

Why Military Love Relationships Are Different

*By Alison Lighthall, RN, MS
Founder, HAND2HAND CONTACT*

Anyone who considers getting seriously involved with a member of the military may wonder what he or she is getting into. With deployments to war zones becoming a near certainty for Service Members, the stakes for those who love them are higher than ever.

When someone asks me whether he or she should pursue getting more deeply involved with a Reserve, National Guard, or Active Duty member of the Armed Forces, I offer this advice:

- Start by becoming well-versed in military life; learn everything you can about the values, culture, and language of those who serve. Familiarize yourself with the Warrior Ethos, military training, and deployment. Learn why Family Readiness Groups are so critical to military couples. In short, enter into this relationship understanding your Service Member's world as best you can;
- Since this is a way of life--a very different way of life--it's critically important to become familiar with military family life, as well. Read "While They're at War: The True Stories of American Families on the Homefront," or "Under the Sabers: The Unwritten Code of Army Wives," among other books. Rent DVDs of the TV show, *The Unit* (it does a fairly good job replicating military family life, even though their heroes are members of the elite Delta Force.) These can help engender a deep respect for the sacrifices that Service Members and their families have to make every day;
- It's important to be brutally honest with yourself and each other about what may lie ahead. Enter into this relationship with the understanding that the time WILL come to be apart, probably for a year at a time, and it will almost certainly happen more than once. Separation between spouses is a way of life in today's military. A military couple cannot go into a life together viewing the deployments or training as a temporary or occasional problem to be dealt with if the time comes. It requires a great deal of strength to have your loved one away for a year or more, especially under such stressful circumstances. It's essential that each person has a wide range of resources to call upon during those times;
- If you have a strong need to feel safe and secure, and/or your need for sexual intimacy is quite high, then the demands of training and deployments will place tremendous strain on you. If, however, you have a high degree of integrity, strength, courage, and resourcefulness, (or you want to become the kind of person who demonstrates these qualities,) then the sacrifices you will have to make to keep your relationship healthy will be entirely manageable.

- One caveat: cheating on a deployed Service Member can not only break his or her heart, but can get him or her--or their buddies--killed. A deeply distressed Soldier in combat is an unfocused Soldier, and an unfocused Soldier is at serious risk of injury or death. He or she cannot do the job the way they must in order to stay safe. So if you cannot do this--cannot handle the stress of war and the strain of separation--don't lie to yourself about it. Too much is at stake. If you do commit to the relationship, commit with your whole heart, body, and soul.

This is not macho-gung-ho-military-tough-guy BS. It really *is* this hard. But men and women in the military understand discipline, strength, and loyalty at a core level that is rarely seen anywhere else, and that makes them some of the most reliable, committed, interesting, and grounded people you'll find anywhere.

Take the time to learn what "I Will Never Leave A Fallen Comrade" really means to a military team. Learn how bad a "charlie foxtrot" really is. Push your own physical limits by getting in phenomenal physical condition, so that you can appreciate the intensity and hard work that goes into the level of fitness required by the military.

Then sit in meditation or prayer and ask yourself if you are truly ready to make this commitment—to your partner and your country.