

Introduction

A Navy wife should be proud of the Navy and her connection with it, and never by word or deed should she cast any discredit upon it. Times will be hard and separations will be long, but she should present to the world a cheerful agreeableness rather than a resigned stoicism. The Navy doesn't particularly care for a wife who is too *obviously* carrying her load. Take life as it comes in your stride, my dear, and you'll be loved all the more for it!

—*The Navy Wife: What She Ought to Know
About the Customs of the Service and the
Management of a Navy Household* (1942)

Scott paced in front of me, back and forth, back and forth, silent. But I knew what he was thinking.

“This will never work,” he finally said. “We need to break it off now before it becomes too painful. I’ve been in long-distance relationships before. They always go bad. I don’t want that to happen to us.”

He was breaking up with me, but it was hard to get upset. This was the third time he’d tried to call it quits, and we’d been dating less than a month. He was a nice guy—too nice—and though we both felt an intense bond immediately after we had met, he remained worried. The problem was obvious: We would have only another month to get to know each other before he moved from southern Maryland, where he was a Navy test pilot, to a base in

Whidbey Island, Washington, where he would undergo two months of flight training. After that, he was headed to a squadron in Japan for three years.

“I think we can make it work,” I said, as gently as I could. After our two previous breakups, I saw how easily he could be persuaded. But I had a shred of dignity left, however tattered, and I refused to let him off easily again. Besides, this time, I had an inkling of what nagged at him. His sister, a high school friend of mine who had set us up, confessed that he feared I wouldn’t make a good Navy wife.

I didn’t want to dance around the issue any longer. I had already started to grow my hair long for our wedding. We needed to move on with this thing.

“Are you afraid I wouldn’t make a good Navy wife?”

“I know you’d be good at it,” he finessed. “I just think you would hate it. It’s not for you. It’s not who you are.”

Scott counted all the things required of an officer’s wife at his level: relocating frequently, involvement with the wives’ club (the “knives club,” as it is sometimes referred to), “mandatory fun” with people you hardly know, being left behind during long and frequent deployments, shouldering the problems of younger service members’ wives, exposure to the ever-present possibility of death.

Carrier aviation, after all, is a dangerous business. Just a few months before we met, two friends from Scott’s test-pilot school class had crashed while he was flying. He witnessed the event and the subsequent fire from his jet. He’d been close to the wife and girlfriend of both aviators who died; watching them at the funerals and helping establish scholarship funds for the children forced him to think practically about what he required of a girlfriend, even though we’d been dating for such a short time.

I understood why Scott believed military life wasn’t for me. I loved my urban Washington, D.C., apartment. I loved my job handling communications for a national nonprofit association. I loved

dining at the numerous ethnic restaurants within easy walking distance of my place. My parents lived twenty minutes away, and I visited them nearly every weekend. Two of my younger siblings rented nearby apartments, and the third was a short Amtrak ride up the Northeast corridor.

Most of my friends' lives mirrored mine. Like me, they were in their early thirties, with graduate-school degrees and jobs that promised either great riches or deep fulfillment (depending on the diploma). We read *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* and *Harper's*. We agreed on most issues and voted for the same political candidates. We commuted from condos within three subway stops of one another on the D.C. Metro's Red Line. We met for readings at Politics & Prose, a nearby bookstore-café. We scheduled brunches on Sundays. We dated one another. None of us had friends or relatives in the military.

Before I met Scott, I imagined service members to be well-intentioned robots, necessary to society but alien to my thirty-one-year experience of life in America. We began dating during the spring of 2001—before the attacks of September 11 and the subsequent war on terrorism brought faces in uniform to morning newspapers and evening broadcasts. So no military presence peopled my consciousness. I'd never heard of a wives' club, except maybe as the punch line to a joke. I didn't understand Scott's point when he referred to the responsibilities of an officer's wife or the ways the Navy consumes your personal life.

