't any one right way. People handle things their own way. And you will too.

Now me? One of the ways I handle deployment is I cry. I sob. I beat pillows. I boo hoo to beat the band. Then I get over it. Take a nice shower. Strap back into the boots and get on with my life. But I need to cry first.

My best friend Dawn? She is exactly the opposite of me. You will never see her cry a tear. But the woman cleans. She cleans until eleven o'clock at night. She cleans until you want to use her grout as the, you know, the test substance there. She cleans until she's so tired that she can fall into bed and tell herself that she's not missing her husband.

We have another neighbor who declares to everyone who will listen that deployments are no big deal. That she doesn't miss her husband at all. But she flies off the handle over nothing when her husband is gone. Poor, unsuspecting plumbers and school secretaries take her wrath. It's kind of scary. And we've decided we going to post a "Danger - Deployment" sign in her yard. And I believe the service people will all be grateful to us. Still other women handle separation by eating. By forgetting to eat. By talking on the phone until late into the night. By working extra hours. By scheduling every possible minute. By watching scandalous amounts of TV.

It would be great if all of our reactions to deployment were the same. And then we could at least understand each other. What I want you to do is look at other people with compassion. They're getting through it. And it's a path they'll exercise. And as long as they're passing, that is good enough. Our differences are never bigger than when it comes to how people handle their problems. Some people are the kind they prefer to keep their troubles to themselves. They turn them over and over alone. They ponder them. They think on solutions. And you may never know they have a problem until they can tell you what the solution is. That's a great way to be. Another kind of person denies that there are any problems. I mean, they may be eating the fuzzy Skittles out of the bottom of their kid's backpack? But they will not admit that there's a problem.

And then there's a third kind of person. We call them complainers. And some people are really just complainers. But I think that a lot of times these people we call

complainers are really people who need to think their problem out loud. I know this because I'm a terrible complainer. Ask anyone. I am a whiner. I am such a whiner that I am practically colicky. I have to moan over a problem. I have to think up every possible solution and talk it over with you. OK? It's only when I'm really sick of myself -- really sick of the problem, then I actually act. But before I've talked about it, I can't act. Now, there's only one problem with being a whiner and a complainer, you cannot do this with other people up the command. These are not the friends to whine and complain to. You need those three people we talked, about a few minutes ago. Those are the people to go to. But not the people in the command. Because the people in your command are as stressed out as you are about the same things that stress you out. And so you don't want to be the person who's wearing everybody out. OK? Please don't think that you have to keep every problem to yourself. You definitely need to talk about it. But don't do it within the command.

A deployment is a really long stretch of road. It is a marathon. It is not a fifty-yard dash. People forget that. Maybe that is why everybody from my mother to those pamphlet writers down at the family service center -- they all want me to set wonderful goals for these gazillion hours I have during deployment. They want me to re-awaken all my past neglected personal goals. Every time a deployment or a long separation comes up, people think I must have hours that I used to waste doing husband-tending things. Like making meat and potatoes for dinner. Or picking up dry cleaning. Or sitting in the lap of my beloved. (Hey, those are some good hours!) According to the recognized wisdom of the day, the deployment is time for little military spouse me to re-awaken my neglected personal goals. I love this idea. I especially love to awaken the idea that I will go back to a single-digit dress size -- last achieved when my age was also written in a single digit.

And I do get grandiose plans. I think to myself that I am going to retile my bathroom. I'm going to make a king size quilt out of velvet. Because, of course, I'm

going to have all this extra time. Right? But I actually know me. I will not do any of these things. Two weeks before my beloved gets home from sea, I will be stricken with the knowledge that I am, in fact, a complete slug. The conquering hero is sure to sweep in with all his goals met -- only to find that the same Frito crumbs that were under the dishwasher when he left? Are still there when he comes back.

I'm not the only one at the slugfest. In surveys of other spouses, I found that the problem with all this personal goal-setting is a problem with the goals themselves. Not the sluggishness of a particular goal setter. We parents in particular forget that all those extra hours we're supposed to gain during deployment? Also come with extra chores to fill them. All the chores that the service members do.

