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WOMEN AT ARMS

Wartime Soldier, Conflicted Mom

By [LIZETTE ALVAREZ](#)

When Specialist Jaymie Holschlag returned home after 12 months in Iraq, a new set of children awaited her.

Her son, Seth, 10, who had moved in with his grandfather, switching towns and schools, was angry and depressed. His grades had plummeted and his weight had ballooned by 60 pounds. Her 4-year-old daughter, Celeste, scarcely knew her. And in Specialist Holschlag's absence, new rules had taken hold — chocolate syrup on waffles, Mountain Dew with dinner. Any hint of a return to the old order met with tirades and tantrums.

Specialist Holschlag, a single mother and a combat medic, had changed profoundly, too. The violence in Ramadi had staked a claim on her patience, her tenderness and her resilience. She snapped at her children routinely, at times harshly.

Last month, on the eve of her second tour in Iraq, Specialist Holschlag decided she could not put her children through another deployment, and she requested a transfer. "They are my kids, and they deserve a mom that is wanting to hug them," she said.

The military has in large part adapted to women living, working and fighting successfully alongside men in Iraq and Afghanistan, and bringing home their own medals for bravery. Women can now find birth control on bases in war zones and get ultrasounds and gynecological exams. Married couples share trailers.

Motherhood, though, poses a more formidable challenge for the armed forces.

Hanging on to today's war-savvy, battle-tested cadre of mothers — and would-be mothers — is both crucial and difficult for the [Army](#), say officers, enlistees and experts. So is attracting recruits. Since the war in Afghanistan began in 2001, the number of female Army recruits has declined by 5 percent, a sharper drop than for men. "The Army's challenge, but also the military's challenge, is to help service members feel they don't have to choose between family life and their military career," said Shelley MacDermid Wadsworth, director of the [Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University](#), an organization supported in part by the Department of Defense.

"They leave when they can't figure out" a way to do both, she said.

More than 100,000 female soldiers who have served in the wars are mothers, nearly half the number of women who have been deployed. The vast majority are primary caregivers, and a third are single mothers. Like men, they turn to the military for all sorts of reasons. The pay is good, particularly in a war zone, the benefits are excellent and the jobs offer financial security and career advancement — all of which is good for

their children. Many love their work and feel a sense of pride and patriotism in defending the country.

Yet mothers, whether married or single, say that long periods of time away from their children and then the transition back to domestic life — where they are expected to immediately resume household responsibilities — can be excruciatingly difficult.

The Pulls of Duty

Not long after reuniting with her children in 2005, Specialist Holschlag said, she was sitting alone in her apartment in Iowa when she was struck by a thought she recognized as absurdly selfish: she wanted to go back to Iraq.

“All of us that were single parents, who came back to our lives, there isn’t one of us who didn’t say it was easier being in Iraq than coming back and picking back up,” said Specialist Holschlag, 36.

The military tries to discourage single parents altogether. They are not allowed to enlist in active duty, though if they become single they can stay after providing a notarized family care plan. (Nearly 12 percent of the women in the regular Army and 4 percent of the men are single parents, according to 2008 statistics.)

The National Guard and the Reserves allow single parents to join since those jobs are technically part time. They, too, require a family care plan — but even the best-laid plans can go awry.

When Willa Townes, a single mother in the Army Reserve, was called to Iraq early in the war, her sister agreed to watch her 5-year-old son — then backed out two weeks before Ms. Townes was to deploy. “I broke down right there,” Ms. Townes said. “I was devastated.”

Refusing deployment was not an option, she said. She was then the No. 3 person in the chain of command, and it was her 15th year in the military. She needed five more years to retire with a hefty bonus. “I wanted to go,” said Ms. Townes, who retired last year as a lieutenant colonel. “I needed to go.”

