

Flying SOLO

BY STEPHANIE BURKHEAD THUM

Is it possible to actually grow through, and not just go through separations when your spouse is deployed? Yes, according to the wives and husbands of many recently mobilized guardsmen and reservists.

Throughout history, active duty military spouses have proven that they can “run a tight ship” at home during lengthy and frequent family separations. Over the past few years, scores of guardsmen and reservists’ spouses, too, have acquired and/or polished the skills needed to take control of and make it through separations due to deployment. Ask any military spouse who has “been there,” and you’ll likely receive some great advice on how to gracefully make it through what can be an overwhelming experience. The following four guidelines are perhaps the most practical and applicable lessons learned, and if you follow through, these techniques will help you to provide stability at home and sanity for yourself while your service member is deployed.

1. BE PREPARED. Readiness is both the soldier’s and the spouse’s first step toward self-sufficiency when deployment orders loom.

“You need to look into the future while the soldier is gone,” says Maj. Charles “Rob” Epperson with the Judge Advocate’s Office of the Air Force Reserve’s 916th Air Refueling Wing in North Carolina.

Prior to departure, soldiers must update their personnel, career, and medical records to assure mobilization readiness. Together, you and your soldier should obtain your wills, living wills, and power-of-attorney documents. If such documents already exist, “the spouse should know what is written within those documents—what the service member has planned, and, most importantly, know where those documents are kept,” says Epperson.

“Also think about any payments that come out of the service member’s civilian pay, such as child support, insurance, or car payments. Be prepared to make other arrangements for those payments because that civilian pay probably won’t be coming in,” he said.

You also will need to discuss with your soldier how and when you will communicate during your separation.

“Snail mail” should be one of your regular means of communication, says Chaplain (Maj.) Andrew C. Meverden of the 5/19th Special Forces Group (Airborne) of the Colorado National Guard. Meverden recently helped several units deploy and re-deploy to and from the Balkans and Southwest Asia and completed a tour of duty as a chaplain in Afghanistan.

“Many things can prevent soldiers from being able to contact their loved ones at the prescribed time, he says. “Some inhibitors include long lines, emergency exercises, patrol, equipment failure and solar flares. There’s nothing like receiving a loving letter or card with your honey’s perfume or aftershave to read throughout the day. Taking the time to draft and write a card or letter in your own handwriting is a special investment that both will appreciate.”



How to “Soldier On” When Your Spouse is Called Away



Meanwhile, as a spouse, it is your job to prepare in such a way that you can provide the stability at home that helps your soldier to focus on his/her mission. That means acquiring the information and skills needed to manage your family's personal affairs, balance checkbooks, manage childcare, eldercare, investments, home and automobile maintenance schedules, and the like. Prior to being separated, discuss with your soldier all routine household responsibilities and how to handle emergencies. Build confidence by practicing your skills.

2. KEEP BUSY. Now, keeping busy may seem to be the strangest piece of advice a military spouse can receive. After all, simply taking care of the house, the lawn, the kids, the parents, the in-laws, the cars, and the bills can be time-consuming in and of itself when your spouse's two helping hands are unavailable. Strange as it may appear, however, “keeping busy” is one of the longest-offered pieces of advice from military spouses who have “been there.”

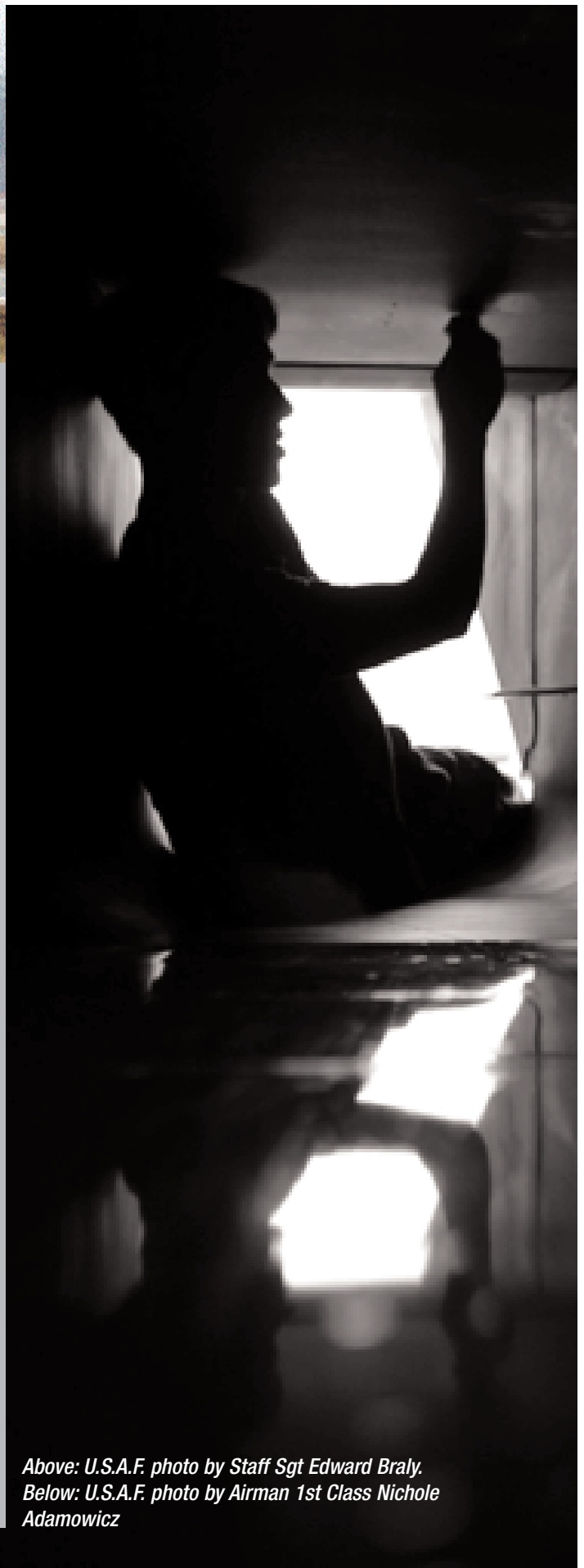
“Staying busy helps to pass the time,” says Hilary Martin, author of *Solo-Ops: A Survival Guide for Military Wives*. Dreaming up original care package ideas, for example, is creative, time consuming and productive. However, other activities are crucial in keeping away loneliness and depression. Finding a method of support through a group, taking college courses, or getting a job if you don't already work outside the home are some examples.