But none of that mattered to me in those early days. Since I'd never seen Scott in his flight suit or his uniform, just in the polo shirts and khaki pants he wore on our dates, it didn't really seem like he was in the Navy.

"I think we can make it work," I repeated.

I was falling in love, and I brushed away my fears. So we talked for hours, repeating ourselves, circling back to the same issues, until

he said he couldn't take it anymore. He broke up with me anyway. But he was too tired to drive the two hours back to base, and he asked to sleep on my couch.

I undressed in my room, in the dark, and slid under my quilt. I lay awake, certain that Scott would knock lightly at any minute or just push the door open and proclaim that he was all wrong. He didn't. He slept on the couch. All night. And when I peeked out in the morning, he was gone.

By the end of that year, we were married.

In the seven years since we stood under the wedding canopy, Scott and I have moved four times and have had two children: Ethan, who is now six, and Esther, who is four. After tours in Japan and Washington, D.C., we currently live in Anacortes, Washington, a friendly town of 16,000 tucked into the far northwest corner of the state. My husband is the commanding officer (CO, also known as Skipper) of a squadron of EA-6B Prowler jets at nearby Naval Air Station Whidbey Island, and I am the “wife of.” Fortunately for me, many requirements for military spouses have changed over the decades, and expectations have shifted even further during the last few years. When Scott became skipper of his squadron, he offered me the opportunity to opt out of the responsibilities that are normally associated with being the CO's wife—those same challenges he counted on the fingers of both hands during that anguished night in my old apartment.

But our tour here is just three years, and a lot of good can be done in that time. I've seen firsthand how visiting an enlisted couple with a new baby can boost the morale of the whole squadron, simply by demonstrating that someone at the top of the food chain (however short and insignificant a chain it is) cares about them. I've witnessed how delivering a meal to a woman with sneezing kids, and a husband in Iraq, can transform her whole day. I've watched

the way that the squadron's emotional support cheered a young mom who took her toddler to the base hospital for a bruise and was wrongly accused of child abuse. And I've learned how potluck dinners, birthday celebrations, holiday parties, and afternoons at the bowling alley can make military families feel just a bit less alone during a long deployment.

For an institution that prides itself on following directives and procedures, it's interesting that no formal rules exist for spouses to organize, lead, or participate in these sorts of activities. As the skipper's wife (this is how I am known within the squadron), my level of involvement falls somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. Many spouses do much more; many do far less. Sometimes the end result is exactly the same.

A few items in the job description are critical. In naval aviation the CO's wife, with the help of the ombudsman (who works closely with family members, especially enlisted spouses), provides a continual flow of information to squadron families during deployment. If a jet crashes, if there is a terrorist incident or an emergency on the aircraft carrier, the CO's wife often hears it from her husband first. She or her husband notifies the ombudsman, activates a phone tree, and sends an e-mail message to families so that everyone receives accurate, current information. If serious illness strikes a family member at home or if a relative dies, she facilitates a call to the Red Cross, which is organized to handle emergencies for deployed service members, and coordinates support on the home front. (The Navy's Command Spouse Leadership Course, a one-week, full-time class, develops the facilitation skills of incoming CO's wives and trains them on Navy resources. Other branches of the military provide similar courses for senior service members' spouses and family readiness group leaders.)

As a neophyte to military culture—one who drank in feminism along with mother's milk—I was startled to hear that these kinds of responsibilities fall under the purview of the commanding offi-

cer's wife. But this tradition is as old as the military itself. The standard for volunteerism and general good works among officers' wives was set early on in America's history by Martha Washington, America's original First Lady. Before she became the wife of the President, she was the General's wife. During the frigid, deadly winter of 1777, some of our nation's first military wives followed their husbands to Valley Forge to support the Continental Army as it fought the Revolutionary War, and she was among them. Historians document that these "campfollowers" created the precedent for the millions of wives of enlisted troops and officers who would accompany their husbands to posts worldwide. In *Campfollowing: A History of the Military Wife*, the authors write movingly about how these women labored to maintain a semblance of domestic life for their families. Their contributions exceeded anyone's expectations. In addition to mundane tasks such as washing the camp's laundry, they nursed countless wounded soldiers back to health and even carried out dangerous espionage missions. In some cases, wives fought and fell in battle next to their husbands.