Frantic, she turned to her son’s first day care provider, who had become a friend and volunteered to take him for the year Ms. Townes was away. “We were not related at all,” Ms. Townes recalled, adding that the arrangement worked wonderfully and that she insisted on sending her friend money for expenses. “We were not even of the same race. That didn’t matter. People come together to help you when you are in need.”

Easing the Path

Since the start of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the armed forces have changed some long-held policies, hoping to ease some of the difficulties mothers face. Without a return to the draft, the need for women is unlikely to go away.

“We’re certainly attuned to the challenges that motherhood imposes on our female soldiers,” said Lt. Col. George P. Wright, an Army spokesman. “We have several programs that are designed to address those challenges.”

Last year, the Army extended the time that a new mother can defer deployment from four to six months. Then, in Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany, the base commander, Col. Brian Lein, following the Navy’s lead, increased it to a year, the recommended time a mother should breast-feed.

To help lessen the stress of long separations, the Army has started to allow more families to accompany soldiers to South Korea, where once soldiers had to deploy alone. Back home, the Army has built additional day care centers and allowed some families to stay in one place longer. Last year, the Army approved 10-day paternity leaves for new fathers, a milestone.

Working off surveys that show women respond better to flexible schedules than financial incentives, the Navy now allows more sailors to work from home on computers, when possible. It is also running a small pilot program that permits three-year sabbaticals.

Advocacy groups for women and families say more can be done but recognize that with the military fighting two wars and strapped for deployable soldiers, significant changes will have to come gradually.

Some fixes, though, are relatively straightforward.

“The one thing the military could do that would have a lasting and immediate impact would be to provide plentiful round-the-clock child care,” said Lory Manning, who directs the military women’s project for the [Women’s Research and Education Institute](#), a nonprofit group.

Meanwhile, hardships remain.

Under current regulations, the military offers no assurance to military couples that they will not be deployed to war simultaneously. A unit’s requirements come first. But some joined the Army with the expectation that this would never come up.

Maj. Katherine P. Guttormsen, who has a year-old son, dreads the moment she gets the call to go back to Iraq or Afghanistan, particularly because her husband, an officer, is still there. The thought keeps her up at night, she said.

As a mother in the military, “the sacrifice is greater now,” said Major Guttormsen, a graduate of [West Point](#) who served in Iraq as company commander of an engineering unit then switched to public affairs when she decided to have a child. “This is a different Army than I entered into in 1996. It was fun. You were doing exercises. You weren’t going to Iraq and getting shot at.”

Major Guttormsen, who was a [“lioness.”](#) part of the first team of Army women to search Iraqi women in Ramadi in 2004, said, “I don’t know if I get that call, if I would be able to do it, and that would be the end of my Army career.”

Staff [Sgt. Connica McFadden](#) of the Army received only two weeks’ notice that she would be deploying and scrambled to find a caretaker for her 6-month-old daughter and 6-year-old son.

Her commander at Hunter Army Airfield in Georgia had given her assurances in 2003 that she would not be going to Iraq that year so soon after giving birth. Her husband also would be deploying. But the rules changed. Heartbroken, she weaned the baby abruptly and left her with an aunt, while her son stayed elsewhere with his grandmother.

Not obeying orders was not an option. Sergeant McFadden, who holds only an associate’s degree, wanted to hold on to her career. “It matters what I do,” Sergeant McFadden said. “I love helping people. It’s for our

country. My dad was a Vietnam vet. I feel like I owe it to him.”

The Children’s Burden

Parents fret most about the consequences that long deployments will have on their children. By now, nearly two million children have seen a parent go to war. In some cases, their mothers have not come home. At least 25 women with children have died while serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, out of 121 women casualties.

Recent surveys indicate that most children, while largely resilient, experience worry and anxiety when a parent deploys, and the military has tried to address this by increasing counseling services. Nevertheless, grades and behavior suffer. Young children cry more. Some start wetting their beds. Nightmares are common, and teenagers can become more reclusive and defiant. National Guard and Reserve children are often hit worse since they live outside the military community.

