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Troops' families feel weight of war

By Gregg Zoroya, USA TODAY

MOUNTAIN VIEW, Calif. — If military families are quietly "coming apart at the seams," as the wife of the Army's top soldier told Congress in June, the evidence is here in the dining room of Army Capt. Mark Flitton and his wife, Lynn.

Their oldest child, Scott, 15, stormed into this room early this year after an argument with his father, asking why his mother ever married "that man." It was here in March where the couple first discussed divorce.

In July, Mark and Lynn explained at the dining room table how they live together now only on a superficial level, driven apart by back-to-back combat deployments and marking days until he goes back to war in [Iraq](#) next year.

"I haven't come home yet," admits Mark, 46, who during the past 10 years has spent a cumulative 36 months away in three separate tours. "I'm still in the war mode, and I don't know that I'm going to come out of it until I know I don't have any more war rotations to go back on."

"We've just become so comfortable in living separate lives," says Lynn, 49.

As the wars in [Iraq](#) and [Afghanistan](#) continue to demand long and multiple deployments of soldiers, the Army high command is focusing more attention on a tragic consequence to military families. Soldiers and their spouses are learning to live separate lives — the soldier at war, the spouse at home with the children — and it is becoming more difficult with each deployment to get back together.

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The Army's second in command, Vice Chief of Staff Gen. Peter Chiarelli, says he learned of this during a tour this year of six Army installations hit hard by deployments.

"Spouses were telling me that their husbands were not reintegrating with the family," Chiarelli testified before a House subcommittee Wednesday. "They just realized that that was too hard to do in the short period of time they had (before returning to war) and they would back off from the family, which creates the relationship problems."

The Army is scrambling to address the issue, providing more counselors to help couples address their marital issues, expanding a program run by chaplains that offers marital therapy retreats. In an interview Monday, Chiarelli said he was encouraged by a pilot program creating online counseling services for soldiers and their families.

A crucial goal is to lengthen the time soldiers spend at home between deployments, he says.

Still, many fear that the damage done to marriages is lasting.

"What families are dealing with are the cumulative effects of nearly eight years of war ... effects (that) are not easily reversed," Sheila Casey, wife of Army Chief of Staff Gen. George Casey, told a Senate subcommittee in June.

Army documents and interviews with military families identify why communication between a soldier and his wife break down and problems ensue.

Husbands acquire stoic "survivor" instincts at war — the ability to control their emotions, for example — and bring these skills home. Wives who become experts in living independently struggle to relinquish power.

A soldier's depression or combat stress can make matters much worse, according to research published in February in the *Journal of Clinical Psychology*.

Statistics are showing a trend in broken military marriages.

The Pentagon says divorce rates among enlisted soldiers and Marines increased to about 4% in 2008, a full percentage point jump from when the [Iraq war](#) began. The civilian rate is 3.5%, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Researchers tracking 226 Army marriages at Fort Campbell, Ky., last year, found that 6% ended in divorce and that nearly 12% of the couples either became divorced or separated, according to results provided to USA TODAY.

Troops in combat who worry their marriages might be failing rose from one in four in 2005 to one in three in 2007, according to an Army study published last year that examined mental health issues plaguing combat troops. More than 250,000 active-duty soldiers are married.

War and separation is historically hard on families. Researchers, though, say a key feature of the current conflicts — the same troops being sent back to combat over and over again, rather than serving one tour and coming home to stay — may be further aggravating marriages.

Each time they are separated, couples say, holding the family together gets tougher.

Carol Herrick, 39, works with family support groups at Fort Sill, Okla., and says she struggles to reassemble her family each time her husband, Donald, a sergeant first class, comes home. He has left for Iraq or Korea four times in eight years.

"The more we do it," she says, "the harder it gets."

'Is it really worth it?'

When Staff Sgt. Charlene King returned to Oregon last year after 15 months of training and fighting in Iraq, she and her husband, Karl, were virtual strangers.

His struggle to bring up four children by himself, a financial crisis that plunged them into bankruptcy and Charlene's frustrated efforts to manage affairs from Iraq left their marriage of 14 years in shambles, both say.

Only in recent months has the relationship slowly improved to where it is, they say, 70% back.

"You just don't talk about things that might lead to an argument, or that you're uncomfortable with," says Karl, 32. "Pretend (sensitive issues) don't exist. Probably not the healthiest way to function."

"Our marriage had gone from being really, really strong to really, really weak really fast," says Charlene, 31.

The family was living in tiny Carlton, Ore., south of Portland, but today lives in Redmond in the center of the state.

Despite the turmoil at home, Charlene says her war experience was a period of personal growth.

Married at 16, she led a cloistered life until she was called to active duty and sent to Iraq, she says. There, Charlene trained Iraqi soldiers in managing supplies and was promoted to staff sergeant. Her experience quickly won her a job as an operations manager with Pacific Power after she returned home.

Charlene says she now realizes that lives at home were changing as well.

In the months shortly after Charlene went to Iraq, Karl was overwhelmed with the children: William, 13, Elyana, 10, Shayna, 7, and Nathaniel, 3. He turned to antidepressants, he says.

With the help of in-laws who gave him an occasional break from the children, Karl says he learned to adjust to single parenting, developing a style less structured than Charlene's, allowing the kids more freedom to walk to school and spend more nights at friends' homes.

"(Charlene) gave up a lot of control and a lot of power," says Karl, before correcting himself. "It was more like I took it, instead of her giving it up."

