

The Home Fires Are Out

Chelsie O'Neill

When their loved one is sent to war overseas, many spouses and family members often struggle to keep their attitudes positive and fully supportive. However, with the current war on terror in Iraq and Afghanistan, divorce rates among deployed soldiers are increasing; strong family ties become so frayed that they are, in many cases, damaged beyond repair. In the narratives of soldiers and their family members in *Operation Homecoming*, we see first-hand that, although sometimes the folks left behind can keep the home fires burning, in many cases the stresses of war puts that flame out for good.

One of the hardest challenges in a woman's life would be to stay faithful and fully supportive of her husband away at war. In Kari Apted's email to her husband, she shows how much of a struggle it can be. She has a very tough time getting through despite the love she has for her husband. She writes to him, "The struggle between my will and our reality has never been more apparent or more challenging than it has been this year" (193). Apted is not angry or resentful at her husband-- she knows that he would have chosen not to go to war-- but she is still angry: "The best-laid plans I had for this year were all blown to bits by the plan that someone else had for us; leaving us with absolutely no choice but to submit to a situation we opposed with every ounce of our beings" (193). Apted shows that she is emotionally distressed and very lonely: "But as I know you are experiencing as well, you can feel totally alone even in the largest crowd. Sometimes I feel even more alone in those moments than in times that I truly am alone" (193). Apted's friends recommend that she look to God, but it doesn't help as much as she would like: "Everyone says to let God fill the newly empty places inside me and I try so hard to let him. But a nebulous concept like the presence of God doesn't fix the car when it breaks, doesn't hold sick children at 3:00 a.m. who miss their daddy, doesn't kiss the soft part of my neck when it literally aches for the touch of your lips" (193). Although Apted's marriage was apparently able to bear the burden of war, it was clearly threatened each and every day her husband was away.

Not only wives but also the parents of soldiers often have a hard time keeping a positive attitude. In the letter by Pamela Clemens, we see how much hardship a deployed soldier's family as a whole goes through. Clemens had been watching the news and learned that there were POWs taken from a unit that was with the 3rd ID, her husband's outfit. She realized with horror that her husband could be one of those POWs. Her heart sank. "I thought I was going to die. I thought it was you. I was so scared. I did not know what to do, what to think. I just stood there not knowing what to do. Jason it was horrible. I was so scared. I can't even begin to describe what I felt to you in words. My whole body was screaming on the inside. I don't ever want to relive those feelings again. It was awful" (195). Clemens' father-in-law also saw the clip and called her: "We both sat on the phone and cried" (195). Clemens and her father-in-law are both falling apart with the anguish and strain of uncertainty as to Jason's fate. Luckily it turned out that Jason Clemens was not among the POWs taken, but Clemens realizes she may not have been so lucky: "I was so relieved, but my chest still hurt for the families of those who were captured. I feel so guilty because I was glad it was not you" (195-96). Without such a strong family support network, the Clemens' marriage and family life may not have had a happy ending.

Although the stories of Kari Apted and Pam Clemens are heartwarming, others stories are less so. They are more painful and distressing. The following analyses show graphically how war deployments can tear down a family.

In the personal narrative by Tammy Enz, one sees how terrible can be the pain of being left behind by a spouse at war can be and how easily the foundations of a marriage can crumble under the strain. Enz's husband was deployed to Iraq for one year, leaving her alone with the children. Enz felt empty and lost: "My breaths stop as I strain to hear my babies breathing across the hallway. I reach across the mattress, fumbling to seek solace in the lifeless folds of cotton. He's not here" (324). To her, the house is no longer a home. She has her children, but still something essential is missing: her husband. She is so stressed and angered by her husband's absence that she couldn't even manage to play ball with her son. "*This is dad's job I don't have time for this.* I tossed the ball into his glove. It rolled out and thudded to the ground. Dammit. You're not trying! He looked at his dirty, naked toes. I know my words stung him. I kicked the bat and walked away rubbing the hard lines in my forehead—those deep unrelenting creases that will remind me of this for life" (Enz 325). Even when her husband calls, it only makes her more furious. "He'll speak of his camp in the desert and call it home. He's been there less than a year. But through the static and the three-second delay in the conversation, he says home like he's always been there. *That isn't home, I want to scream*" (325). Enz had turned into a different person than she was before the deployment. "I can't bear what I have become" (325). She couldn't sleep or eat. She is so depressed she started self-medicating with alcohol. "I used to sip the bubbles off the top of his beer bottle when we sat together on the porch watching the children chase fireflies. That was a different time. Now I need something harder, something that cuts a little deeper. I don't sip, I slam a glass of whiskey, feeling it trace a lukewarm path inside me. I pace" (324-25). Enz speaks of her family now in the past tense. "We were the smiling family on the wall" (325). She wants to be able to think that when her husband comes home that things will go back to normal, but she fears that it won't happen. She has changed and so has her husband, who sleeps every night with his M-16 rifle—a possible sign of PTSD. She wonders if her husband would be able to see the change in her if and when he returns: "At night he reaches out in his sleep. His fingers seek comfort in the darkness. Will he notice the difference?" (325).