I think that this is actually a great thing for families and it's great for the marriage. Because for a person like me, I suddenly realize all the things my husband's been doing without my knowing about it. Because suddenly those things are undone. Other friends report that they realize that their husbands were not quite carrying the load. So if you're the service member yourself, do try to make sure that everyone's going to miss you.

Some spouses do manage to drop a dress size. Go back to school. Build a house for Habitat for Humanity. These things are awesome. I don't mean like awesome the way teenagers say. I mean like they should fill you with awe. You should look at that person and know how much extra effort went into that. But these extra efforts? These awesome achievements? They are not required. You are allowed, nay encouraged, to ask for help. We have a saying that the smart woman accepts help when it's offered. And the wise woman asks for it. Sadly, I know very few wise women in my circle. But deployment has a way of making that kind of wisdom absolutely necessary.

Track 9: Using resources

There is so much help available to military families. Civilians cannot get over how much help is available to us. They would love to have some of the advantages that we have. If you're really having problems in a military family, it makes sense to access all your resources. We're lucky that way. We have the resources. We can reach local folks. Like the command chaplain. Or your family service center advisor. There's quite a few new books written by and for military spouses available through your library, if you're under a budget. Or Amazon.com has everything. Just put in your search words: Military family. And you'll be amazed at how much stuff comes up.

We can even get short-term, free face-to-face counseling that helps us organize and process our experience -- just by calling Military OneSource at 1-800-342-9647. You can also look them up on line at www.militaryonesource.com. You don't have to be in dire straits to get this kind of help. Things don't have to be falling apart. All you have to do is need that third-party input. Someone who can listen to you with an open mind. It makes a huge of difference and lots of people are using these services. This may be the deployment that you really do need to be a little easier on yourself. And you probably need to be little easier on your service member.

Track 10: Communication

One of the places I see couples get in the most trouble is how and how often they plan to communicate with each other. On our first deployment, we didn't have access to email and we didn't have access to phones. Except once he called me from Brazil and he talked for two minutes and it cost us four hundred dollars. Be glad those days are past. I would not wish them on you. But what I did instead was I wrote letters to my husband. Everybody wrote letters to their husbands. But I put mine on this love-red paper. And I put them in a red envelope. Because I wanted everybody

who was dealing with the mail to know that someone cared about this junior, junior, junior, junior guy. Even if it was just me.

On the rare day I would actually get a letter back from the ship? Dan, Dan, the nice postman would ring my doorbell. So I could fling myself out there and rip it open to see: “Dear Jace: I love you. I miss you. Wish you were here.”

I do so love my husband. But he is not one of those men who expresses themselves beautifully on paper. Or easily. Or, sadly, often. On his first deployment, he actually let twenty-eight days go by without putting pen to paper. Or ear to a telephone. Or thoughts to feeling a little wife across the water. Men can do that kind of stupid stuff. Not cruel stuff, but just stupid stuff. And often they do this stuff during their very first deployment.

You will hear about service members who seem to spend so much time communicating with their spouses that you wonder how they ever get their jobs done. You’ll also hear about guys who, they think if they’ve thought about you once in a month and maybe dropped you a letter one time and told you they love you? That’s enough. That should tide you over for the entire deployment.

The important thing is not how often that they contact you or don’t contact you or how they contact you. The important thing is that you agree how much it’s going to be. So you need to have this conversation. You can have it before the deployment. More likely, you’ll have it more than once during the deployment. Again, perfectly normal. I think it happens to all of us.

Thankfully, communication really is a lot better now than it even has been in the past. Cell phones are great. The next best thing to being there. But they do have their drawbacks, don’t they? Then don’t always work. And they can be very, very

expensive. The other problem that I've heard, especially from Marines recently -- they tell me that it's almost too immediate. It's almost like you're in your home too much. Because when you reach a Marine or a soldier in the field, they are tired. They are hot. Or they are cold. They are dirty. They are irritable. They haven't slept. It is so easy for a service member to say something that they don't mean and then get frustrated by spending fifty bucks getting the silent treatment from you. "C'mon baby. C'mon baby." You've heard it a million times. That's one of the drawbacks of cell phones.

