

The Pandemic's Pressure on Military Spouses

By Simone Gorrindo
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At the beginning of the pandemic, military wives across the country were circulating a smug meme: *Some of you have never had the government ruin your plans and it shows.*

Ouch. What a kick in the knees. But I had to admit, I did feel oddly prepared for a world-upending crisis.

“Nothing ever goes according to plan,” my husband once said to me of the missions he does overseas. This is equally true of the larger mission that is military life, which is defined by uncertainty. In March, when we first took the kids out of preschool and day care, my husband worked from home and we traded shifts. In the afternoons, I edited book manuscripts while my kids shouted on the other side of our bedroom door. This arrangement felt like a gift, my husband was *home*. I knew it wouldn't last long, so I wasn't surprised when my husband returned to base a month into the pandemic, training hard to make up for lost time.

We barely saw him for weeks. Then there was a Covid outbreak at his work, and he was forced into quarantine. I felt like screaming, but I got through it. The Army has trained my husband to weather chaos and hardship, and it has trained me too.

But then, in mid-August, with just a month's notice, my husband deployed.

We are no strangers to separation. My husband is in a rapidly deployable combat unit, and they are frequently sent overseas. My daughter, Fiona, will be 4 at the end of October, and this is the third deployment she's gone through. He will miss her birthday, like he missed her last, and my son, Will, turned 2 the day after he left. We were told a deployment was off the table right now, but *nothing ever goes according to plan*. Since my husband and I married eight years ago, I have come to know this in my bones. Life is tenuous, plans are made to be broken, all we can count on is this early-autumn afternoon.

Still, saying goodbye to my husband five months into a pandemic felt profoundly unfamiliar. It was no more painful than his other departures, but it was unsettling, almost vertiginous. What would these next months look like? And how would we make it through them?

“Everyone's going through the pandemic, but when you take away a major support system, it becomes that much harder,” said Dani, 32, an Air Force spouse based in Louisiana whose husband deployed this summer. (For personal and operational security reasons, military spouses interviewed for this article are identified by first name and state of residence only.) She works at home as a program manager for a small outsourcing company, and her 3-year-old is in a day care that takes careful precautions.

But Dani still worries, especially since she is pregnant with her second baby. “What if she contracts something? What if she brings it back to us?” she said. “Our knowledge of this virus changes so much.” She and her husband hope that he’ll be able to briefly return for the birth at the end of this month, but babies don’t arrive on a schedule, of course, and the military has been giving troops far less freedom of movement during Covid.

About 15 percent of active-duty service members are deployed at any given time. Deployments were on pause at the beginning of the pandemic, but now that they’ve resumed, military spouses across the country are being forced to make difficult choices about childcare and work. I have chosen to keep my children at home, and, like many military spouses since the dawn of our creation, sideline my career. Money is tighter as a result, but I am fortunate to have the flexibility of self-employment and my husband’s job security and health insurance. I’ve always been grateful for these, but right now they feel like the equivalent of gold.

I try to take stock of these silver linings, because that’s how military spouses survive. While most of us don’t have family nearby, my mother-in-law is just a mile away. For the first five months of the pandemic, she was quarantined from us. Now that we no longer have to worry about my husband’s threat of exposure, she takes the kids 12 hours a week while I work with heated focus. Some evenings we share frozen pizza and watch a movie. My intensely extroverted daughter still misses her peers, but her rotating cast of imaginary friends has gotten noticeably smaller since her Nana re-entered the scene. And my mother, who hadn’t spent time with the kids since we visited during Christmas, drove up with my brother from the Bay Area 10 days after my husband deployed. Fiona looked at her like she was a movie star, and when she left sobbed with an anguish that brought goose bumps to my arms.

For her, every goodbye, I think, is a reminder that her father is not here. Last week, she stumbled upon his hamper. “It’s Daddy’s clothes,” she said softly, running her hands over his shirts as though she’d discovered a precious relic. “I miss him,” she said. “I *want* him.” I am trying to be enough for them, but I am tired and frayed and in a constant state of housework. My kids need my best, and I often feel like I’m giving them my worst.

Military spouses tend to be deeply reliant on their social networks, but Covid has robbed us of maybe our most fundamental lifeline — our friends. Sarah, 36, of Maine, who works full-time as a brain injury advocate and writer, is married to an officer in the Navy reserves who will be deploying later this fall. Sarah has no family nearby to help out with her three girls, ages 9, 3 and 6 months. She always knew her husband would deploy someday, but she thought she’d be able to lean on her neighbors and friends without worrying about everyone’s safety. “I really feel like I’ll be going this alone,” she said.

Without school or their father or even their “aunties” dropping by, I am the one true constant in my children’s lives. In the mornings, I teach the kids a “lesson” that I lift from Busy Toddler’s Playing Preschool program, which my structure-craving daughter loves and my son sabotages at every turn. There are daily marvels: my daughter’s face lighting up when she masters swinging on her own, my son squealing as he discovers a green caterpillar among the weeds. And though we are isolated, human beings remain delightfully creative, relentlessly social creatures.

The other afternoon, I was walking with my children through our neighborhood, looking for what my daughter calls “magic rocks,” which are painted pebbles that people hide in bushes and trees for others to find. As we walked, I noticed just how many signs were in my neighbors’ windows. *We’ll get through this. We’ve got this. Hope Grows Here.* We find ways to buoy one another even when we can’t be together. Our neighbors did an art project with us over the fence. Another gave us flowers to plant from her garden. An Army wife friend offered to take my husband’s care packages to the post office, and another summoned both the energy and ingenuity to set up virtual wine tastings for all the wives in my husband’s company.

Even my 2-year-old finds ways to connect. When my husband left, Will hadn’t yet figured out how to say, “I love you.” “You,” he’d say to us sweetly, less a word than a coo. But last week, my son looked at the screen and said to my husband, out of nowhere, “I love you.” It was the whole phrase, clear as a bell, for the first time.

“I love you,” my husband said back. For a moment, we were together again.