

DATING THE WAR:

The "Force" Behind the Force



BY HAYLEY M. GABLE

VALENTINES DAY – 19 year-old Christina Holt, who has been in a healthy, happy relationship with her boyfriend for just over one year, remembers exactly what she did that evening: “I ate leftovers and watched the weekly news report by myself,” she recalled. So on a night where most couples are out celebrating their relationship with flowers, chocolate and fancy feasts, why was Christina alone, snacking on leftovers and carefully watching the news?

Christina’s boyfriend, 24 year-old Andrew Trenton of Fort Worth, Texas is currently stationed in Iraq for a 12 month deployment. He left in June 2006 after meeting Christina for the very first time just weeks before. Of the ten months they’ve been dating, only one of those months they have spent together. The other nine months, he’s been thousands of miles away, fighting in Iraq.

With the War’s recent four year-anniversary, relationships like Christina and Andrew’s are becoming increasingly common. Oversea deployments, which are bound to happen to nearly every soldier currently serving in the U.S. armed forces, test the strength and endurance of every relationship it affects. And while there’s no doubt that the men and women fighting overseas definitely face all kinds of challenges every day, what about the significant others of these soldiers? The “challenges” these girlfriends face may not be anything like those that occur overseas, but it is true that they are responsible for holding the relationship together by doing whatever it takes – writing letters, putting together “care packages”, being available for middle-of-the-night phone calls, as well as other various acts.

“There are so many aspects of dealing with deployment that are difficult – loneliness, constant worry about your loved one, safety, and even guilt about living your life while someone you love is in harm’s way,” explained Jessica Redmond, author of *A Year of Absence: Six Women’s Stories of Courage, Hope, and Love*. “But above all, it is the uncertainty that eats away at people on the home front. There is uncertainty about when the soldier is coming home, if the soldier is coming home, how the soldier will be changed by his experiences, how the relationship will be changed in the time apart, and on and on,” she said. “Dealing with that uncertainty is a stress that never subsides for a moment – along with all the other stressors of having a loved one

in a war zone, it takes a huge toll". Christina agrees, adding that "the hardest thing is the not knowing. Not knowing the day he comes home, the day I can expect a phone call or even if he's sick or injured, dead or alive."

What many are generally curious about when it comes to these kinds of relationships is how they work: is it even possible for a relationship to be successful when put in this situation? Because the couple is not married, the challenges that come along with a war deployment are difficult – especially for the young women left behind. Women ultimately choose to stay with their boyfriends because they whole-heartedly believe a better future awaits them. But there are many risks that come along with these deployments; and unfortunately, the longer the deployment – the greater those risks become.

One major challenge for such couples separated by war is keeping the romance alive during long periods of no communication. The interest in the relationship that was once there can easily be lost as other distractions become part of life. For younger women, these distractions can be anything - school, a new job, social events or even meeting somebody new. Because marriage is not bonding the couple together, some women simply do not take the relationship as seriously. However, that's far from the end of these complications. "There's always that one, dark thought in the back of my mind that he'll come back a different person and won't want anything to do with me," Christina stated. "I've read about it happening before – it's scary."

Consider the relationship of Dianne Jacobs and Mark Bryant of Phoenix, Arizona. "We met in high school but didn't begin dating seriously until my freshman year of college," stated Dianne. "Once we found out about his 8-month deployment, we were forced to sit down and talk about how serious we were with each other - because at our age, 8 months makes a big difference," she said. Before Mark left for his deployment, the couple became engaged.

"The deployment was long and often confusing. Communication between us was very strange for that 8-month period. Sometimes he would call once a week, sometimes every other week, other times twice in the same week – it was very random," she added. "But the truth was I had no idea what to expect when he came home, and that really scared me". In order to prepare

herself for Mark's long awaited homecoming, Dianne read books, kept a journal, and joined online support groups.

However, once Dianne's boyfriend returned in January 2007 it seemed another curveball was thrown at their relationship. "I definitely noticed a change within the first month," she said of her boyfriend. "He showed signs of depression and anxiety, didn't talk much at all about his experiences, hardly slept at all – I was really worried not just for him but for us also."

Mark certainly is not alone in his post-war troubles; the Associated Press reports that 30 percent of U.S. troops returning from the war in Iraq have developed stress-related mental health problems three to four months after coming home. For girlfriends in this situation like Dianne, the weight of the challenge becomes significantly heavier. "I am doing everything I can to be there for him. I recently I took off a few days of class because he wanted me to be with him while he met with his counselor."

Dianne and Christina both openly admit that keeping up with the news had become a big part of their lives during their boyfriends' deployments. "I am always watching the news or reading things online," said Christina. "But sometimes it's hard because all the news will report is that 'five soldiers died in Iraq' and that will be it because they can't release names before next of kin is informed. It's a horrible feeling."

Although keeping up with the news when a loved one is overseas often feels like it creates a temporary closeness, Redmond warns that too much of it is not necessarily a good thing. "It is essential to not become fixated on the news," she remarked. "Some women find that they do better when they cut themselves off totally from the news in Iraq and Afghanistan, while others feel compelled to stay informed. Early in my own husband's deployment, I checked CNN obsessively, agonizing over each report of an attack in an area my husband might have been in. I quickly learned that the repeated exposure to such traumatizing images was doing nothing but make me even more on edge than I already was – so I made a conscious decision to tune a lot of it out."

With so many hardships to bear, is it even possible to make it through a loved one's deployment without being too emotionally burnt? Although the worry and stress are inevitable, the

ways in which you choose to deal with it are not. What exactly is the best way to get through the deployment of a loved one? “First, find ways to communicate effectively with your soldier. Agree in advance on what kind of communication the two of you want to maintain during the deployment and make sure you keep those lines of communication open,” stated Redmond.

“Secondly, live your life. Many of those left on the home front fall into the trap of putting their own life on hold while their loved one is deployed. This only makes the already long separation seem longer, as well as compounding the feelings of loneliness, fear, and even resentment that are natural during deployment. Finding positive ways to fill your time during the deployment and sharing those experiences with the soldier will help you get through the long separation and will also help your loved one worry less about what his deployment is doing to you.”

Clearly, the most rewarding part of the deployment is the end – the ‘homecoming’. Christina, who is counting the days until her boyfriend arrives home, is ecstatic about spending time with him and catching up on lost time. “I feel like once I see him again, all this stress and craziness will have been completely worth it,” she said. However, some homecomings, such as Dianne’s, aren’t as glamorous as most hope they will be. “The kind of reunion a couple has depends entirely on what kind of couple they were prior to the deployment, how they each dealt with the stress of the separation, what kind of communication they were able to maintain, and the degree to which their goals for their reunion are realistic and in sync,” explained Redmond.

The thousands of women who dedicate much of their time and energy to these men should not be known simply as any other wife or girlfriend; but as patriots for America in how they act as the force behind the force. Christina, Dianne and Jessica are just three of the many women who survive off of the hope they have for their future and the love they have for their significant other. “If I had to do this whole deployment over again, I’d still do it with a smile on my face,” said Christina. “Just to show him that I’m not going anywhere.”