2-18-2015

Parenting During Deployment

Jeremy Dobbins  
Wright State University - Main Campus

Will Davis  
Wright State University - Main Campus, william.davis@wright.edu

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Parenting During Deployment

by Jeremy Dobbins

One of most challenging times for young children in military families is the deployment of a parent. Today our Veterans Voices series continues as we learn about a doctor’s separation from her newborn daughter, and the unique challenges she faced as a mother in the military. Marine Corps veteran, Wright State University student, and father Jeremy Dobbins has the story.

Dr. Sarah Hedrick made a commitment to serve in the Air Force just before entering medical school. The military would offset the cost of her schooling if she agreed to serve a term as a military physician. Over a decade later, Sarah, who was married with a baby daughter and treating mostly retired patients at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, doubted she would ever see conflict. But then the Air Force informed her that her time to deploy had come, and Sarah was sent to northern Iraq to work in a small military hospital.

"I was actually on vacation with my husband, when I got a phone call from the base, from somebody high ranking that I didn’t even know, who just told me I needed to come back, that I had been tasked to go to Kirkuk, Iraq," says Sarah. "Usually our base went to like Kuwait, and Kuwait. You know, it’s a lot more safe, not a lot of activity, whereas in Kirkuk, our base was bombed like several times a week."

The main effort of Sarah’s job was to quickly stabilize wounded service members during the critical time following traumatic injury known as “the golden hour,” and then move them along to better-equipped medical facilities for more specialized care. Thanks to the work of medical professionals like Dr. Hedrick, thousands of service members who would have otherwise perished have returned home to their families. During her six months in Iraq, Sarah’s own daughter was never far from her thoughts.

"I would try to Skype with her when I could. Sometimes it's difficult to get a good internet connection, or just with the time difference. I would try to sing silly songs just to get her attention. She was just one, so really I very rarely felt like she connected with me in terms of knowing I was her mom, you know. So I really thought it would be fine. I thought this is difficult but I thought it'll be fine."

My own daughter had just turned two when I was deployed, and I told Sarah that she remembers being in the airport, and everybody being really sad and crying because we knew we were going into combat and we were told to expect casualties.

We were Helmand Province where they grow all the poppy and what not, so it was a really crazy area. When we were getting ready to go, we were told, "prepare yourselves because
some bad things are going to come your way." My job in the infantry was a point man, so I was always the person out front. Coming home was almost like being a stranger to everybody, or I felt like a stranger to everybody for a while. When I came home, you're real familiar but at the same time, especially with my daughter, it did take awhile.

"When I landed, my daughter literally didn’t even seem to recognize me," Sarah says. "I don’t want to say I was nothing to her, but really she was just, we got in the car and looked back, you know, and I tried, you know, to connect with her and she was just kind of like, who are you?"

Sarah returned to work at the base, and was not deployed again. In time, the parental bond that was strained while in Iraq was restored. Today Sarah’s daughter is six, and their relationship is strong.

"But it definitely made me realize people that do a lot of these deployments, and some people do a lot of them, I mean the relationship you have with your child is going to be a very different one," she said. "That was the hard part of coming back."

For more information on services available to veterans, visit the resource page at the Wright State University Veteran and Military Center website.

Veterans Voices is part of Veterans Coming Home, a public media effort to support veterans, made possible by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.