As General Washington's wife, Martha enjoyed a privileged position, but according to letters and accounts of the period, she never put on airs. She spent her time with the other officers' wives as they knitted socks, patched garments, sewed shirts for destitute soldiers, provided medical aid, comforted the dying men, and took widows under their wing. Leveraging her high-level contacts in the civilian community, Martha collected cash donated by upper-class women who supported the Revolutionary cause ("the offering of the Ladies"), and used it to purchase linen to make more than two thousand shirts for soldiers. Without knowing that the implications of her actions would resonate for hundreds of years, Martha created the prototype of the CO's wife as well as the great-great-grandmother version of today's wives' clubs and family services programs.

Military wives who followed their husbands from camp to camp looked out for each other because no one else did—certainly not the

military, which in the early days could just barely clothe, feed, and arrange transportation for a force continually moving and expanding. As another campfollower, Elizabeth Bacon Custer, wife of General George Custer, wrote in her 1885 memoir *Boots and Saddles*:

It seemed very strange to me that with all the value that is set on the presence of the women of an officer's family at the frontier posts, the book of army regulations makes no provision for them, but in fact ignores them entirely! It entered into such minute detail in its instructions, even giving the number of hours that bean soup should boil, that it would be natural to suppose that a paragraph or two might be wasted on an officer's wife! The servants and the company laundresses are mentioned as being entitled to quarters and rations and the services of the surgeon. If an officer's wife falls ill she cannot claim the attention of the doctor, though it is almost unnecessary to say that she has it through his most urgent courtesy.

Elizabeth Bacon Custer lived her long career as an officer's wife one hundred years after Martha Washington, but very little had changed for women by then. Martha, Elizabeth, and the other early officers' wives whose diaries and letters survive (historians have found nearly no recorded documents detailing the experience of enlisted wives) were industrious, supportive, and most of all flexible—qualities still required of military spouses, especially when confronted with frequent moves and even more frequent deployments.

Two hundred years after the earliest campfollowers sewed shirts for the regiment, expectations for American military wives finally started to shift. It was long overdue. Because starting with Martha Washington, who called herself “an old fashioned Virginia housewife, steady as a clock, busy as a bee, and cheerful as a cricket,” a military system evolved that judged male officers' suitability for advancement partly on how well their wives fit this ideal. For de-

cares, senior officers evaluating a subordinate for promotion would also assess his wife's fitness as a military spouse. This evolved from the idea, especially popular throughout the 1950s and 1960s, that military wives operate as unofficial ambassadors for American policy abroad, serving as soft-power resources in international relations. Therefore, this "two-for-one" theory goes, the military couple needed to be appraised as a team, and the ambassador-wives must therefore adhere to their own set of rules and regulations.

Formal judgment of a military wife's suitability for her husband's career has gone the way of engraved calling cards and white-gloved teas. Officially, advancement in today's military depends solely on merit. In the Navy, for example, selection boards are explicitly prohibited from considering the marital status of a service member or the employment, education, or volunteer service of a service member's spouse. The volunteerism I see appears to stem from a genuine desire to contribute to the military community. That's encouraging, because being an involved military spouse isn't a job that can be performed under duress or with half a heart. There are too many personal interactions, too many potential stressors, too many important causes, too many people in need. Simply put, there are too many opportunities to slip up.

Scott never asked me to take a role in our squadron wives' club or participate in the social side of his career. I chose to do so, though I also continued working (as a part-time communications consultant and a freelance writer) during most of this tour. I've increased my involvement in the squadron over time, as I felt the gratification that comes from building a community of families. I've also seen how happy it makes Scott to know that we are partners in the toughest job he's ever had.

