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View from the Homefront

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VIEW FROM THE HOME

1:50 a.m., March 1, 2003: His image in the rear-view mirror grows smaller. I reach the end of the battalion's row of buildings, where I turn a corner . . . and he is gone.

I suppose we have all turned corners like that in our lives. And like most others, I imagine, I was unable to immediately gauge the significance of my new direction.

David and I had endured separations because of the Army before — through his years of camps and field training exercises in ROTC at Furman, to weeks and even months at a time after we were married. But sending him off to train in the back woods of Fort Campbell was a far cry from the uncertainty of war in a foreign land.

I was an Army spouse for little more than a year when war suddenly loomed large on the horizon. Both before and after David left, I often wondered how I would cope, what this war would be like and, God forbid, what I would do if he didn't come home. We had plenty of time to consider the answers to these questions, because on some level, we knew the goodbye would come eventually.

For us, the road to Baghdad began long before any negotiations with the United Nations or discussions about a "coalition of the willing." On September 11, 2001, David was in Missouri for a monthlong training program before our wedding in November. He did not return until early October, and even then we did not know whether he would stay and marry or go and fight.

In the end, he was not deployed to Afghanistan and we had our storybook wedding, but the war on terror had just begun to affect our lives. The first year of our marriage was spent constantly adjusting to the latest "level of readiness" of David's battalion and dealing with the resulting roller coaster of emotions that only foreshadowed what was to come. On February 7, 2003, the 101st Airborne Division received official deployment orders to the Middle East — and our worst fears became a sobering new reality.

When President Bush appeared on television March 17 to rally the country for the impending invasion of Iraq, no one at Fort Campbell was surprised. We were, however, painfully aware that our spouses' lives now hung somewhere in the balance between hell and home. And the world suddenly seemed a very small place.

For the next three weeks, I awoke every morning to the sound of my alarm, followed in short order by the first glimpses of the night's events and the breaking news on CNN. I've never been much of a morning person, but those weeks were the most sleepless and anxious of my life. Before I even got out of bed each day, I had already registered the last 12 hours' casualty count and scanned the battlefield for any possible movement by David's unit.

On March 22, news broke that David's unit, the 3rd Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division (nicknamed the Rakkasans), had crossed the border into Iraq. I memorized the name of the CNN reporter embedded with the Rakkasans and tried to trace David's steps as best I could through him. I remember how very strange it seemed, watching the reporter on videophone broadcasts and wondering if I would catch a glimpse of David in the background. It never happened, but the thought that it could have gave me a sense of comfort.

After several days of tragic losses, the news began to improve as American units moved closer and closer to Baghdad. April 9, 2003, was a memorable day in Baghdad and in the world, as it came to be known as "Liberation Day" in Iraq. I watched in amazement and relief as the people toppled the statue of Saddam in Baghdad's city center. I cried tears of joy for the Iraqis cheering and waving in the streets, and for our soldiers as they waved back to the crowd. All in a day's work.

Even though David was not in Baghdad that day, I was proud of him all the same. He didn't have to fight a war or take down a dictator to be my hero, but I was moved and thankful for his part in the hope felt around the world that day.

After the fall of the regime, however, progress became more difficult for me to follow as reporters came home and media interest in the war waned. The initial, intense press coverage had at first made me feel closer to David, then more worried. As the coverage tapered off, I felt alone — and disappointed that the American public seemed bored and ready for a return to the normalcy of Hollywood scandals and the latest movie releases.

As the steady stream of news all but stopped, so did my daily connection to David's safety. The pace of everyday life resumed, and I began to miss him even more. And yet, the days did not stop. They kept coming, only I felt as though they were carrying me farther away from him.

When David arrived in Baghdad in April I was so happy to get his sporadic calls and e-mails about life with the Iraqi people. Before we met he had wanted to join the Army Special Forces, and I knew his interactions with the indigenous population in Iraq were more fulfilling than anything he had previously experienced.

He spoke eloquently and humorously about his attempts to communicate with the Iraqis, his fumbblings with engineer-related tasks, and his endless search for a guitar to play. I smile still to think of him on a street corner in Baghdad, picking out some lonesome tune in a crowd of incredulous Arabs. Life, we have both learned, is full of such contrasts.

Along with the eight other Army wives in my office, I was able to share

FRONT

BY LAURA SIMS MEDLIN

these stories and other bits of humor, and together we found comfort in our collective experiences and those of our husbands. Unfortunately, just as many of our conversations were about our endless frustrations with military red tape, rumors of this and that return date, and the always controversial pay cuts or increases during times of war.

