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Dallas-Fort Worth program helps military families cope

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Brooke Knox, a former Navy wife, counsels military relatives who are struggling with the repeated deployments of husbands and fathers, wives and mothers.

There's often one unifying refrain -- one deployment too many to handle well. She has found that often, that number is three.

"There's a saying among Army wives," said Knox, who leads a free counseling program for military families through the Mental Health Association of Tarrant County.

"The first deployment, they say, 'I think I can do this.'

"The second deployment, they say, 'I know I can do this.'

"The third deployment, they say, 'I can't do this.'"

It's hard to know, at this point, what precipitated the recent arrest of the principal of a Fort Worth middle school, except that police say she left her two young children sleeping in a Dallas hotel room, tried to go to a nightclub and then fought with a bouncer and police.

But mental-health experts who work in the realm of battle-hardened troops and their often-stressed families noticed one fact in the news coverage of her arrest: Carla Westbrook-Spaniel's husband was on his third yearlong tour to a combat zone in about six years.

No one outside Westbrook-Spaniel's family or close friends can explain her behavior and whether his military service had a bearing on her actions. But Anthony M. Hassan, director of the Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans and Military Families at the University of Southern California, said the Spaniels' life could easily have been "overwhelming."

"The family is having to cope with many issues -- single parenting, role changes, role ambiguity, instability for the children, perhaps a loss of income, child adjustment issues, marital challenges, deployment stress, reintegration stress," said Hassan, a retired Air Force mental health counselor. "Not to mention, the mother is a career person with major responsibilities at work."

The arrest and aftermath

Westbrook-Spaniel, 44, principal of J.P. Elder Middle School for the last four years, was arrested about 1:30 a.m. May 9 in downtown Dallas. Authorities say she punched a bouncer who refused to admit her to a nightclub, then scuffled with police, who later discovered that her 3- and 4-year-old children were alone in a room at the Adolphus hotel.

The children were picked up by her in-laws, but Westbrook-Spaniel was not released from jail on bail until Friday, five days after her arrest.

Her husband, Capt. Keith Spaniel, deployed to Iraq last summer with an Army Reserve civil affairs unit out of Oklahoma, even though he belongs to the 490th Civil Affairs Battalion in Grand Prairie. As former residents of Oklahoma, Spaniel belonged to the Oklahoma unit until fairly recently.

It was his third tour overseas -- two to Iraq, one to Afghanistan -- since the mid-2000s. Before he deployed in August 2009 to Iraq, he had spent all of 2008 in the Gardez province of Afghanistan.

The civil-affairs community belongs almost entirely to the Army Reserve because those units are tasked with helping rebuild after a war, skill sets that active-duty units typically don't have in abundance.

"We're short civil-affairs officers," said Lt. Col. Kelly Broome, the commander of Spaniel's unit. "And Keith has energy sector experience, so he serves a critical role in helping the Iraqis establish an energy program."

Spaniel arrived in North Texas last weekend on emergency leave and may not return to Iraq to finish his scheduled deployment, Broome said.

"It's my intention to keep him home for the rest of his activation," he said.

Since the incident, Westbrook-Spaniel has been on administrative leave from her job with the Fort Worth school district. On Thursday, Dallas police filed two cases with the district attorney's office for abandonment of a child with the intent to return, a state jail felony. The

cases will now go before a Dallas County grand jury.

Without commenting on what she might have been experiencing, Broome said that Westbrook-Spaniel helped organize some of the unit's family day in December while her husband was gone.

"She's bright, articulate, caring and highly educated," he said. "What happened isn't in keeping with her character, in my experience."

Stress on the home front

Seeing a spouse off to war is often compared to being a single parent, and to some degree, that's true.

Every wakeup, every bedtime, every tantrum, discipline, mess, broken dishwasher, flat tire, monthly bill, soccer practice and science fair falls to the spouse at home, day after day, month after month.

Then mix in additional anger or sadness from children who don't understand their father's absence -- again, perhaps -- and the ever-present fear of becoming a widow.

Melissa Hermsillo, a Grapevine native who has been married to an active-duty soldier for 14 years, has made it through two yearlong deployments with two children. It's not all bad, she said, but it can feel like it sometimes.

"There are days when you get frustrated and you think, 'I can't do this anymore. When is this going to end?'" said Hermsillo, whose husband is stationed at Fort Bliss in El Paso. "That's when you call in your friends, your support system, and you vent. You can be mad, but for us spouses of career soldiers, truthfully, it won't end until they retire."

Broome, a veteran of six overseas deployments, including two to Iraq and one to Afghanistan, said often the stress is worse for the families in the U.S. than for the soldiers in the combat zone.

"The serviceman knows where he stands," he said. "He knows whether he's safe or in harm's way on any given day. But the family member is always waiting for the other shoe to drop. It's challenging. We focus pretty well on preparing our soldiers. But we're only now getting better at helping family members."

A report earlier this year in the *New England Journal of Medicine* concluded that Army wives whose husbands deployed for long periods were more likely to be diagnosed with depression, anxiety and adjustment disorders than wives whose husbands haven't deployed.

The study investigators compared the rates of mental-health diagnoses and use of mental-health services by looking at a sampling of about 250,000 Army wives and comparing them with their husbands' service.

But that study shed no light on wives who never sought mental-health services at all; nor did it look at the impact on reserve and National Guard families.

What makes the issue more complicated in Dallas-Fort Worth is the relative isolation of military families, compared with places such as Fort Hood or Camp Pendleton, where there are thousands of spouses, families and retirees who know what lengthy deployments are like.

In a reserve unit, the officers and senior enlisted personnel, in particular, can live hundreds of miles away from each other. The spouses tend to be unfamiliar with one another because of that separation.

Case in point: Broome, the unit's commander, lives in San Antonio.

"Here everyone is spread out, and there just aren't those natural support systems," Knox said. "The physical distance makes it really hard to get the spouses together and have regular support."

Fighting a stigma

To confide in the unit's leadership that you need help coping is not only an admission of weakness for many spouses, Knox said, it is also perceived as potentially detrimental to the spouse's military career.

"Officers' wives are not supposed to need help," she said. "That's a huge barrier."

The go-it-alone attitude among many spouses, not a lack of help from the Army, is often the biggest obstacle, Knox said.

She said free counseling is available to any relative through her program, which is called Operation Healthy Reunions, as well as the military's One Source hot line. She said the Army is trying to eliminate the stigma associated with asking for help, but that's proving to be a hard sell to soldiers and their spouses.

"For some it's an issue of pride -- 'I can do this. We military spouses are made of tougher stuff,'" she said. "That attitude contributes to the reluctance to seek support. I don't feel people are slipping through the cracks because there isn't any way to help them. It's because

they're not asking for help."

The military culture also makes it clear to spouses that they are not to complain about anything to their spouses overseas because often there is nothing they can do about it and because, it is said, worrying about home can distract them from their mission.

Hermosillo, whose husband was wounded by a roadside bomb on his second tour, though not seriously enough to return stateside, said she struggled hugely with his absence at the time. When he returned, she questioned him about whether it was worth it.

When he said yes, she immersed herself even further in working with families to help them through difficult times, recognizing that they would not go away anytime soon.

"We want to empower families to make the choice to ask for help, rather than us becoming a rescuer," she said. "I see the benefits and values of using the resources the Army has given us. For me, it's been a big difference-maker. I chose."

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