But if it had been up to me—the person I used to be, that is—Scott never would have volunteered for military service. Because

the person I was before my close-up with camouflage grossly misunderstood the essence of that service. Scott's job is difficult and demanding, but it's the path he chose, and he finds it meaningful and fulfilling. He set his sights on it long before he laid eyes on me—and long before the Iraq War, or what's known in the military as the Global War on Terrorism, was ever conceived.

The question that rushes from many people's lips when Scott tells them what he does for a living is not "How do you do it?" as I'm most often asked, but "How *can* you do it?" Sometimes the query remains unspoken, lingering in the eyes of a fellow parent at our children's school. Sometimes a civilian friend dances around the issue, mentioning a politician's name but refusing to voice what would force an inevitable change in the relationship. Complete strangers have no such worries. Scott has been accosted on the street while in uniform by people who demand to know how he can fight in America's current conflict. He engages each and every one with a respect and patience that, I suspect, mask his enthusiasm for debate. He starts off by explaining that when he joined the military, America was in the midst of a Cold War with the Soviet Union. He names each of the presidents who have recited the oath of office since then, and touches on the wildly diverse list of national priorities that have consumed the country at various points.

"Being a military pilot is my profession," he likes to say. After all, the Navy, unlike some of the other military branches, is a career force, with historically high rates of retention that reflect its need for specialists in a diverse array of fields. It would be impractical to change one's profession every four years solely in response to the political views of each U.S. president, or the actions taken by each Congress. He invokes the service member's oath of office, in which he or she swears to support and defend the Constitution—the entire machinery of government—rather than an individual elected official. He somehow manages to take the long view.

In the social history of our time, the military serves a proxy role

in the culture wars, and keeping this in mind allows both of us to see his service in a broader context. So we are each engaged with our conscience but not in conflict with it. Supporting America as a military family has little to do with who sits in the Oval Office, which political party dominates Congress, or even how we feel about the Global War on Terrorism. I feel strongly that terms like “pro-war” and “antiwar” don’t apply anymore because the complexity of the situation we find ourselves in as a country transcends pat positions.

My feelings about service members and their families, however, are not complicated. I have never met people who worked harder, spoke more earnestly, or internalized a stronger sense of responsibility toward their fellow citizens. Marrying into the military granted me a passport into an America I never knew existed, populated by a people whose overwhelming public silence masks lives lived at a level of intensity that would crush most mortals.

That relentless intensity has transformed me into a warrior on behalf of my family. One front is the battle to keep my kids psychologically healthy in the midst of an insane environment: A world where they can identify their dad’s electronic attack jet flying overhead and track the progress of his aircraft carrier across foreign waters. My children live in a land without dads; many of their friends’ fathers are deployed too.

I’m also pitching a battle to advance my own professional and personal goals as motherhood and the military threaten to engulf everything else I’ve dreamed of achieving for myself. Ever since I could write my name, I wrote it as a byline. I interviewed teachers for my elementary school’s mimeographed newsletter. I staffed the newspapers and literary magazines of nearly every school I’ve attended. My first essay was published in *The Washington Post* eleven years ago, and the intoxication of seeing my name in print left me permanently hung over. Nevertheless, I’ve tried to stop writing many times, especially since I had kids and took on squadron re-

sponsibilities. I just couldn't afford the hours hunched over my laptop.

But now I have to write about our family's experience of war-time deployment, because it keeps me honest. During the course of Scott's tour, our military family was forged by the iron will to stay connected to each other despite long absences and impossible distances. To stay connected to Scott and the kids, I had to connect with myself. To do that, I wrote. And wrote. That's the only reason Scott, Ethan, Esther, and I survived the odyssey ahead. And that's why this book isn't about politics, but about particulars—the particulars of our family, as we grew to know each other in new and surprising ways, under conditions none of us would have wished for ourselves.