By early July our conversations began to focus on the likelihood of the unit's return to Fort Campbell by September 1 — six months to the day David left. I was walking on air for a few weeks, preparing myself mentally for his return while also trying to contain my premature excitement. What I should have realized is that the best-case scenario rarely (if ever) happens in the Army. Almost overnight the talk shifted to the probability of an extended rather than a shortened deployment.

When the official news broke that the 101st would be staying in Iraq "indefinitely," I was devastated. Five months of loneliness, fear and uncertainty were behind me, but how many more remained? For the first time since David left, I was completely incapacitated. I went about the motions at work, ate when I remembered and slept a lot, all the while trying to comprehend a year without seeing David's face or feeling his arms around me. From mid-August to mid-October the days passed at a maddeningly slow pace, and each contact with David was overshadowed by the thought that we were perhaps only halfway home.

Finally, a timeline for redeployment of the 101st was published, indicating that March 1, 2004, was the goal for the unit's return. Ever so slowly, I adjusted to the idea that David would not be home for my birthday, or Thanksgiving, or even Christmas. "Take one year and I'll give you 70" became our casual adage, and we worked on maintaining a sense of optimism and staying mindful of our many blessings.

As this article is published, a year has passed since that early morning goodbye. David and I are finally able to speak of the future without fear or denial.

I also realize that my initial concern that he would somehow change as a result of war was unwarranted. He still has an amazing capacity for gentleness and humor. But I know that certain things, once a part of you, will never be forgotten and can never be erased.

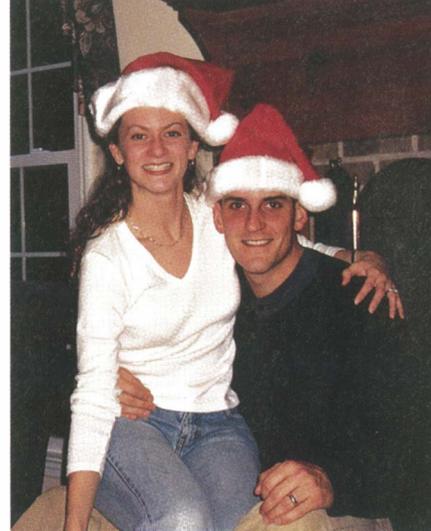
As the attacks on U.S. forces in the region increased, so did his exposure to pain and death. On November 1 David called to tell me that a friend and fellow officer in his company had been killed when a roadside bomb exploded. It seemed so unfair that, this long after major combat operations were declared over, so many were still losing their lives.

I think often about how we will begin to speak of the sadness and pain surrounding these many months apart. I am not the same person I was before the war began, and neither is my husband. We will have to get to know one another again, and most of all, to be patient. Such opportunities come so rarely, though, to rediscover familiar beauty and give thanks for it all over again.

The victories in this war, although great, have been few, and the lessons too many to count. And most Americans enjoy the luxury of evaluating White House policy without the complication of having a spouse in the direct line of fire.

I have asked myself many times during David's deployment whether war is a necessary evil. Many argue that all wars are evil but the men sent to fight them are ultimately good. Others proclaim that there are such things as "just" wars, and that those who give their lives in these conflicts do not die in vain.

I guess I would have to agree with both of these statements. War is a terrible confession of our failure to address our differences peacefully and civilly. We send



our fathers, brothers, husbands and wives into harm's way to defend a cause and carry out a mission. We endure hardship in the form of separation, mental anguish, loss of livelihood and even life.

But somewhere in the fog of war another side of human nature is revealed, and this is what allows hope to live on: A young Marine crying over the body of an injured Iraqi boy . . . a flower placed in the helmet of a liberating soldier by a man taught to hate all that the uniform represents . . . women able to walk through the streets of their cities with a new sense of purpose and respect.

Living through a war and loving a man who has fought in it have taught me many things about joy, sorrow, empathy and faithfulness. I cringe to think of all the innocent lives on both sides forever changed by violence, but I rejoice in the belief that many more lives have been given a chance. I realize how sheltered and coddled the average American is, and how stepping out on the world stage a little would benefit all of us.

Most of all, I recognize what I have been given in this life, and I realize that baptism by fire is sometimes the only way to make us into the people we are destined to be. ●

The author, a 2001 Furman graduate with a double major in psychology and Spanish, plans to enroll in a graduate program in educational psychology this fall. She and her husband can be reached at dbmedlin@earthlink.net.