E-mail. A great boon. Ask anybody who has had to do without it. Ask those submarine families who only get it once in a while. Just a few lines. I call it the single best improvement in the lives of military families. Because for a lot of families, it does give you almost daily contact with a spouse. That can really, really help.

But it will go down with some frequency. Calling the command to complain will not bring back the e-mail any sooner. The service members working on the problem want the e-mail up and running even more than you do. Let them do their job.

Another one of the disadvantages of e-mail is that it's in cyberspace. It's not an actual physical thing. I've talked to lots of military wives who have boxes of letters that they've saved, that they exchanged with their spouses during deployment. Recently I talked to a history professor, and he was telling me that he hopes that military spouses are printing out all of their e-mails because these are historical documents. This is how people really feel about a historical event. It's immediate and one of the things they're afraid of is that because they're not a physical document, it will disappear. I actually did that after our last deployment. It was almost a ream of paper, and I could hardly bear to read them because they were all so real. They were all so real.

One of the things I love about e-mail is that it is so immediate. When we were younger and we could only get letters, there'd be things that would happen that would require a decision. For example, buying a new car. Do you want me to get this expensive repair? Are we really interested in buying a new car? So, now an e-mail decision like that is so easy because we can really exchange ideas.

The problem is that sometimes it can be way too immediate. Just because he's gone doesn't mean I don't lose my temper with him. And say things that I don't necessarily want to say. So sometimes when I have written an e-mail where I feel really hot about the e-mail? I have kept it until the next day before I press send. Just put that in your draft column. You can still send it tomorrow if it's good. But too often, we start a fight that we wouldn't have started a fight about if he'd actually been present.

At the same, that is so true as well for gossip about the schedule. Often you can get an e-mail from your service member and he tells you, "Oh, yeah. I heard this." Okay? Do not pass that along to anyone. That is for your consumption alone.

I love how much contact we have with our military, um, members who are overseas. When you think of how far away they are? It is amazing that they can sound right there in the room. And because they sound right there in the room, we often talk to them as if they were actually in the room. This is really true when it comes to a crisis popping up. Like your insurance was cancelled. Or you get a bill you didn't expect, or you've got a teenager who is in their room doing God knows what teenagers do in their room. Right?

Often we fire off these calls or e-mails and expect the service member to be able to do everything he does when he's actually present. I know my husband can fix my daughter, what's wrong with her, because he's just like her. He's so much better at it

than I am. But when they're working eighteen hours a day, when they are not showering like normal people shower, they are not all the way there on their game. They're overseas to fight a war on terrorism. Not to solve the problem that's going on in my daughter's bedroom. Right? So one of the things that we've done is often I tell him in the e-mail. Or tell him on the phone call. "This is what I want from you." A lot of times what I say is, "Honey, I just want you to hear this." Or, "I can't believe this. I just wanted to tell you about it. And after I'm done telling you, I want you to say 'Good job.'" And believe me, this works a treat for him. I know he wants what's best for me. I know he means well. But sometimes if you just give him the right line to say, it's really kind of a relief.

Now there are things that he's never going to be able to do -- i.e., mow the lawn. Really hard. That's the one thing I wanted him to do and darn it, he never did do it. You can't mow the lawn from overseas. But there are certain things that you can do. He can offer, "Hey, I can't talk to her right now but I will call her back later. Tell her I'm going to call." OK?

There's certain kinds of advice that they give better than anybody. One of the best things that they do from over there that you really need to tell is to compliment us on the good job that we are doing. It means so much not to hear, "Oh, baby, I miss you and you're beautiful and I love you so much." What I want to hear is, "You handled that thing with the teenagers so great." "I am so glad you took care of the dishwasher. I was worried about that." But the specific compliment does a whole lot of good.