Meverden agrees. “Keep moving ahead. Continue to grow as a person physically, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually and professionally. Keep up or start a regular exercise routine. If in school, stick with it. If not, and you were thinking about it, check it out. Deployment separation is a good time to upgrade your professional skills, complete continuing education units, and even complete or finish a degree or certificate program. Do try to time your training so that it will be done or at least ‘interruptible’ so you can be available for some ‘R&R’ when your soldier returns,” Meverden notes.

3. REACH OUT. “Get involved in a spouse's support group,” says Yonna Diggs, Ombudsman-at-Large for the Naval Reserve Forces. Diggs works with 700 trained Naval Reserve ombudsmen throughout the United States who serve as liaisons between the families and commanding officers of the Naval Reserve's uniformed service members. Or, stay connected with other Reserve and Guard spouses through your soldier's unit's family readiness group. Attend the monthly meetings and volunteer to help with projects or other group members in need.

“This will keep you informed and involved with people of like interest. If no spouse's support group exists, work with the unit's ombudsman and commander to start one,” says Diggs.

U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Bennie J. Davis III



*Above: U.S.A.F. photo by Staff Sgt Edward Braly.
Below: U.S.A.F. photo by Airman 1st Class Nichole Adamowicz*

In some cases, however, being geographically separated from the unit's home base of operations may inhibit your participation in military-sponsored support activities. To gain support in such instances, lean on your unit's ombudsman, if one is available. Ask your military spouse to find out the name and phone number of the unit's ombudsman, or ombudsman equivalent. Diggs notes that even in nonfleet concentrated areas, ombudsmen are trained to know where resources are "such as churches, civic organizations, hospitals and fire departments."

Or, turn to the local library, community college, and Internet. Geographically dispersed Marine Corps reservists and their families, for example, who do not have access to traditional base/station support services may find the Marine Corps Community Service's (MCCS) One Source website (www.mccsonesource.com) to be particularly helpful.

According to an openly available memo from Gen. M.W. Hagee, Commandant of the Marine Corps, users may log on with the user ID Marines and password Semper Fi.

Similarly, the Navy's Lifelines web site (www.lifelines.navy.mil) is freely available to all service members and their families, regardless of service branch. Both sites host an exhaustive repertoire of parenting, childcare, education, financial, legal, elder care, health and wellness, and crisis support resources. For those who do not have access to the Internet, MCCS One Source information and referrals are available by phone at 800-433-6868.

Additionally, many civilian-based, military-friendly institutions and professionals are available in person, by phone, and the web. Financial institution USAA, for example, offers extensive educational materials specifically related to managing finances. Numerous booklets on topics such as establishing a budget, starting out with credit, debt management, and credit repair scams are available free of charge at www.usaedefoundation.org, or by calling USAA at 800-531-4250.

Hundreds of geographically dispersed civilian volunteer attorneys from 54 bar associations in 41 states have organized or taken steps to organize a pro bono legal assistance initiative that supplements the military's legal assistance program through the American Bar Association's Operation Enduring LAMP (Legal Assistance for Military Personnel). Check out the ABA's website (www.abanet.org) for a state-by-state listing of the efforts of bar associations to assist deployed and mobilized personnel.

4. ATTITUDE IS EVERYTHING. There is truth to the adage, "that which does not kill you makes you stronger." When your spouse is called away, it is easy to become overwhelmed by feelings of loneliness, anger, and heartache.

According to Martin, particularly for the spouses of guardsmen and reservists whose day-to-day interpersonal encounters occur predominantly in the civilian world and away from other military spouses who share and understand your feelings, a general attitude that friends, family members, and co-workers “just don’t get it” can add to the emotional roller coaster of a deployment.

“Veteran wives have dealt with deployments in two-week, two-month and six-month increments in the past,” says Martin. “They already have a routine in place for what happens when their significant other is not around. They have had time to experiment with what works for them in terms of combating depression. Reserve spouses are

literally thrown into military life, usually out of the military element (a base with support measures in place) and have no idea how to cope with an ‘undisclosed time period’ deployment—which is what most of them are facing.”

“Get involved in your spouse’s military career,” advises Diggs. “For example, learn how to read a Leave & Earnings Statement (LES). Understand your benefits and deployment issues. A spouse who just looks at their soldier’s job as part-time and doesn’t get involved or expect a deployment can become angry with the situation when it does happen. They may think, ‘this wasn’t supposed to happen.’”



U.S. Air Force photo by Sharon T. Bass, CIV, U.S. Army

However, a spouse who becomes involved in their service member’s military career and learns how to access information does well. If a family is well prepared and their expectations are realistic, then things usually will go well.”

“Remember that ‘this, too, shall pass,’” says Meverden. “If we stay meaningfully engaged in life and occupied taking care of ourselves, physically, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually and socially, we will see that both deployed soldier and family members have important missions that will be accomplished on both sides of the world.”

