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Stress of separation takes its toll on military families

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One in an occasional series Story by DAVID TARRANT Photography by SONYA N. HEBERT / The Dallas Morning News

Russell and Erin Miller met while deployed in [Iraq](#) in 2005 and discovered a shared passion for Dungeons and Dragons. Their interest in the popular role-playing game led to their marriage and settling down in Rice, 45 miles southeast of Dallas.

The husband and wife, both in the Texas Army [National Guard](#), now have new roles: Erin, 28, as a soldier deployed to [Afghanistan](#); Russell, 30, as a stay-at-home dad with 2-year-old daughter Abby.

How their marriage fares during Erin's 12-month deployment is a question of keen personal interest to the Millers – as well as a matter of urgent national security.

Two wars and multiple deployments have caused enormous strains within the ranks, contributing to a rising military divorce rate that is outpacing the civilian divorce rate, as well as a sharp increase in mental health problems.

While e-mail and video chats have made it easier for couples to stay in touch, the dangers of war can wear down the feelings of intimacy and togetherness that keep marital bonds strong. "It's all on you," said Russell. "You have to make so many decisions, and you don't get to bounce ideas off each other. And even when you do talk, you lose a lot of personal connection in the conversation."

In response to the strain on families, the [Pentagon](#) has increased spending to a record \$9 billion on family support programs, including more for child-care services and family counseling.

"Military families are stressed – really, really, really stressed," said Dr. Benjamin Karney, a professor of social psychology at [UCLA](#) who has studied military marriages for the Rand Corp., a California think tank that often does studies for the military.

For citizen soldiers like the Millers, the needs are greater than ever. Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, 787,000 Guard members and reservists have been called to active duty, the most since [World War II](#). A half-million have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan – and 200,000 have served multiple tours. Nearly 100,000 Guard members and reservists are currently serving on active duty.

Members of the nation's reserve component leave behind careers and families. Their spouses and children do not have a built-in support structure, as full-time active duty service members who live on military installations do. But outside the military community, few Americans realize the sacrifices made by these families.

More than 50 percent of military personnel are married, and 70 percent have children. The divorce rate for active-duty military personnel has risen from 2.6 percent in 2001 to 3.6 percent in 2009, when there were an estimated 50,000 military divorces, the Pentagon reported. That's slightly higher than the civilian divorce rate of 3.4

percent.

The Pentagon's divorce records don't tell the whole story because they leave out the National Guard and reservists. The overall percentage of Guard members and reservists who are married has decreased from 53 percent in 2001 to 48 percent in 2008, according to other military records.

The Pentagon also doesn't account for soldiers who get divorced a year or two after leaving the military, Karney said. And divorce rates aren't the only indicator that marriages are in trouble. It's not unusual for estranged couples in the military to remain married to continue receiving higher housing payments. In addition, a civilian spouse who divorces a service member loses his or her military health coverage.

Meanwhile, combat veterans are at an increased risk of marital problems, according to studies. The rate of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has increased almost sixfold from 2003 to 2008, according to the [Defense Department's](#) Medical Surveillance report issued in November.

Couples dealing with post-combat stress go through a period of trying to make their relationships work. "And this will serve to depress divorce in the short term. The problem is that families might not be able to sustain this [work on their relationship] over the long term," Karney said.

His research found that military women have the harder time staying married. Divorce rates are two to three times higher for female service members than for men. The highest divorce rate occurs with military women married to civilian men.

One possible reason is that there are fewer role models for stay-at-home dads. "There are very few movies about the loyal, stay-at-home husband of a female soldier," Karney said. "The support available in the military to the stay-at-home spouse is geared toward women."

Sergeant Dad

Russell Miller, a sergeant with 10 years in the Guard, is used to playing the role of the loyal, stay-at-home husband. After Abby was born, Erin went back to work full time as a paralegal for the Guard. Russell quit his telecom job installing fiber optic cables to stay home with Abby. He also took online courses to complete a bachelor's degree in history. "It's been the greatest time of my life ... watching Abby grow up and bonding with her," Russell said.

At times, he's felt like the odd man out. During one of the Guard's Yellow Ribbon events for spouses of deploying soldiers this summer, Russell met only one other stay-at-home dad. That man's wife also was headed to Afghanistan, but not with Erin's group.

Erin, a staff sergeant and an eight-year veteran of the Guard, is assigned to the headquarters company of the 176th Engineer Brigade. The brigade held its farewell ceremony at TCU before deploying in July.

Before the ceremony, Erin and Russell watched as their petite, sandy-haired Abby scampered around the tiled walkway encircling the arena. Erin wore her camouflage combat uniform. Russell leaned against a wall in his brown cowboy boots, faded jeans and a red T-shirt inscribed with the words "Proud Army Family," issued by the 176th's family readiness group.