Another case of a family being pulled apart by war is contained in the personal narrative written by Kathleen Furin. She is the older sister to a soldier. She does not believe the war he chose to fight in is a just or necessary war, but she tries to support her brother in the things he had to do. "I worried for you even though we still weren't close, not close in any real way. I loved you through loving your family: your wife, your daughter, later your son" (198). Despite her new found devotion to her brother, she clearly disapproves of how he has changed. He has become very racist and has stopped getting pizza from their favorite place because of its ownership. "I remember thinking you were a total asshole because you stopped getting pizza from our usual place; it was owned by Arabs. "A-rabs' as you would say" (Furin 198). Also, she feels that he is selfish and insensitive. Before his departure, his wife had asked him to make a DVD of himself so she could show their kids; he refused: "I'm not making a death video" (199). When she saw the tears in her sister-in-law's eyes, Furin realized how much her brother was changing for the worse. Furin only received two emails from her brother while he was away. When she asked his wife why the family hadn't heard from him, his wife told her that he wasn't always able to get online. Furin comments, "I know that's not true, because you pop up sometimes on my buddy list" (200). Furin can barely suppress her anger: "And what do we do now, other than wait? I was vehemently opposed to the war in Iraq, still think it was a huge mistake. I can't watch the news, and when it comes up on AOL or whatever, one hundred dead in a car bomb in Baghdad, I can't read it. I just shut my eyes and hope" (199). Furin is also angry because she believes that most Americans could not care less about the soldiers fighting this war or their families, unlike during WWII and Vietnam, "This war hasn't *gripped* us, hasn't absorbed us like the other conflicts did" (199). Although Furin loves her brother, it's easy to see how his deployment might lead to their estrangement.

It is not uncommon for families to bicker over money, but the combination of financial stress and a war deployment drove a major wedge between Ruth Mostek and her soldier son, Hiram. When her son left for war, he put her in charge of the finances for his small business. Mostek soon began arguing with her son over the bills: "I had paid his business insurance that was in danger of being cancelled. He said if I had not done that he would have enough money in his account. We started blaming each other. I began to think perhaps 'going off to war' should be a total break from his parents, like in the old days" (223). At first Mostek tried to be understanding and blamed his behavior on stress of being constantly in harm's way, but soon she loses patience and the feud in

this family escalates. Her son came to visit Mostek on a leave, yet they couldn't manage to avoid quarrelling: "I laid out everything that's been bothering me about his asking me to pay his bills, then demanding when and how they be paid and the many overdraft fees. The first thing he said was, 'Maybe it's because I'm in a war, you know?!' and 'All of the financial stuff is unimportant. What does it matter? I might not come back--this may be the last time you ever see me'" (224-25). Her son did come back in mid-November, and on December 15th was married. Mostek observes dryly: "I wasn't invited to the wedding" (225). We see here that even a mother's love--the strongest love of all--can be undermined by a war deployment.

As the editor of *Operation Homecoming* notes,

No matter how frequently they communicate by email, letters, or phone calls during their separation, deployed service members and their loved ones recognize that the dynamic of their relationship is likely to change while they are thousands of miles apart. And the question, for many, becomes how significant and lasting will these differences be once they are reunited? (Carroll 324).

War deployment invariably changes those who endure it--both soldiers and their families. It makes all relationships unstable. Lonely and overwhelmed spouses fear that they will become one part of the divorce statistics; soldiers fear that they will be stigmatized, that their family members will never speak to them again. In some cases absence can make the heart grow fonder and can add fuel to the home fires, but in far too many cases, war deployments puts those fires out for good.

Works Cited

- Apted, Kari. "The Life We Used to Live." *In Operation*, 192-94.
Carroll, Andrew. Preface to "Bedfellows." *In Operation*, 324.
Clemens, Pamela. "Too Much Reality." *In Operation*, 194-96.
Enz, Tammy. "Bedfellows." *In Operation*, 324-25.
Furin, Kathleen. "Album." *In Operation*, 197-204.
Mostek, Ruth. "Hurtful Words." *In Operation*, 222-26.
Operation Homecoming. Ed. Andrew Carroll. Updated ed. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2006. Print.