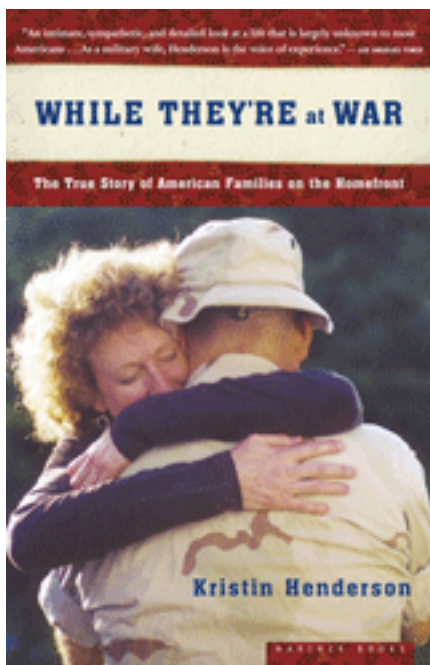


## A Reader's Guide



# While They're at War

by Kristin Henderson

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## About the Book

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"Kristin Henderson . . . gives us the truth from the homefront in *While They're at War*, a revealing and nonpartisan look at the military families behind the headlines. Fair warning: Even the joyful reunions can make you cry." — *Parade*

In this honest and heart-rending account, Kristin Henderson brings to light the crucial but often overlooked side of war: the challenges faced by the military families left behind when their loved ones are sent into combat.

"When you send a soldier to war, you send a whole family to war — families are veterans, too," Henderson writes. By sharing the phenomenal stories of military spouses, she reveals the core-shaking, day-to-day realities of life on the homefront — extending from fears of death to worrying about financial stability and marital fidelity. The book focuses on Marissa Bootes and Beth Pratt, two very different women living in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, while their husbands are in Iraq on their first deployments. Through their experiences and those of others left behind, Henderson "shows how loneliness . . . can be as crippling as bombs, fear as traumatic as firefights. The casualties are not limited to the battle zone" (*Seattle Weekly*).

"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

"So often military spouses are newsworthy only for the pathos and pity and drama of their lives. Kristin Henderson is one journalist who sees so much more. She not only understands why military families do what they do, she sees their place in the big picture. This is the year's most worthy work about America in wartime." — Jacey Eckhart, military family columnist (<http://jaceyeckhart.tripod.com>) and author of *The Homefront Club*

## About the Author

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**Kristin Henderson**, a writer, is married to a Navy chaplain who served with the Marines in Afghanistan and Iraq. She contributes frequently to the *Washington Post Magazine* and is the author of *Driving by Moonlight: A Journey Through Love, War, and Infertility*, a memoir that tells of her struggles during her husband's deployment to Afghanistan after 9/11. A practicing Quaker, Henderson has participated in the Marine Corps' Key Volunteer family readiness program and is a member of the National Military Family Association.

## Questions for Discussion

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We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding of *While They're at War* for every reader.

### 1. Do you know anyone who has deployed to a war zone?

If you don't know anyone, what does that say about who's serving in the modern military and your relationship to that military?

If you do know someone who has deployed but you don't live with them, how aware were you of what their family was going through, prior to reading *While They're at War*?

If someone you live with has deployed, do you think it's harder to be the spouse, parent, or child who's left behind? Or does it depend more on each individual's personality and resources?

### 2. Kristin's Web site includes a list of ways you can support the troops by supporting their families, whether or not you know them personally ([www.kristinhenderson.com/takeaction.htm](http://www.kristinhenderson.com/takeaction.htm)). Try brainstorming what you can do as an individual or as a group to help a military family. What might you do for families whose service member has been wounded or killed?

### 3. Imagine your spouse or significant other goes to war. Maybe you don't have to imagine, maybe he or she already has.

Who would you be in this book? Would you handle it more like Beth, who withdrew and struggled with depression? Or like Marissa, who pushed herself to the breaking point? Or like someone else in the book, such as Annie, who turned to alcohol; Ken, who started a charity to help soldiers overseas; or Starla, who weathered it matter-of-factly?

Was there a spouse in the book you particularly admired? What was it you admired about him or her?

**4.** People who haven't been through a deployment often assume that for those with children, life on the homefront is essentially like being a single parent for a while. They're amazed to discover that there are many hidden emotional, physical, and practical challenges. What was the biggest surprise to you?

**5.** Deployments are tough, yet many military spouses, including Kristin, embrace the military lifestyle. Some say the privileges and benefits are the reason, others the satisfaction that comes from being a part of something bigger than yourself.

What upsides can you see in a life that revolves around military service? In particular, do you think there are any upsides for children? Do you agree with the head of the Military Child Education Coalition that it can "encourage the courage of children"?

**6.** Now that you're aware of the complexities of homecoming — from the "terrible relief" of being safe in each other's arms to the struggle to adapt to the inevitable changes in the other person — what will go through your mind the next time you see a military homecoming on the TV news? Do you think your own relationship would be strengthened or undermined by a wartime deployment?

**7.** The director of the Medical Family Assistance Center at Walter Reed Army Hospital said, "When a soldier gets wounded, the family gets wounded. Their community gets wounded. The nation gets wounded." Do you think this is true, and if so, what kinds of wounds are inflicted at the community and national level? How do we heal these wounds?

**8.** How would you sum up your opinions about the military and the current war? Now that you know more about homefront life, has that knowledge changed your opinions or reinforced what you already believed?

**9.** Historically, democracies have tended to fight their wars with citizen soldiers while empires have relied on professional warriors. If democracies are at one end of a scale and empires at the other, where do you think America falls on such a scale?

**10.** Kristin didn't know much about the military and didn't like it much either, until her husband joined the Navy. Then she got to know the military firsthand and had a change of heart. That experience opened her eyes to a growing gap between the military and civilians. Do you agree with her that this gap is bad for our democracy?

If you don't agree, why do you think it doesn't matter?

If you do agree, why do *you* think it's bad for democracy? Is there anything you can do personally to reach out and build bridges between civilians and the military? For instance, is there anything you can do to help returning soldiers reintegrate back into your community?

## A Conversation with Kristin Henderson

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### **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.