Maybe one of the things we should do with e-mail is that when the e-mail goes down, take that as a clue that you should put something in snail mail that day. It doesn't have to be a blood-red letter. It doesn't have to be a missive. It can be a card. It can be a post-it note. Things that come through snail mail are a touch of home.

People who have been deployed, they say that they read things that they got from home over and over and over again.

You can't hold an e-mail in your hand. It also doesn't taste nearly as good as, say, a cookie. Home-baked goods are the food of choice. But the mail system can be chancy. It's a very long supply line. Things can go wrong. So when I send things overseas, I usually include something really well wrapped that's homemade and also a bag of Oreos or Cheese-Its or whatever your spouse likes. You want those things in case your snickerdoodles don't quite make it. Also, I don't want you to turn up your nose at some of the activities that the family support groups have. Sometimes they will make a craft. Or they will put together -- you know -- special socks. All these things might seem very, very goofy to you. But by the time they get overseas to a person who hasn't had anything from home they're really great.

Both men and women report that they love these things. Our command just did a Halloween. They sent bags of Halloween candy -- which I thought was just so goofy and extreme -- but the women called and said, "Thank you for doing it. I really appreciate it." Which made me feel good.

So, let's see. We talked about realistic goal setting and complaining and communication and craft projects. What are we missing? What haven't we talked about in deployment? The dog? Well, you know. Your dog. He does pretty well. You really do have to take him outside more than once during a deployment. Cats don't notice whether the service member is there or not. The truck? Oh, yes. Definitely turn on the truck. You have to turn the ignition on. At least once a month. And if you don't turn it on, you can always lie about that. That's a forgivable lie.

Track 11: Helping children cope

So what haven't we talked about? Kids. We haven't talked about kids. Now it would be so easy to talk for an hour about kids and deployment. I think it's one of our biggest worries. We worry that our kids are going to be hurt and scarred and, you know, ruined by deployment. This is where the research does you most good. Every time they research military families, they find one thing over and over and over again. How goes the mother or the parent -- whatever parent's home. How goes the mother? So go the children. If the mother handles the deployment, the kids usually walk around right behind her following her lead. If she falls apart, the kids fall apart right after her.

Notice how I didn't say that you had to be perfect during deployment. You don't have to be perfect. You don't have to have a clean house. In fact, I can say this absolutely from personal experience the clean house is not necessary. All you have to do is a fair to middling job. You only have to be pretty good at it. Take that as a relief. This is one place in your life it's OK to just be OK.

The second thing I want to share is the technique that we all use for dealing with a child who is crying for the deployed parent. This I swear to you will happen more often than you think. It will not happen on things like birthdays or Christmas or sometime you expect it. No. This always happens when the child brings home a D on his science fair project because he didn't turn things in on time. Or he's been running around the back yard with his brother's underpants on his head and he fell down. And so you send him to his room. I mean he's clearly done something wrong. But you'll walk past the bedroom and you'll hear it. "I want my daddy. I need my daddy."

And then like you're like brushing off the tears as you go into the kid's room. It is very, very tempting to go in there and try to talk the kid out of it. To say things like -

- actually to tell you the truth, the thing I always want to say when I go in that room is, “Your daddy couldn’t save you from the trouble that you’re in, bubba!”

But, no. I guess a really good parent would say something like, “Oh, darling. Daddy will be home soon and it’s really not that bad. I can take care of you.” No matter how well meaning you are at that moment. No matter how logical you are in that moment, that’s not working with the kid. We’ve only found that one thing works with the kid. That’s to agree with them. “Yes, honey. You really, really miss your daddy.” “Yes, sweetheart. I know if mommy was here, things would be a lot better.” “Yes, I know how much this hurts.”

People, even really little people, don’t want you to talk them out of their troubles. They want to be understood and they want to be heard. And when you’re in that “I want my daddy” mode, the thing to do is to just agree with them and let it be. I cannot get over how quickly my kids get over whatever their problem is if they’re allowed to say what they feel. The second part of that is later in that day that’s the time to bring in more cheerfulness. That’s the time you want to remind them that Daddy really loves you. Or, you know, Daddy told me that he got your picture and that he put it up on the wall in his room. Daddy really cares about you. There is a time for the cheerfulness but it is not at the “I want my Daddy” moment.

