

As Bianca Strzalkowski, 2011 Military Spouse of the Year, says: “We are fortunate that in the year 2011, all eyes are on the military community and ... various organizations are pitching in to reward our service. Because of this, there are so many websites and blogs dedicated to everything military, and an array of information exists on each.”

Run a web search, though, and you’ll be overwhelmed with results. We have done the homework for you and narrowed down some things you should know about:

# I wish I’d known about that *earlier!*

## Find **free stuff** for military families

By Victoria Pressley

### Education

This huge category includes government programs, DOD initiatives and various scholarships. Here’s a brief rundown of the programs and benefits for which you may be eligible:

#### Programs:

1. Federal Financial Aid (FAFSA), Pell grant and / or loans. Even if you are eligible for other assistance, apply for FAFSA! Often, other need-based scholarships and state aid are dependent upon completion of the FAFSA. Score a grant and keep the leftover cash!
2. Tuition Assistance (TA)
3. GI Bill
4. GI Bill Transfer
5. Troops to Teachers Program

#### Scholarships

Scholarships can be found in the most obvious places—and the most unexpected. Look everywhere, but here are some tips:

1. Spouses Club
2. On-Post Thrift Store
3. Memorial Funds
4. The Counsel of College and Military Educators

5. Army Emergency Relief, the Navy Marine Corps Relief Society and the Air Force Relief Society offer aid. The Coast Guard has similar programs.

6. Department of Defense Military Spouse Career Advancement Accounts Program

7. The National Military Family Association (NMFA)

And more! If you are not sure where to start, ask the academic advisor at your college, or an education counselor at your installation’s Education Center, and check out collegeboard.com’s scholarship finder tool.

As an Academic Advisor for an on-post college, I saw many scholarships go unclaimed or with little or no competition. Many students considered the application process for smaller scholarships too hard or not worth the time.

Strzalkowski says, “within the Marine Corps’ Family Readiness program, many benefits and programs are underused. For example, the highly publicized MyCAA tuition assistance program for spouses offers \$4,000 for those falling in the ranks of E1-E5, O1-O2, and W1-W2. I have found that many spouses have never heard of it and/or do not know how to enroll.”

# Army Family Covenant

Your family may be eligible for free childcare, reduced childcare rates, free classes, or free sports. Your level of benefits depends on your mission status (not rank).

I get, for example, 16 hours of respite childcare, per child, per month, at the Child Development Center (CDC). Additionally, this year my kids scored swimming, gymnastics and toddler music classes — completely free.

Ask your Family Readiness Group (FRG) for your branch-equivalent program. Also check Military OneSource. “A key website everyone should be visiting,” says Bianca, “they are the hub of information for every branch, every role, and every status within our community.”

## Travel

If your installation has one, start with the local travel agent. They are on top of the discounts and “free for military” deals that are out there, saving you time and money.

### Space A

Totally free flights! Sounds like a sweet deal right? If you’re patient, flexible and lucky — AND — the flight is not cancelled, is not diverted in transit and no one with orders takes your place at the last minute ... well, maybe (just maybe) you’ll score Space A travel.

#### Tips:

- Space A travel is for those with time to spare and NO COMMITMENTS.
- Work on the assumption that your trip will be delayed or

cancelled — don’t prepay for your accommodations, for example.

- Be aware that you could get stranded and may have to pay full price for last-minute airfares to get home.
- It helps to be near an Air Force base.

- You’re more likely to score a seat if you avoid peak travel periods, to include around the holidays.
- Dependents will need valid passports if heading OCONUS.
- You may need to pay taxes for some destinations.

*continued on page 14*



## Military Resorts

Several resorts offer great military discounts and free stays. But don't forget about the Armed Forces Recreation Center Resorts! I've stayed at Shades of Green in Orlando, sipped cocktails on Waikiki Beach at the Hale Koa Hotel and dined at the Dragon Hill Lodge in Seoul. All were fabulous and more than comparable to other area resorts for standards and amenities. Rates are based on rank. They usually offer deals for soldiers on leave or returning from OIF/OEF. There's also the Edelweiss Lodge and Resort in Germany and the Cape Henry Inn and Beach Club near Virginia Beach. Check out videos, photos and reviews online through MWR at [www.armymwr.com/travel/recreationcenters/](http://www.armymwr.com/travel/recreationcenters/).

## Parks and Events

You may get discounts at the gate but it's best to purchase tickets in advance. Check you're local MWR office, your installation travel agent, or your favorite military savings blog or website.

So many websites and blogs, so little space! Two top blogs Bianca follows are Spousebuzz ([www.spousebuzz.com](http://www.spousebuzz.com)) and CinHouse-Jacey Eckhart ([www.cinhouse.com](http://www.cinhouse.com)). I suggest you also check out Bianca's blog at [www.mca-marines.org](http://www.mca-marines.org).

## Other

I couldn't possibly list all the retailers offering discounts or organizations offering free goodies. So try this:

1. Always ask, everywhere, for a military discount.
2. Use social media sites, follow bloggers, join spouse groups, and military organizations online.
3. As a FRG Leader, I have heard about so many offers, deals and programs out there that my friends and I knew nothing about. Join the spouse's club and FRG and READ the stuff they send out. Yes — it can be a lot — but you could miss a gem of a deal.
4. Read the installation paper. It's usually chock full of free events, like concerts and kids activities.

"The best way for military families to find out about the programs that could benefit them is by a) being an active part of their unit's family readiness group, b) network with spouse groups, and c) do research." Says Bianca. "One of the most efficient ways I get information is by utilizing the Internet, every resource organization such as National Military Family Association, Blue Star Families, and Military OneSource has websites and social media pages (i.e. Facebook) that update you on current services & programs."

By no means is this list complete. If you hear about a great program or deal for military families — share the love and spread the word! ●

### Helpful websites

#### Education

[FAFSA](#)

[GI Bill](#)

[MyCAA](#)

[Troops to Teachers](#)

[collegeboard.com](http://collegeboard.com)

[scholarship finder...](#)

#### Travel

[Space A](#)

[Armed Forces Recreation](#)

[Mwr](#)

#### Other

[NMFA](#)

[www.spousebuzz.com](http://www.spousebuzz.com)

[www.cinhouse.com](http://www.cinhouse.com)

[www.mca-marines.org](http://www.mca-marines.org)

Victoria Pressley is a full-time writer, stay-at-home mom, and military spouse currently stationed at Fort Leavenworth. She is the editor of the upcoming anthology, [How to Avoid Murdering Your Mother-in-Law](#).