Several years ago, I visited a carrier and heard the intercom announcement, "Stand by for a word from the commanding officer." Activity on the boat froze as the crew awaited a message that might change their lives. In the universe of women and children where I now live, we wives spend our days standing by. We await critical information on our husbands' schedules, swapping rumors and scraps of data on carrier departures, tanker status, and flights from Bahrain as if we ourselves are the aviators.

I'm going to win this war. I don't yet know how, but I will. The future of our family depends on it.

Shock and Awe

It wasn't a covered-wagon journey with a caravan of campfollowers, but as Scott drove the kids and me from the airport in Seattle to our new house ninety miles away—which we rented months before, sight unseen—I reflected on military wives throughout history who had been escorted to homes not of their own choosing. To be precise, I wondered how many of them had been able to hide their tears, as I now struggled to do.

Anacortes, a cheerful postcard come to life, had nothing to do with it. In summertime, the town is a paradise, and on that August day a light breeze ribboned the waters of Fidalgo Bay. I glimpsed the length of Commercial Avenue, Anacortes's version of Main Street. Colorful, overflowing flower baskets hung from every lamp-post; tasteful banners welcomed visitors to the weekend's arts festival. There wasn't a garish billboard or a chain restaurant in sight. I counted four traffic lights.

Anacortes isn't your typical military town. In fact, it's not a military town at all, especially when compared with places like Fayetteville, Pensacola, or Twentynine Palms. Scott's new base was located twenty miles away, but Anacortes beckons an ever-growing

number of Navy families every year precisely because it's not a Navy community. Residents praise the well-run schools, the renovated library, the vibrant arts scene, and the carefully planned commercial area, purposefully devoid of Big Box stores. The proximity to several beaches and lakes doesn't hurt, either.

But my emotions swerved at every bend in the road. Scott turned right, and we drove past a row of rundown rural shacks; my heart fell. He turned left, and we passed a sweet Victorian with blooming gardens. I wiped my eyes and managed a smile. He turned right, and I spotted a barren patch of land with scrawny horses grazing. (Horses!) He turned left, and a small neighborhood of Arts and Crafts-style bungalows gazed back kindly at us.

"I think we're getting close," he mumbled to himself, studying the map.

More turns, more shacks, more farms, an out-of-nowhere hair salon, then a mobile-home park, a few cute cottages, and the last right turn—"We're here, honey," he said—into a newish neighborhood of Craftsman homes. I discovered later that locals call it Wisteria Lane. It certainly appeared perfect. That evening, teenagers rode their bikes in the cul-de-sac, looking after younger siblings playing catch with their friends. Doors swung wide open. The annual summer block party was scheduled for the very next night.

We pulled into the driveway. A wooden play set in the backyard beckoned Ethan and Esther, and both kids revived, curiosity pushing through their exhaustion. It had been an especially trying day of cross-country travel. We had arrived at Dulles Airport outside Washington, D.C., at sunrise; our kids, half asleep, still grasped their nighttime sippy cups of milk. As my father hugged us goodbye at the curb, we wondered why the check-in lines seemed so much longer than usual. Post-9/11 travel remained unpleasant, but the way the line snaked to the end of the terminal seemed excessive, even for Dulles. Word soon reached us that just a few hours

before, authorities had uncovered a terrorist plot to use liquid explosives to bomb airplanes. Two and a half hours of line later, we checked our bags and carried our whimpering children to the security checkpoint. As instructed by increasingly frazzled security guards, we dumped the kids' apple juice boxes and milk bottles, the infant Tylenol, and their snacks. Trash barrels were already overflowing with other unfortunate passengers' water bottles, shampoo, perfume, toothpaste, and makeup.

Ethan, who had recently turned three, frowned as he watched his booty disappear. But when the security officer demanded he remove his shoes and walk through the X-ray machine alone, the insult was beyond a toddler's tolerance. He burst into tears. We had no choice. We pushed him forward, sobbing, without us.