Track 12: Waiting

Thankfully, deployment does eventually wind down and it does come to an end. Scientists who work for businesses that require long lines, like banks and airports and amusement parks, have discovered a lot of things about the science of waiting. Bet you didn’t even know there was such a thing as a science of waiting. It’s called “line theory.” They found that unoccupied time seems longer than time spent watching TV or eating a meal. Which is why airports are full of opportunities to watch TV

and eat things, right? Unexplained events and anxiety make a wait seem longer. So if the airline tells you the next plane is coming, you're a lot more patient in your wait than any other time.

Waiting alone is worse than waiting with companions. Perceived unfairness. You see other people and they're going in line ahead of you? They better have a reason written on their back. Or you're going to be like, "Hey. I got here before her!" The same principles hold true for our deployments. If we're busy, if we keep ourselves really busy, the wait does seem shorter. If you don't know what's going on? The wait seems much, much longer. That seems really unfair and it makes the deployment seem absolutely excruciating.

This theory also holds true during deployments that get extended. Somewhere in our minds, we have set a timer for exactly the amount of time our spouse said they were going to be gone. The first time, he can tell you, "Oh, honey. That six-month deployment is actually going to be seven months. Oh, that six-month deployment? It's actually going to be eight months." But in our heads, the original timer is set for the six-month period.

The deployment that is extended or you get it without the definite home by date at the end? Makes people absolutely nuts. If the military wants to do us a favor, they should try to really work on either not announcing a time or sticking to a time that they do announce. Because scientifically we can wait longer that way.

That leaves us with only one thing. How are you going to react to the extended deployment? Or the uncertain deployment? The first thing to do is to have some realistic expectations. We're in the middle of a war here. Deployments are not cast in stone and they are not going to be cast in stone. Don't go pinning all your hopes to

one day when you know, when you know right now, that you're going to live with uncertainty.

Lots of time for deployment, we recommend that people make a paper chain. Or they mark off days on a calendar. Or circle a calendar really big. This is the time not to do that. Especially with your children, be as general as possible. "We expect Daddy back at Easter time. Daddy's going to get home this summer." OK? Not, "Daddy's going to get home on June 17th." Because, again, remember, if it's extended, it makes it seem that much longer. The second thing that we found that really works well is lots of people adopt the hardest path contingency program. You'll find that one of the things that drives military spouses crazy is we like plans. We like our calendars. We like to be able to expect what's coming. Because we are normal human beings. This is what normal people like. And so when you're looking at the end of the deployment, you're trying to figure out things like your mother wants everybody to go to North Carolina on vacation as a family. So she says, "When will he be home?" You don't know. But you mom goes ahead and she makes the reservations and then you don't know how many tickets to buy. Somebody wants to get married and they expect everybody to be there. So when I plan these things, I always plan what's the hardest path? The hardest path is always, "he ain't gonna be home at that time." So instead of buying two tickets, I buy one ticket. And, yeah, you're probably going to spend some extra money for a second airline ticket late, but at least you're not stuck with the airline ticket if plans change. Your life really is up in the air. This is a temporary time of your life to live this way. Try to be light on your feet and not get too bogged down in the calendar right now.

A third thing you need to do: You gotta work on understanding gossip. OK. Gossip is a word I really hate because the image of a gossiping military spouse is not a pretty one. Alright? But when I look at people who are talking, I look at people who are

trying to understand their circumstances. Who are trying to get control over something that's absolutely uncontrollable.

So you kind of divide gossip into two things. One is the stuff we always say about people. You know. But if we're talking about "I can't believe she wore that spangled, red, white, and blue sweater again." To me, pretty harmless gossip. The harmful gossip is gossip about the schedule.