Erin tried not to think about her impending departure. "Otherwise, you have a meltdown," she said. She did not want to cry in front of Abby. "She's not going to understand if I cry."

Abby bounced up and down in her new cherry-red cowboy boots, staring at them with delight. "We went to three or four stores looking for just the right boots," Erin said.

Abby took off down the hallway, and Russell chased after. When they returned, Abby held a book she'd been given

at a table staffed by the family readiness group. It was a new version of *Over There* for preschool children of deployed parents. "Oh, they finally have the Mommy version!" Erin said. "We have the Daddy version."

The next morning, several buses waited at a hotel to take Erin and her fellow soldiers to the airport. Erin's unit was scheduled to fly to [Wisconsin](#) for eight weeks of training before heading to Afghanistan.

Standing near the entrance, her eyes welling up, Erin held Abby tightly and buried her face in her daughter's hair. At last, she gave Abby back to her husband, turned and quickly walked toward the buses, wiping away tears.

"Mama, mama," said Abby, reaching out toward Erin. In her other hand, she clutched a baby bottle.

"Mama going bye-bye," said Russell, his voice thick with emotion as he softly bounced her in his arms.

Left behind

Russell and Abby made the five-hour drive back to Santa Fe, Texas, a small town near [Galveston](#) where he grew up and his parents still live. He and Abby have lived with his parents since then. Russell visited Erin briefly in Wisconsin before she left for Afghanistan. He also attends training one weekend a month with his Army National Guard unit in Waxahachie. When he's away, his parents take care of Abby.

Even with good support at home, the first four months of Erin's deployment weren't easy for Russell. He became moody and depressed. The problem started after he tried to quit smoking. He took a prescription for Wellbutrin, an antidepressant also used to quit smoking. He began to feel intense anxiety and paranoia.

"I thought I was having a hard time with Erin's deployment," he said.

He became preoccupied with negative thoughts, worrying about Erin getting hurt or if she was going to divorce him. "We all have thoughts about worst-case scenarios, but I couldn't use logic to counter those daydreams," he said. "I couldn't emotionally detach." He tried ignoring the feelings but felt "needy and emotionally unstable," he said.

Russell and Erin talked every day, mostly via military phone lines or [Skype](#). "This wasn't the person I left for deployment. [He was] a little emotionally insecure," she said.

In November, Erin returned to Texas for two weeks of R&R. Russell had stopped taking the medication because of the side effects. His mood improved, but he slipped back to smoking. Erin put a stop to that.

In Afghanistan, she quit smoking with the help of a "quitters' club" she joined. She gave Russell fair warning. "I told him, 'I'm not a smoker anymore, and I don't want you to be a smoker, either.' "

The couple attended several pre-deployment Yellow Ribbon events. Topics included managing stress and anger, and learning how to talk about personal problems that can drive a wedge between couples.

When Erin visited in November, Russell felt they weren't in sync. He brought it up with her. "It was awkward at first, and we were just getting used to being around each other again," he said. "So we talked about it."

He and Erin are on the same page about one thing – that it's easier to be the one who deploys than the one who stays home. Her schedule revolves around work, exercise (she lost 10 pounds her first three months overseas) and socializing. She helped organize a knitting club for other female soldiers. She's already knitted scarves and hats for Russell, Abby and several friends.

Her routine also helps with homesickness. When the Internet is working, she can see and talk to Abby using a Web camera. But such moments have proved bittersweet, Erin said. "You get used to not seeing her, and then it's harder when you do, because you realize how much she's changed."

Something special

Russell and Abby are not scheduled to see Erin until her deployment ends sometime in June. By then, Russell will be nearly finished with his studies. He also plans to work on their house in Rice, in preparation for moving back when Erin returns.

Most days find him parked in a recliner in his parents' spacious living room. He studies on his laptop while keeping an eye on Abby as she plays on her rocking horse or watches *Ponyo* and [Sesame Street](#), her favorite programs.

Russell tries not to look too far ahead. "If you look at it as one big chunk of time, it's self-defeating," he said.

Still, he's a little worried. "It's been a hard four months, and I've seen [Erin] twice. We'll make it to Christmas and then to New Year's and then the next milestone," he said.

Erin will probably be working on Christmas Day, so she has planned ahead to do something special for Abby. She got her daughter a special copy of *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*, one with a built-in tape recorder that allowed Erin to record herself reading the classic.

She said, "I don't want her to forget my voice."

dtarrant@dallasnews.com

shebert@dallasnews.com