

Press Release



While They're at War

by Kristin Henderson

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"Most of us are aware of the horrors of war and of the sacrifice made by our fighting men and women. Less well understood is the burden borne by the families our service members leave behind. *While They're at War* reveals their solidarity and hope, their loneliness and anguish in the face of uncertainty. Authentic and from the heart, this is a piece of often untold American history, and a must-read for those both in and out of uniform." — Senator John McCain (R-AZ)

"*While They're at War* is the powerful story of those on the homefront who are also on the tip of the spear in terms of suffering in war. It is their story — the true story — of the ultimate costs of war." — Former Senator Max Cleland (D-GA)

About the Book

There is a war story most Americans never hear. It is the story of what life is like for the diverse women and men who are married to the military when a loved one is deployed. Some people have seen the tearful goodbyes and the joyful homecomings occasionally caught on camera. But the rest of the homefront experience has been hidden behind closed doors, until now.

In *While They're at War: The True Story of American Families on the Homefront* (Houghton Mifflin, February 2, 2005), Kristin Henderson exposes the often difficult aspects of military culture on and off America's bases. Henderson has frequently written about military issues and is married to a navy chaplain who has served with the marines in Afghanistan and Iraq. Her expertise and powerfully human reporting bring the story to life.

While They're at War focuses on two very different women at Fort Bragg who are facing their husbands' first deployments. Scenes from the lives of these women and other military

families illuminate the overwhelming costs of being married to the military — anticipatory grief; strongly enforced rules concerning infidelity; isolation and alienation from nondeployed military officers and the civilian world; the effects of e-mail, cell phone, and CNN culture; homecoming violence; and much more. Powerful chapters on casualty notification, the challenges military children present to schools, and the complexity of reunions after deployment are insightful and enlightening.

"They don't have any idea what it's like," Henderson, feeling alienated from the majority of Americans not connected to the armed forces, once told an army chaplain, "They just can't understand." "Maybe they don't understand because we don't tell them," he answered. This book is a poignant, important chronicle for all Americans whose everyday lives intersect with military families.

About the Author

Kristin Henderson has written frequently about military issues, including two cover stories for the *Washington Post Magazine*, where *While They're at War* originated.

A journalist, an author, and a military spouse, Henderson participates in the Marine Corps' family readiness program, the Key Volunteer Network. She is the Key Volunteer for the company in which her husband serves, passing information between the company's commanders and spouses and acting as a resource for spouses in need of help or service.

Kristin is a practicing Quaker and occasional amateur racer of Corvettes. She lives in Washington, D.C., and Beaufort, South Carolina.

A Conversation with Kristin Henderson

What made you decide to write this book?

The seed was planted during the initial invasion of Iraq. My husband's a navy chaplain, and when a neighbor found out my husband was over there with the marines headed for Baghdad, she said, "Wow, what's that like? Having him in harm's way?" I was the only person she knew who had someone in the fight. And it hit me: Most Americans no longer personally know what it's like to send someone they love to war. Some time later I complained to an army officer that civilians just don't understand what we military spouses go through, and he said, "Maybe that's because we don't tell them." And that's true, we don't. It's partly out of pride. We don't want to admit how much of a struggle it is sometimes. And partly because we feel vulnerable — when you're emotionally on edge, it can be hard to open up.

But in a democracy like ours, civilians are the ones who send us to war. So their lack of experience with war's consequences seemed a dangerous development to me. I wanted to write a book that would help civilians walk a mile in the shoes of the men and women whose loved ones are fighting and dying for the rest of us. I was also hoping a book like this would help other military spouses know they're not in this alone, because isolation can be a real problem for some of us.

Aren't war's consequences greatest for the people who actually do the fighting? Why focus on the families?

The real story of war doesn't end at the battlefield's edge. The people fighting our wars will tell you that they depend on their families for the support they need to prepare for war, get through it, and then recover from it. Our nation's military readiness depends on three things: training our military service members, equipping them, and making sure their families are in a position to support them. Families are just as important as training and equipment, because soldiers are human beings, not machines. If a soldier knows his family is struggling while he's gone, that can distract him from his wartime mission. And in a war zone, distractions can be fatal.

Were you able to just sit down and start writing from your own experience? Did you learn anything you didn't already know?

Before I started, I figured I knew everything I needed to know to write a book like this, because in the space of a year and a half my husband had deployed first to Afghanistan, then Iraq. But life has a way of curing us know-it-alls. For instance, I learned from the chaplains on Fort Bragg that when your spouse is in a combat zone, many of us have the same emotional reaction as someone whose loved one is dying from a terminal illness. It's called anticipatory grief, and the physical symptoms include everything from shortness of breath, like an anxiety attack, to restlessness and agitation and difficulty concentrating. Emotionally, you're prone to crying jags. You find yourself imagining the funeral. You're essentially grieving as if the person you love is already dead. When I heard that, my mouth dropped open, because while my husband was in Afghanistan and Iraq I had had those exact symptoms. Not only had I not known all that craziness had a name — anticipatory grief — I had no idea other spouses were going through the same thing.