I shouldn't have been surprised at being caught up in trickle-down terrorism. The milestones of our family life already read like a mini-history of the war. I had flown cross-country from D.C. to Seattle in the early-morning hours of September 11, 2001, to visit Scott, who had relocated to Whidbey Island earlier that summer. Halfway across the country, the seat belt sign flashed, and the pilot announced that we would be landing immediately because of a national security incident. We were near Minneapolis, the pilot continued in a voice that sounded distracted and distant, and he added that he had no information on when the plane might take off again. I looked up from my book in search of a conversation I might eavesdrop on. Generalized, dissatisfied grumbling wafted from one or two seats, but few of the other passengers exhibited any interest. One person announced that there must have been a backpack left somewhere.

When we touched down on the tarmac, I pulled out my cell phone and dialed my mother's number. She listened to NPR during her commute to work in downtown D.C., and would surely know how to translate the cryptic phrase "national security incident."

Her voice mail picked up. “Mom, I’m not sure what’s going on, but we just landed in Minneapolis unexpectedly,” I said. “I’ll call you later.” Cell phone lines went down soon after that.

I spent the next four days at a no-frills roadside motel, waiting for the airlines to resume scheduled flights. Though I knew a few people in Minneapolis, and friends from home fed me phone numbers of their own relatives in the area, I remained alone in my room, venturing out across the six-lane highway only to send e-mail from Kinko’s and buy an occasional cheese sandwich and an apple from the deli in the strip mall next door. It seemed right, this frugal, isolated approach to life in the days immediately following the terrorist attacks; it was my penance for being on the right airplane that devastating day. The spareness of my room and the emptiness of my hours reminded me of my travels to a convent in the hills of Nazareth, many years before. During that trip I woke every morning to the slow, hollow ringing of bells. Existence at the convent was as mournful as the peal of those bells. No one smiled—not the nuns who pocketed my shekels and not the other guests, whose eyes reflected the dolor in the air. No one at my motel in Minneapolis smiled, either. The identical shock stamped on our faces wiped out our features, rendering us all related.

After several days at the motel, I finally joined Scott (who had awakened on an aircraft carrier off the coast of San Diego to news of the attack) for our long-planned vacation on Whidbey Island. But the phone rang at three a.m. the night after I arrived, with orders for him to report to his new squadron in Japan as soon as possible. We shared a few more days together as he finalized his paperwork and travel plans, and he proposed the night before he flew to Asia.

Once I returned to D.C., I rushed the wedding plans to coincide with Scott’s Christmas leave. My best friend took the train down from Manhattan, and together we addressed and stamped two hundred invitations. But because of the anthrax poisoning at a post office

in the city—the post office through which my mail was routed—more than half of the invitations came back destroyed. (Five people died in the anthrax attacks.) We got married as planned, and a year and a half later, after a move to and then back from Japan, a nurse wheeled me into my room at George Washington University Hospital after a last-minute C-section. Scott was then living on the USS *Kitty Hawk*, flying missions in the “Shock and Awe” campaign over Iraq. As our newborn son Ethan nursed, I reached for the television’s remote control. The first image I saw was the statue of Saddam Hussein slamming to the ground in Baghdad’s Firdas Square.

The conclusion of the initial phase of the air war coincided with the end of Scott’s tour. He flew off the carrier to a base in Bahrain and boarded a commercial flight home just a few days later. He finally met Ethan in the International Arrivals terminal at Dulles Airport.

As a newcomer to the military, I am continually astonished by the way war’s twists and turns affect the lives of individuals far removed from the actual conflict. Pulling into the driveway of our new home in Anacortes, I couldn’t help but wonder what surprises loomed ahead.

Often, when I tell civilians that my husband is in the Navy, a faraway look in their eyes cues a long-ago recollection, and that’s when I know I’m about to hear the Myth of the Military Wife. “It must be fun,” they say wistfully, imagining a sisterhood of Sunday potlucks and shared babysitting duties.