Charlene returned to a family where her children turned to Karl for everything. "It drove me crazy, and it still does sometimes," she said.

Both concede there was resentment to overcome and a relationship to rebuild.

"You have to wonder, is it really worth it?" Karl says. "Is the other person going to think it's really worth it? I worried about that."

Charlene says she returned thinking, "I don't know how I'm going to live with these people," and admits there are still times when she needs to be by herself.

"With everyone around, she can sit there and read and be totally lost to the world," Karl says.

Both say the rebuilding is slow going, even after a year.

"We probably don't talk about what we're feeling as much as we used to," Charlene says.

'Working though this slowly'

The Army understands the difficulties families face in coming back together.

Through the war years, there has been an outpouring of PowerPoint briefings, videos, how-to guides, brochures, workshops, hotlines, informational fairs and counseling services, all aimed at getting couples help.

Soldiers sit through briefings filled with slogans such as: "Combat skills that made you a HERO in the war zone will create casualties and make you a ZERO in the home zone." A presentation on marital intimacy recommends "meaningful touches (not just sexual)" 10 to 12 times a day.

Installations are plastered with banners, signs and billboards urging soldiers to seek psychological help if they need it. Families say that sometimes they feel bombarded by all the information and very little of substance seeps through.

"There was so much out there," says Army Maj. Doug Wekell, who is based at Fort Lewis, Wash., and is struggling to rejoin his family after a difficult Iraq tour. "It was almost like an information overload."

Families don't need more programs, says Barbara Thompson, head of the Pentagon office of Family Policy/Children and Youth. They need access and knowledge about those that work.

Two key efforts, endorsed by the National Military Family Association, are family counseling services such as Military OneSource (800-342-9647) and relationship-building weekend retreats run by chaplains — an Army program called Strong Bonds (www.strongbonds.org).

Researchers tracking 472 Army couples who attended a version of Strong Bonds called Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program found that it reduced divorce rates.

Among those couples who did not attend the weekend retreats, 6.2% got divorced within a year. Among those couples who did, only 2.03% of the marriages broke up during the next year, says Scott Stanley, a professor at the [University of Denver](http://www.denver.edu).

Sometimes families simply don't know to ask for these services, says Kathleen Moakler of the military family association.

When the association created its own pilot program for two weekends of family counseling this year and directly approached families with the idea, they received 400 applications for 40 slots, the association says. Some servicemembers even signed up from Iraq before coming home.

Wekell, 42, and his wife, Tina, 45, tried to attend with their children Alex, 15, and Lilly, 13. Doug and Tina say they liked the idea of trying to heal their problems at a retreat with other military families. They didn't get in.

It has been nearly two years since Doug finished his third combat deployment — a 15-month tour in Iraq setting up aid stations — and he says he still feels like "a guest or tourist" in his own home.

"You feel like, well, I'm going to be leaving for something eventually anyway. So I'll just let her (Tina) make the decisions and not get too involved," he says.

With each passing month, Tina says she grows weary of Doug's absence in helping with Alex's attention deficit disorder or Lilly's problems with not eating enough to keep her weight up.

"We're working through this slowly, him coming home," she says.

Better from a distance

Near the front door of their Spanish-style military housing duplex on Moffett Federal Air Field here in Mountain View, the Flittons have a collage of happy pre-war family photos: Scott and Nicole skiing or on roller coasters with their father; a smiling portrait of Mark and Lynn.

Lynn says she feels "a loss when I look at those pictures."

Now Mark seems more distant, Lynn says, noting his periods of depression, his sleeping on the couch downstairs and the weekends that pass without their going out on a husband-and-wife date.

Part of her, she concedes, nearly looks forward to her husband going back to war. This makes her feel very guilty. Yet, when he leaves for Iraq or Afghanistan, she will hear "I love you" over the static of an overseas line and a sense of intimacy will return to their relationship, Lynn says.

Mark is a psychological operations or "psyop" officer, and company commander, who disseminates information on the battlefield to try to win hearts and minds of citizens and demoralize the enemy. He served nine months in Bosnia from 1997 to 1998, 15 months in Iraq from 2005 and 2006 and a year in Afghanistan from 2007 to 2008.

He's slated to return to Iraq next year. Even Mark says life is less complicated when he goes.

"You don't have to deal with the gas and the power (bills), and the kids, and the driving back and forth, and the school calling you up because the kids are late, and the paper work and all the hustle and bustle," he says.

"What we do (in war) is clean. You get up, fight the war and go to bed."

"We had a good relationship on the phone," Lynn says. "I guess it was safe. He seemed a little more interested in what I was saying. ... I just have to hang on for another eight or nine months, and I'll be alone for another year."

She says she hates feeling that way. And it does nothing for the children, who also are struggling to reconnect with their father. Scott, at 15, says his dad still seems to treat him like the 12-year-old he was before the last combat tour.

He says he loves his father and is proud of his military service but feels distant from him and often finds it easier to just leave the house and go skateboarding. "I'm never around here," Scott says.

On a recent Sunday, before his father left on a trip, Scott suddenly threw his arms around his dad and hugged. "I didn't know what to do," Mark says.

Father and son had shed that kind physical affection one or two combat tours ago. "I lost that connection," Mark concedes.

With his father out of earshot, Scott admits he wouldn't mind getting affection in return.

"Kisses ... make me feel awkward," he says. "But hugs would be OK."

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