Was that the biggest surprise to you as you wrote this book?

It was one of many. I was really surprised at how willing the spouses were to talk to me. They opened up their lives. Although in hindsight, it makes sense. I was one of them — they knew I'd been through the same thing. I knew what questions to ask. Maybe it was also because they knew my husband is a chaplain. People confess things to chaplains that they wouldn't to anyone else, and that can extend to the wife, too. They trusted me, and I felt a responsibility not to betray that trust. So I tried to tell each person's story the way she saw it, and not impose my own judgment on it.

That was especially important in the stories about infidelity. I spent time with one homefront spouse whose soldier cheated on him while she was in Iraq, and another homefront spouse who had a long-running affair during her soldier's tours in Vietnam. Deployments, especially wartime deployments, can really test a marriage. The testing strengthens some marriages but it undermines others.

Was there any one part of the homefront experience that was harder for you to write about than the rest?

There was one part I did not want to write about at all. And that was the one thing we're all afraid of — that knock at the door. At first I told myself that since this was a book about typical deployments and the vast majority of us don't wind up as widows, I didn't have to include it. But then I learned about anticipatory grief and eventually I had to admit there was no way I could write about the homefront experience without writing about what it's like when your worst fears come true.

It took me weeks to work up the nerve to call the first widow. Every day I'd put it on my list of things to do — "call widow" — and every day I'd find fifty other things I absolutely had to do first. In the end, these women taught me so much. I'd sit down with a widow and there I'd be — I'd have my funeral face on, tiptoeing around the conversation as if she were a fragile doll instead of just an ordinary human being with a hole in her life. And she'd be so matter-of-fact about it, laughing sometimes, crying sometimes, sometimes both at the same time, that I had to tell myself to just get over it and follow her lead and be normal. Spending time with each of them enriched not just the book, but my life.

Did you work with the military in doing your research?

I didn't plan to. I found most of my wives and husbands through informal channels — through my personal life, my friends in the military family advocacy community. I didn't want a military minder looking over my shoulder during these interviews. I wanted to tell the homefront story honestly, both the upside and the downside, and I assumed the military would censor the downside. But eventually I decided I wanted to include the perspective of the officials whose job it is to support military families. So I went ahead and approached public affairs. I was amazed by how cooperative they were. I was also amazed to discover how many services were already in place to help military families. I had no idea those services were out there, even though my husband is a chaplain. He knows about them, it's his job to know. But I didn't. It occurred to me that if I didn't know, most other spouses probably didn't know either. As I spoke with one military official after another, I learned there's not a lack of services so much as a lack of communication between the military and the spouses. That's an area that could use improvement.

What sort of reaction do you get from readers?

From military spouses, I hear thank you a lot — for making them aware of the available services for instance, but mostly for telling their story on their terms, without twisting it to fit a political agenda. For just saying: Here are the sacrifices; for better or worse, this is what it's like.

Probably the most interesting reaction I get, though, is from civilians who are opposed to the Iraq War. The war seems unjust to them, and they know there are always some people in the military who feel the same way. And so these civilians ask, "Why don't soldiers just refuse to fight?" As if it's up to our military service members to prevent or end a war. But in a democracy, that's not their job. To those civilians I say, "That's your job." The Founding Fathers put civilians in charge of the military. The civilian leaders we elect are the ones who give the military its marching orders. And it's every civilian citizen's job to hold those leaders

accountable, to decide which wars are worth fighting and which ones aren't. The people who volunteer to serve in our armed forces, their job is to go out and possibly die for us. And now on top of that you want them to do your job, too? There are two things wrong with that. First, it's an awful lot to ask. And second, that's an invitation to turn our democracy into a military dictatorship, where the generals call the shots instead of the president and Congress. I don't think any of us want that.

You're a Quaker. What's it like to be a pacifist moving through the world of the military?

I'm an outsider on the inside, and it's given me a unique perspective. I used to think the military had nothing to do with me, that we'd all be better off without a military. But after my husband joined the navy, I was forced to confront my own prejudices. Gradually I began to realize that my own attitude was the result of a growing gap between the military and civilian society. Since we no longer rely on the draft to fight our wars, there's a whole generation of Americans like me, both liberal and conservative, with no firsthand exposure to the military. That's ominous for two reasons. If you look back at our history as a nation, whenever there have been fewer veterans among our elected leaders, that's when our country has most often resorted to war to solve problems. And looking ahead, if civilians disengage from the members of our armed forces, the two groups run the risk of becoming increasingly alienated from each other. I don't want to see the day the military no longer feels it has a stake in civilian society, because they're the ones with the biggest guns. Understanding and embracing our military families is one way to help bridge that gap.

