

From Afghanistan: Families Who Serve

Military spouses confronted with tough career decisions

May 23, 2011

I met Tech. Sgt. April Lapetoda almost immediately upon arrival at NTM-A. She's the NCOIC of media relations at NTM-A and hard not to notice. She's high-speed, congenial, professional and the go-to person for plenty of people around the HQ, including many of the top brass.

Aside from her role in media relations, she wears a lot of other hats at the HQ Public Affairs Office: acting Public Affairs Officer for Maj. Gen. James B. Mallory, Deputy Commanding General, NTM-A, and Dr. Jack Kem (Ph. D), Deputy to the CG. If that weren't enough, she also runs the newsroom, ramrods the reporters and edits and clears copy before it's released. In short, she's pretty much a hyper-kinetic dervish of efficiency and fount of knowledge.

About a week ago, she was presented with an "Impact Award" during a surprise ceremony by NTM-A Command. After personally pinning her with the Joint Service Achievement Award, Lt. Gen. William Caldwell asked her publicly (he had already sent word down the chain-of command) if she would extend her deployment. She respectfully declined. It's not often that an enlisted person turns down a General Officer, but as I soon learned, she had good reason not to extend her tour in Afghanistan.

Through conversations with her, I learned this is her fourth deployment and second to Afghanistan. Nothing too unusual about that nowadays, but there's more to it than that. She's married to a soon-to-be Air Force Master Sergeant Chris Lapetoda, and since he crews with Air Force 2, he is often on Temporary Duty Status (TDY) away from home in various parts of the country or the world. He's currently TDY to Chile, while his parents help out by watching the kids.

As we continued our conversation, she spoke of her two children, ages six and two. She missed her youngest child's first birthday while TDY and missed his second birthday during her current deployment to Afghanistan. It was obviously painful to her as she recounted

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having to deploy this time around on Christmas Day. Last week, she and Chris marked their tenth wedding anniversary, separated by miles and circumstance.

Women serving in the military—especially women who have deployed to combat zones—have issues and difficulties distinctly different from that of men, and being a deployed parent presents another subset of challenges. Overall, April feels she is more fortunate than many in that respect; "My experiences have been good. As a woman serving in the military, I've been treated like everyone else. And as far as being a mother, most pressure comes from the outside. It isn't intentional, but when people ask how I can stand being deployed away from my children, they don't realize the impact their questions have. They unknowingly initiate guilt feelings."

As the war ... and deployments continue, the issues confronting April and Chris are representative of thousands of American service members who are married. The deployments hit both spouses equally hard while their concerns are focused primarily on the welfare of their children.

Balancing career and family can be a monumental task. So much so that, like many other military spouses, the Lapetoda's are now confronted with making some tough career decisions. April will have 12 years of service next month, and Chris already has 13 years invested. April and Chris are both undecided about re-enlisting. "We really have to think about it," explained April. "Our six-year-old is having problems in school and with the deployment situation the way it is, we don't know how much time we'd have together as an entire family."

—Jerry Newberry