Back when the USS Cole was bombed before 9/11, one of the things that went around the Navy is they wanted you to take the stickers off your car that said that you were a Navy family or which command that you belong to. At the time, it just seemed like, just too much itsy-bitsiness. And truthfully, people didn't do it. They still all had like, you know, Proud Navy Family on the back of the car. But it does bring to mind that we need to be careful about what we say and who we say it to. In certain families, when we talk about the schedule, we're not allowed to talk about the schedule on the phone. So one of the things we do in our family is we will refer to people's birthdays. Oh, that'll happen around my mom's birthday. That'll happen around Peter's birthday. Then we know about what time that it'll happen. I've heard other families, they have very elaborate schedules that all had to do with, like, NFL teams. Things like this. These people were very big into spy novels.

But I think that we can't be too careful about our safety. When you say things to people on the street, don't tell them anything about the schedule and don't tell them exactly where anything is. If this was something you wouldn't want Geraldo to know, don't say it.

You're going to hear those things from people. They are going to have no problem telling you this stuff. It's what happens next that's your concern. One is worrying about what the gossip is. Especially if people are talking about a change in the

schedule. Talk to some of the older military spouses that you know. They will tell you that even the captain of the ship. Even the, um, general who's in charge -- they don't know exactly what's going on because they're reacting to the circumstances. OK? So that somebody that is back home thinks that they know what's going on? They don't. This is not an evil person. This is a person who is trying to control an uncontrollable event. So when you hear that kind of stuff, go ahead and call your mother and say (gasp), "Oh, mom. I can't believe it. They're going to be gone for Christmas." Or whatever. You need a person to tell it to but don't spread it in the command. OK? I will let you say whatever you want to say about the girl in the red, white, and blue sweater. Just don't say anything in the command about the schedule.

The fourth thing is: be remembered. One of the most interesting things about waiting that those behaviorists have discovered is that human beings have this profound fear of being forgotten. That's why when you go to one of those chain restaurants that have the vibrating thing -- that's why it vibrates. It lights up and they take your name. Because they know you're sure that they have already forgotten you. This is the same thing during a deployment. When security gets really tight, when things are getting hot? Lots of time the amount of information that's coming out is going down. And so what do we do when less information comes through? We make it up. We make up information. That's how badly we need information. The most important thing you can do is make sure you are plugged into that command. You want to be a human being to them. That way, when things happen, you're in the circle and you are not forgotten. OK? It really will reduce your stress a lot.

Be sure that you complete the emergency form that your command will offer and contact someone in your command. The ombudsman. The key spouse. The key volunteer. The command master sergeant's spouse. The commanding officer's wife. Someone. A human being. To find out about all the support groups, phone trees. All that old fashioned stuff that really does still work.

The fifth thing is: we're back to the kids. Give up all pretensions that you know anything. If you've got kids, you know they've always got questions they think that you, and you alone, can answer. "Mommy, when is the ship coming home?" "Daddy, do you think mommy's going to see any of my soccer games this year?" "Is Daddy going to come home in time for Christmas?" Understand that this is not a group that waits well. This is not a group that can take, you know, four more months as an answer. This is a group that cannot wait four minutes for the Easy Mac to be done in the microwave. OK? You've got to remember who you're talking to. Keep explaining that the job of military people is a lot like that of police officers. And firefighters. They have to go where the action is, when the event is happening. They have to help people in trouble when they're in trouble. Promise that when you know anything for sure, you'll be sure to tell them. Because they want the honesty but you can't make up answers that you don't actually have.

Track 13: Homecoming

Now we're getting to the good part. Homecoming! Yea! We need the homecoming. Can this marriage be saved? Although my husband and I come from the same socioeconomic background, we have the same level of educational achievement, we actually look enough alike to be brother and sister, we have completely different worlds when it comes to what a good homecoming is. I, of course, have the right view. In my version, the children and I arrive at the designated spot in our matching Von Trapp family outfits.