I, too, had always heard that military wives form a strong, cohesive support group to keep each other going during their husbands’ long hours at work and many absences. When in the past I heard “military wife” I would sometimes picture the wives of the Apollo astronauts, an elite sorority whose husbands transitioned from jobs as Navy and Air Force fighter pilots to NASA pilots—public service

missions far more demanding than what the family originally signed up for. (Alan B. Shepard, the first American in space, was the first in a long list of astronauts who began their careers as naval aviators.)

I see those women in their careful 1960s hairdos and their linen shifts, eating, drinking, and smoking with each other, watching each other's children, and attending each other's funerals, as dramatized on PBS's *Race to the Moon* series. At the time Scott and I met, my viewing taste leaned more toward *Sex and the City* than documentaries on space missions, but during one of our first dates, Scott, smiling shyly, pulled the videos from his armoire. He'd viewed the series many times and was thrilled to be able to share it with me. It was the closest he could come, I think, to articulating his awe of flight and his own dreams for the future.

As often as Scott had watched the series, he had never slid episode five—"NASA Wives and Families"—into his VCR. As a single guy, he didn't find it relevant. All that was changing fast. So one Sunday afternoon, we propped up the pillows and settled in for the show.

It was probably not the friendliest introduction to the Myth of the Military Wife. But I could tell, if only from the hair and clothes on the NASA series, how outdated were the requirements of the wives to create a *Leave It to Beaver* household. Since Scott had begun introducing me to the wives and girlfriends of his colleagues, I saw quickly they were not cut from that mold. Friendly, smart, and funny, they looked like women I could have gone to college with. Something else made me pay attention too: a sympathetic, been-through-it-all look in their eyes that made me wonder if they knew what my future held. As it happened, they understood exactly what I was about to experience, including the highs, the lows, the lower lows, and the quick elevator trip back up to the penthouse. I'm sure I now scan other aviators' girlfriends with precisely the same look.

At the time I fixated on the question of how to find friends among military wives who shared my interests. It seemed critical to replicate the social circle I had emerged from, intellectual wannabes who gathered at museum lectures after work. When I mentioned it, Scott just shook his head, worried and serious.

“It’s a question of finding people you can spend time with,” he repeated over and over throughout our courtship. “In the military you don’t get your choice of friends. You’ll have to spend time with people you might not want to. But you will find someone you like. I promise.”

He was halfway right. I didn’t find people I liked. They found me.

Our doorbell rang the first Saturday morning after our arrival in Anacortes, when boxes were still stacked high in every room. Scott, Ethan, and I looked at each other. Even Ethan understood that we could be expecting no one.

The woman at the door smiled. She held a small, potted orchid in one hand; in the other hand she grasped the handle of an infant carrier. I glimpsed the closed eyes of a newborn under the fleece blanket.

“Hi, I’m Martina,” she said, thrusting the orchid forward. Mutual friends, she explained, already told her that our sons were the same age. We invited her in, and she rested the infant carrier on the rug. Ethan and Esther came out of hiding to peek at the baby.

Martina knew far more about us than we knew about her. I tried not to give her the third degree, but she didn’t mind my questions. She and her husband had lived in Anacortes three years already, though he’d been away most of that time on deployment after deployment. He worked as an EOD officer. I didn’t know it at the time, but EOD stands for “explosive ordnance disposal,” and it’s one of the most dangerous jobs in the Navy, especially in wartime. EOD

technicians handle and analyze explosives, clear minefields, and execute missions that make me shudder with fear.

Martina and her family (a seven-year-old, four-year-old, two-year-old, and one-month-old) had been scheduled to leave Anacortes that summer, following the end of her husband's tour. Usually, deployments in the Navy alternate with staff tours or desk jobs known as "shore duty," so the officer can gain a broader base of experience. Shore duty is also widely recognized as an opportunity to catch up on important family time. In our case, we'd just completed Scott's shore duty tour at the Pentagon, which was why he was again preparing for deployment on a carrier.

