

MILITARY FAMILIES

Examples of Courage

By Michele Mohar

This holiday season will be different for all of us. We will cherish our time with family a little more and think about those who aren't with us. Americans in the military are no exception. The last several months have been especially stressful for those with family members deployed for military missions.

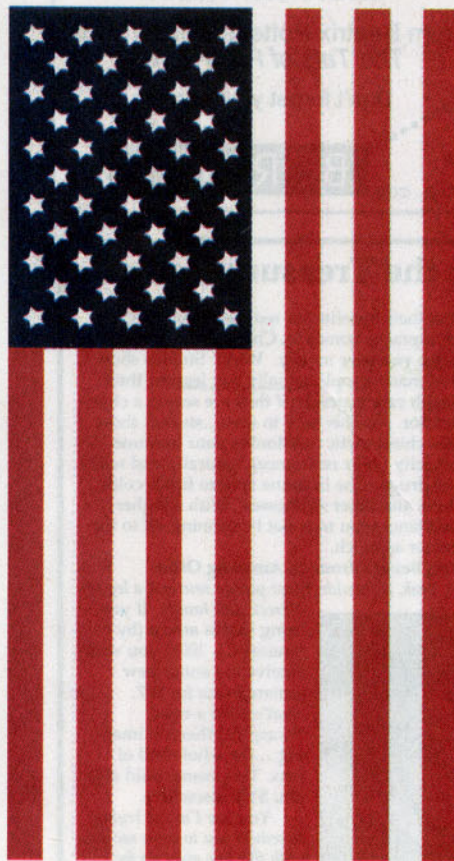
Most of us know someone in the military and understand that the lifestyle requires some time away from family. These families know when that time is coming and prepare for it. Jobs, childcare, and family visits can be adjusted so that they can make the best of necessary time away.

However, after the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington, DC those families in the military faced unplanned deployments. One San Francisco-based carrier, scheduled to return home from a routine six-month deployment the same week as the tragedy, pulled into port for only 15 hours before heading out to sea once again, this time for an undetermined period of time with an uncertain mission.

At the Mountain Home Air Force Base, families know all too well the stresses of military life. Sarah Hidalgo's husband of 2½ years, Richard Hidalgo, left on Oct. 10 as part of the special forces unit from the Mountain Home Air Force Base. Sarah knew that his departure was imminent, but to keep their mission a secret, armament specialists like Richard are required to withhold their deployment date. "Honestly, he never told me he was leaving," said Sarah. She found out from the news media of her husband's departure a day before he was scheduled to leave.

As a former armament specialist herself, Sarah is very knowledgeable about her husband's duties, but other spouses are not as informed, and therefore more apprehensive about the situation. "Even though I know what his job is, I'm still worried," she said. This situation becomes even more stressful for families new to the military and those with children.

Susan, whose husband has been in the military for 17 years, has three children who need consideration in times of deployment as well. She and her husband received their first notice of



his deployment on Sept. 12. He deployed ten days later, leaving Susan the responsibility of their home and family. Raising a 16-year-old and 13-year-old twins is difficult, but tackling both parental roles, particularly during this unscheduled departure, has been especially difficult. Susan explains that each time he has deployed the circumstances have been different, because the kids' ages have been different. This time, Susan has been more overwhelmed by all the running around she has to do. Now, instead of having two parents transporting three active teenagers to youth groups, sports practice, and school activities, it's only her. "You can't say, 'We just have to stop now because dad's gone.'"

This deployment has also affected the kids' perspective. "He has deployed before...but this time is a much different reality," Susan explains. They don't

know where he is, what he is doing, or when he is coming home. That has never been an issue in a deployment before. Even though the kids are getting a little older and understand why their dad is gone, "they still have questions that I can't answer."

To help the kids understand the duties of their parents, the base offers a program called PDF Junior. This takes the children through some of the steps their moms and dads go through, such as a "processing line" where they learn about their destination, receive their gear, and learn about their specific duties. These kinds of activities become even more important when children don't understand why their parents left so suddenly, perhaps heading to places they haven't even heard of.

Thankfully, there are many support networks available to military families. According to Master Sergeant Renee Nelson, the McCloud Family Support Center at Mountain Home Air Force Base has a long list of support options for families including childcare, children's programs, car maintenance, and phone call options. They even have a program called REST (the readiness emergency sleeping tool) that allows family members to have their pictures taken, transferred to pillowcases and then sent to the deployed family member.