The sun shines. The water sparkles. That's the advantage of having a Navy homecoming is it's always by the water. The gate guard waves me through to a parking space that has been designated for me. OK? The cast of thousands parts like Moses and the Red Sea and we are standing there and the first person off the ship is

my husband and we go right home and the crowd shouts, "Hurrah!" because they were all there, you know, just for us.

My husband's version of the perfect homecoming is exactly the opposite. In his mind's eye, he is transformed via --it's like magic powder -- 'til he shows up at night at our house and walks around kissing the cheeks of children who sleep peacefully. In fact, these children are so wonderful that during the deployment they have actually gotten younger. Not gotten any older. This can be quite a surprise for a dad.

He creeps from room to room checking on everybody and then slides into bed and becomes a part of our family again so seamlessly that we don't even remember that he was ever gone.

Both of us are bound to be terribly disappointed. Because homecoming is never what you expect. It's an awful lot like Christmas. You spend months planning it. Weeks sweating it. And you get right up to the event and the happiness is almost obscured by all of the mess that surrounds it. Parking problems alone are enough to suck the joy right out of the event. Honestly, this will be one of the happiest days of your life. You will never forget it. When you see his face. The way he stands. Hear him laugh again after being so many months apart. That part of it? That'll be all you really wanted it to be.

But it isn't the only thing that happens that day. You'll find that the air wing flies in an hour or two or three days after they said they were going to fly in. The battalion commander suddenly decides that everybody has to fill out some kind of wacky piece of paperwork before they leave. Your next-door neighbor will watch your spouse walk in the front door and then he'll come over to say hello and welcome back and he'll stay for three hours. This stuff happens all the time. It's OK.

One of the things that makes homecoming so complicated is that the spouse has had to be both mother and father to the children. And we honestly do get a real groove on. We start doing really well at it. And then when our spouse gets home, he does things like he forgets what side of the car the gas tank is on. How are you going to trust a person who can't remember where the gas tank goes to load the dishwasher in the proper way? I think now is a really good time to remind ourselves that there is always a Dad way of doing things and a Mom way of doing things. And if you want your service member to be reintegrated into your house, and get some help with all the things that are so hard, you have to admit that the Dad way of doing things is just as good as anything that you do. Because if you don't let him do it his way, he isn't going to do it at all. And that's how you end up with all the responsibility for everything. You just had that. Do you really want to go back to it?

Homecoming isn't perfect happiness. It isn't supposed to be. It's just built up that way. Instead, our husbands and wives, they come home. And the world just keeps on spinning. The problems we had before deployment, they keep on going. The joys you had before deployment, they keep on coming.

The command can go on stand down but they can't put the rest of our lives on stand down, too. They can't write excuse slips so everybody can stay home from school and work. They can't stop the baseball schedule. They can't stop the car from needing gas. They can't keep field day from coming.

And in some part of ourselves, we reuniting couples know we need nothing more than to sit alone together. To get used to each other's faces. To become familiar again with the way he stands in the room with his arms folded. The way she never wipes the countertop. The way the baby always cries the instant you get to sleep.

We are never prepared for how tired or dirty the service member might be. We're never ready for the first time he's annoyed. We never plan on sharing him with his parents and our parents. And the neighbors. And the disposal. And the poison ivy. And the kids. And the postman and the Army and the Navy and the Marine Corps and the Air Force and the dog. The dog thinks that he's ahead of me.

Life has a way of not stopping, even for homecoming. And yet, somehow, without our close attention, the service member is reabsorbed. My life and his life become our life together. Because this is what a marriage is all about. The everyday. The normal. The annoying. The passing of time. This is what we've been longing to share with each other every day that the service member's been gone. And this is what we get back starting on homecoming day.

In a few weeks, you'll find that things really wind down. You kick your boots off at the front door. You find yourself sitting next to him on the sofa in your sock feet. Little feet next to big feet. You look at those feet and know that you have stepped up to all your challenges. Stepped over plenty of obstacles and stomped through a lot of rough territory. You look up and it'll all be over and you'll both be standing so tall.

OK.

Good. Good.

END