

Pregnant Military Wives

When Dad Is Deployed While Expecting

by Mark Stackpole

We all have to make sacrifices. From parents to politicians, we have often received this pronouncement during difficult times. Though it offers little emotional comfort, it does provide some perspective on the difficult decisions that face us every day.

No families are being asked to risk greater sacrifices than the military ones who may be asked to send loved ones off to foreign lands and possibly war zones, deployed in accordance with their responsibilities as members of the U.S. military. Our military personnel and the people they leave behind are brave in their protection of both the homeland and the homefront. Not everyone who serves their country does so as a soldier, sailor or marine. Many are not even members of the military at all – and a few of them haven't even been born yet.

When Megan Hughes of Fort Hood, Texas, began having strong, hard contractions in the middle of the night, she was understandably anxious. When they increased in frequency and intensity, she decided that she needed to get to the hospital. Unlike many expectant mothers, however, she did not wake her husband to drive her; with her contractions two minutes apart, she drove herself the eight blocks to the emergency room. Eventually, the doctors and nurses determined that Hughes was not in preterm labor and released her the next day.

And why couldn't she wake her husband that night? Because he was stationed in Korea at the time, as he had been for much of her pregnancy. Since Hughes did not give birth that fateful night, her husband was able to return for their daughter's birth, stay for 16 days and then leave again for four months.

Now, a few years later, Hughes is pregnant again and her husband has been around to help. However, somewhere around her 8th month, he will be deployed again, this time missing the birth of his son. Although he has some R&R that he could use, the family decided not to have him use his leave so close to the beginning of his deployment, as it would make for a very long stretch of time without him. His son will be a year old before he gets to meet his father.

Dads MIA

Situations like these are very common in military families, and they illustrate some of the hardest sacrifices made by those serving our country and the people supporting them from home.

"I have a lot of dread about the upcoming deployment," Hughes says. "I remember how special the birth of my daughter was and how she bonded with him instantly. I regret that he will not have that with his son, and that when he returns from war, his baby will most likely not know him at all."

In addition to these monumental emotional concerns, there are obviously some logistical ones as well. Being pregnant alone, especially with other little ones around, can be especially demanding. "One of the things that bothers me when he is not here is that I am the only one who is 'on,'" Hughes says. "I cannot relax and think that someone else will hear the baby, someone else will hear the intruder, someone else will hear the fire alarm. It's all on me. So even when I do have an opportunity to sleep, it is not restful, as I am constantly on watch. I sleep much better when he is home."

Making It Work

Under these extreme circumstances, what kinds of things are helpful to pregnant women who are facing the deployment of their partners-in-parenting? Support. While living in a civilian community, Hughes found most of her support via an online community of bloggers and other moms-to-be in similar situations. Living on a military base, or close to one, does provide more traditional means of support.

Currently the leader of a Family Readiness Group (FRG), Hughes encourages every "milsponse" to be active in one. (Different branches of the military have different names for FRG-type support systems.) There are regular meetings, fundraisers and the chance to be a direct link in the chain of information for the families of their soldiers.

"Many of these pregnant women will feel very isolated and alone," says Gabriela Cora, a wellness coach and board-certified psychiatrist from Miami Shores, Fla. "Without a group or support system, she may struggle even more. Women tend to do very well when they are together in groups, probably because they tend to resolve issues through discussion. It is very important for her to stay in contact, knowing that he is going to be busy and she can't call him anytime. It's a tough adjustment, and a phone call with him cannot be the center of her day. While it's a very important priority, she will need to be able to create her life while he is not there."

Despite the strength of her emotional commitment to her relationship, she has to create some sort of support outside of the relationship itself, and has to honor a commitment to her own health, and the health of her unborn baby. "It is going to be hard for these overburdened moms-to-be to reach out, even if they know what help is available and that people *want* to care," Cora says. "It might be hard for her to say, 'What can help me?'"

If no such support is a priority in the local community, there might be a way to start something by working through the community and local government. "The strategy is to identify the issue and talk to the mayor, chamber of commerce or members of the community itself," Cora says. "Getting everyone involved is very important in this situation. Find a therapist who might be willing to help and try to establish win-wins for everyone involved."

And if you happen to be a mental health professional yourself, perhaps you could take the first step and provide this service to any military personnel, pregnant wives and otherwise. Cora is currently establishing relationships with other psychiatrists in her community so as to create such support programs. Her hope is to create a country-wide community where folks can get this kind of help no matter where they live.

By supporting the wives, families and babies-to-be of military employees, you are providing a crucial service to deployed soldiers everywhere. "He wants to make sure that all of his sacrifice is worth it," Cora says. "He wants his hope to stay alive, knowing that he can return to meet his child, currently on the way."

And how will Hughes handle her husband's upcoming deployment? "The other thing that I think is absolutely crucial is to have goals," she says. "I want to learn to sew and get back in shape after the baby is born. I have projects planned and have looked into childcare options. At Fort Hood, we have free 'respite hours' of childcare for dependents of deployed soldiers. I intend to use those so that I can go to the gym, possibly find a part-time job or increase my volunteer activities. Most of all, I intend to stay busy."