10 Ways Civilians Can Support Our Troops

Yellow ribbons and flags are just the beginning. Support the troops by supporting their families.

1 – Thank the spouses for their sacrifices

Write a letter to the editor, say it out loud, send a card, or leave a yellow rose. Just keep it short and simple. Intense feelings of sadness and fear lie just beneath the surface of even the strongest-looking homefront spouse, and too much emotional sympathy, or worse, pity, may undo their hard-won self-control. They may not appreciate it if you make them burst into tears in public.

2 – Leave opinions about the war at the door

Military spouses are as diverse in their beliefs as civilians are. But, unlike civilians, military spouses may be relying on their beliefs about the war, for or against, to help them cope with the fear and sadness they feel while their loved one is in harm's way. Try not to rob them of that comfort. Instead, just listen.

3 – Donate to organizations that support service members and their families

Visit www.defendamerica.mil and click on "Support Our Troops" for a long list of worthy organizations.

4 – Friends, family members, and neighbors can give them a break

During deployment, homefront life is often isolated and grueling. Make your offers of help specific — invite them to dinner, offer to mow the lawn, or arrange to watch the kids for an evening.

5 – Employers can give military spouses more flexible hours

Before, during, and immediately after a deployment, the spouses' home demands have doubled during this time. If activated National Guard members and reservists have to take a cut in pay while they're deployed, employers can make up the difference and reduce the financial stress on the family. And employers can actively recruit and hire veterans, especially disabled veterans.

6 – Educators and daycare providers can turn to the Military Child Education Coalition
Visit www.militarychild.org to learn how to help children facing a parent's deployment.

7 – Professional organizations can offer pro bono services

For example, some lawyers in Vermont donated free legal services to families with a deployed service member.

8 – Develop support groups and social events in clubs and places of worship

A deployed family member's absence may be extra hard around the holidays, and social events can help fill the void. Symbolic support means a lot, too. One group made blankets for local preschoolers with a deployed parent to keep their favorite toys warm and safe — the way their parents were keeping them safe — and to remind them that many people in their town were thinking about them.

9 – Book groups can invite military spouses for a joint discussion of *While They're at War*

Getting together will help you to better understand your military while helping the military spouses connect with the local community, especially if they're new in town. If you don't know any military spouses, try contacting family readiness groups or enlisted and officers' spouses clubs at the nearest National Guard armory or military installation. And during your get-together, do not forget suggestion 2! (See above.)

10 – Stay engaged!

Make sure your military reflects the country you want America to be. Pay attention when military issues come up in the news, compare information from a variety of sources, write letters to the editor, and hold your elected leaders accountable for how they use your military and how well they support the warfighters, families, and veterans who serve you.

10 Ways Military Spouses Can Find Help and Support

Knowledge Is Power

1 – Military OneSource

An information hotline that's available 24/7. Get answers to anything, from how to find childcare providers to plumbers to referrals for free confidential counseling with a therapist outside the military system. Call 1.800.342.9647 or visit www.militaryonesource.com.

2 – Community services center

Most military installations have one. It's the central resource for all family support services, including military relief organizations such as Army Emergency Relief. Call information for the number or ask for directions at the gate and just walk in.

3 – Family support programs

Most units have a group of spouse volunteers who can connect you with support services and social activities. If they haven't called you already, they probably don't know you're out there. Call the unit headquarters and they'll be glad to put you in touch.

4 – Rear detachment or rear party

These are the military personnel that every unit leaves behind when it deploys. Visit or call the unit's headquarters for help and referrals.

5 – Chaplains

They provide confidential counseling and referrals. Talk to the chaplain in your unit, at a chapel on base, or at the family life or religious ministries center. Keep looking until you find one with whom you're comfortable.

6 – Military health clinics

The staff can set you up with a whole network of services. To maximize the help you receive, be sure to tell them if you're there for a deployment-related issue.

7 – Schools

Talk with your child's teachers and guidance counselor for support and referrals. If they don't have information, they can probably find out who does.

8 – On-line

Visit www.deploymentconnections.org for official deployment support resources. Join an advocacy group such as the National Military Family Association (www.nmfa.org). Or for informal support, join an on-line group at www.militarywives.com (it's for husbands, too), or search for groups centered around specific military installations at msn.com and yahoo.com.

9 – Senior military spouses

They've been through it before and can provide advice and encouragement.

10 – Community organizations

If you're reluctant about getting help from another person in uniform, try a civilian church, temple, or mosque; a community counseling center; or a service such as the GI Rights Hotline (1.800.394.9544).