Single mothers have the fewest options, said Mark C. Pisano, a psychologist at two schools at Fort Bragg in North Carolina. “Not only are they getting up and moving, but moving without Mom makes it even more stressful.” Even under the best circumstances — leaving young children with a spouse — a deployment can bring on feelings of anguish.

After her cousin was wounded in Iraq, Specialist Stephanie McCulley, 27, felt compelled to enlist in the Army. She left her two young boys with her husband, a former Marine, when she deployed to Baghdad in 2007 as a combat medic. Specialist McCulley earned a Bronze Star with Valor for administering aid after a roadside bomb demolished a Humvee. Two soldiers died instantly. She was able to save a third.

Technology has helped soften the separation for many parents. Webcams and [Skype](#) have allowed them to talk to their children over dinner or before school. They leave teddy bears behind with recorded messages or record themselves reading books that their children love. But Specialist McCulley relied on old-school communication, mostly because the Internet was not always available and her boys were so young.

She wrote letters and a journal. “You should have seen your mom driving a big old truck,” she wrote in one entry.

But Specialist McCulley could not help but catalog the milestones she was missing — first words, first wobbly run, first day of preschool. The feeling was worse on days she “should have gotten killed and didn’t.”

“I always felt guilty,” she said.

Now, more than a year since her homecoming, any trip out the door — to the grocery store, to her Army base — prompts a flurry of nervous questions from the boys, who are 4 and 5: “Where are you going?” and “How long will you be gone?”

“They still think I’m going to leave,” Specialist McCulley said with a note of melancholy. “They have paid a price. It will always affect them in some way. I do think they are resilient; this makes them stronger. But I do wonder sometimes, what long-term damage did I do?”

One positive thing did come of the separation: her husband, John, grew closer to the boys and became a true partner in the marriage, something other mothers also cite as a silver lining. “It made him a better dad,”

Specialist McCulley said. “He acts very motherly sometimes.”

If called again, though, Specialist McCulley said she would go. “The children are being taken care of, and if I wasn’t here, people would be dying,” she concluded.

But Jaymie Holschlag’s experience in Ramadi convinced her that for her family, the sacrifice was too high. She returned in 2006 with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Working as a medic had left her raw. She lost three soldiers to a roadside bomb in her month there. “We were either getting hit with I.E.D.’s, finding I.E.D.’s or getting hit when we were on post,” she said, referring to [improvised explosive devices](#).

From Iraq, she kept in touch with home by e-mail. But she could only stay focused by disconnecting from family life. She rarely talked to her son on the phone because the conversations made a bad situation worse. “To hear them cry and miss me would keep me out of the game,” she said. “It would make it hard to put the game face on.”

Her stepfather and her 21-year-old sister, who agreed to share responsibility for the children, a significant sacrifice, were struggling to cope. The children had trouble sleeping. Seth had trouble in his new school. “My sister was on the verge of totally freaking out,” Specialist Holschlag said, adding: “There was no sense of co-parenting. It almost tore their relationship apart.”

When she returned, she saw that her son had “gained a good 50 or 60 pounds,” she said. “His depression, he wore it. I could see what my year away from him did.”

Yet she was determined to hold on to her military job. It gave her a sense of identity and paid the bills. She also wanted to help her family heal. She and the children began counseling and moved to Texas to start fresh. But recently three weeks of intense combat training, the kind that simulates Iraq, exacerbated her stress disorder. She could feel her temper flaring again and asked to transfer out.

Specialist Holschlag is back in Iowa now, getting mental health counseling and gearing up for college and a nursing degree. Her children are ecstatic about the turn of events, she said.

“It was the hardest choice of my life,” Specialist Holschlag said. “My daughter keeps running around saying, ‘You love me so much, you’d give up Iraq for me.’ She knows how much I love my job. She also knows that I won’t leave them no matter what.”

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