But times are changing. The protracted wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have drained the military's personnel resources. EOD expertise, unfortunately, remains in demand. The military offers no career-path guarantees anymore and has erased the old, set way of doing things that families used to depend on. A "new normal" reigns, and it encompasses any change that the war demands. Instead of family time and a desk job following three years of frequent deployments, Martina's husband received orders to Iraq as an Individual Augmentee—an IA, as I learned to call it. He left before the baby's one-week birthday. Devout Catholics, Martina and her husband held the christening in their hospital room, with no other family present.

I had never heard of IAs before, though it became an abbreviation that soon flew off my tongue because so many people I knew were tapped for the same thing. When naval officers or sailors are sent on an IA, they go alone, deployed separately from their units, to supplement other military branches that need additional staffing on the ground. Though the naval personnel in our circles tapped for IAs are typically aviators, they do not go in a flying capacity, or even to a naval base. They usually work with other service branches in the most remote locations, including Iraq, Afghanistan, Guantá-

namo Bay, and the Horn of Africa, helping coordinate specific missions or large operations.

Sailors sent IA are always gone at least six months. Some require a full calendar year in theater, and this does not include lengthy predeployment training and mandatory repatriation periods. Army soldiers, Marines, and certain National Guard and Reserve units have been subject to repeated, punishing twelve-to-fifteen-month deployments since the Iraq war began, with some units extended to nineteen months away. My heart bleeds for those families. Such orders used to be more unusual for sailors and naval officers, who typically deployed six months at a time. That was changing fast, and no one was immune.

Scott and I had planned Esther's birth in 2005 while he was working at the Pentagon to assure he'd be around for the first year of her life. Since he had missed most of my pregnancy with Ethan, as well as the birth and the early days, we wanted to do whatever possible to make sure he witnessed her entrance into the world. Though we both understood that Scott would miss plenty of birthdays and holidays in the future, we thought an initial foundation to build on would help our family through the hard times to come. So as I saw the tiny face peeking out of the blanket, I could not fathom how Martina could be going it alone with four kids, one of them a newborn, and a husband who was searching for explosives in Iraq for a year.

But Martina looked happy. I guessed she was around my age, maybe a year or two younger, in her mid-thirties. In gentler times she would have been called an English rose; her porcelain skin and pink cheeks shone like a pretty doll. She appeared rested even without makeup, her naturally blond hair pulled back into a simple ponytail, and wearing skinny jeans that made it obvious she'd already lost the baby weight. Despite all that, I liked her immediately. I couldn't believe that in the midst of everything, she found the time to buy flowers for me and introduce herself.

Martina became my first friend in Anacortes, and I still feel lucky she rang my doorbell that morning. Throughout that first year, as I struggled to raise my kids alone, I remembered that Martina was doing something much harder. She and I talked on the phone at night after the kids went to bed and checked in on one another with two- or three-line e-mails during the day. I marked my mood much as she did, by the ups and downs our kids experienced with their dad away. The old adage that mothers are only as happy as their least happy child applied to both of us. She called me to whisper a sad confession, or to vent about the military health-care system, or to rant about her family's uncertain future. In other words, she was real, she was honest, and she was the first military wife I met who wasn't scared to say what irked her about the Navy.

I called her to ask questions or, to be more precise, one question: How do you manage life this way? After all, she had been married several years longer than I, and had once told me that the IA was no big deal, because her husband had been deployed for so long during his last tour. He'd been gone for most of the three older children's lives and, of course, all of the baby's life. She repeated the same line I heard from everyone else: "He's been away longer than he's been here."

I would make several good friends during our tour in Anacortes, and all of them surprised me. Because we often called on one another in a crisis—we had no choice, as our husbands and families were far away—we came to know each other quickly and often without pretense. I learned fast that Martina was no Barbie doll and that none of the spouses, no matter how perfect their lives looked from the outside, lived in a dream house.