

Chapter 1

Living Life As a Military Family

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Some people believe that being in the military is no different than working for a major corporation with multiple outlets around the world. But what corporation do you know requires *all* their employees to be available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and 365 days a year?

Military service is a demanding way of life and there are very few people willing to sign on the dotted line and add themselves to the 1 percent of our nation's population that makes up this nation's All Volunteer Force.

If your servicemember is part of this All Volunteer Force, welcome to the club. Life in the military is wrought with its own challenges and rewards. But success is 90 percent attitude. Throughout this chapter, we draw a broad picture of what sets military families apart from their civilian counterparts, talk about some of the idiosyncrasies of the military, as well as let you know what you can expect right off the bat.

Getting a Grasp on the Military Culture

The military certainly retains its own culture. When your servicemember joins the military, you're exposed to a tight-knit community of people supporting a cause greater than themselves and dealing with issues that the average soccer mom would never encounter. In the sections that follow, we help you understand the military culture by giving you an idea of why servicemembers join and stay in the military as well as how connected you become to your community.

Believing in something bigger than yourself

Ask 100 people why they chose to *join* the military and you'll probably get about 100 different answers that might include travel, thrills, opportunities, money, and benefits. For those of us with wanderlust, the promise of travel still serves to lure some to military service. Certainly with the *temporary duties* (TDYs/TADs) and opportunities to be stationed overseas at exotic locations, wanting to see the world is as good a reason to join the military as any other. There are also some thrill seekers who are drawn to the military by the promise of adventure and tough challenges that only jumping out of airplanes or landing on an aircraft carrier can deliver.

Many choose service as a way of upholding family tradition. For some, it's all they know. If they're military brats, they may loath to imagine any other life. Others are looking for job security or opportunities to learn new skills and better themselves. The benefits of the *Montgomery GI Bill* (MGIB) still draw people looking for a way to finance a college education. Although there are definite financial benefits to military service, not too many people are going to say that they did it solely for the money. So what keeps people in through the deployments, family separations, and constant moves? Simply said, that belief in something bigger than themselves. Ask 100 people why they chose to *stay* in the military and you'll probably only get a handful of answers that include honor, pride, and a desire to serve their country. The decision your servicemember made to join the military means that you are now part of this great tradition.

Making lifelong connections

The military seems to draw together a diverse group of people from all walks of life. However, that common bond of believing in something bigger than yourself ensures that you already have a strong tie to the friends you make in the military.

You'd think that the constant moving would guarantee that you are forever saying goodbye to friends and starting over again. To a certain extent, that's true; but in the military, you never say goodbye, just "hope to see you again soon." With a finite number of installations you can be stationed to, chances are good that over the years, you'll keep running into some of the same people over and over again.



Don't burn bridges because you never know when you'll run into that annoying soccer mom again somewhere down the road.

Civilian friendships are forged over shared experiences such as attending the same schools, vacationing in the same places, and living in the same small town for your entire life. The military's not so different. Think of a culture where you all move in the same circles. Even though you'll move from base to base, you stand the likelihood of living in the same towns (although at different times), vacationing in the same military hot spots, and going to the same base schools. Your best friends become those who served with you on the PTA board, the mother of your son's best friend, or your neighbor on base who watches your kids so you can get a haircut or make a commissary run without your screaming toddler in tow.

So what's different about the military? Well, some of your best friends will also be the ones who help you weather that second, fourth, and fifth deployment. The ones you call at 3 a.m. because the news just reported some casualties in the field. They're the ones who babysit your kids who are running a 101 degree temperature when you can least afford to miss another day of work. They are the same people who cry with you because your spouse is passed over for a promotion or rejoice with you because he or she is chosen for one. They understand without words what you are going through because they have walked in your shoes. Your military friends become an extended family and these are relationships that you will come to count on throughout your time in the military.

Like everything else worth having, these lifelong connections need to be nurtured. There are certain things you can do to develop and maintain these strong connections:

- ✓ Meet the other families in your unit or squadron.
- ✓ Get involved.
- ✓ Be there for your friends and recognize when they might need some extra care and attention.
- ✓ Stay in touch.
- ✓ Share your milestones (such as promotions, graduations, and new additions to the family).
- ✓ Make the effort to send change of address cards.
- ✓ Send those annual holiday cards and letters.
- ✓ Follow the golden rule: Always write in pencil.

Being Flexible — the Key to a Happy Military Life

If you're the type of person who likes to control your surroundings, you're going to have to let that go. After your servicemember joins the military, you're no longer in charge of your life. Of course, you still have some input, but ultimately, your life is out of your hands.

With all the things you can't control, you may find it easy to start thinking that you have become an unwitting pawn in someone else's life. Don't get sucked into that mentality. True, military life demands that you look at things from a different perspective than civilian life. Moving every 2 to 4 years gives you an opportunity to recreate yourself every time. Think of the opportunities you can have that others can only dream of. While your civilian friends can only look at pictures of the great works of art, you can visit them in Paris, London, or Florence. Your friends at home learn a second language in an academic setting while you have the opportunity to immerse yourself in other cultures and languages. You get the idea — it's all in the perspective. Rather than lamenting about how the military limits your choices, start thinking about how it broadens your horizons.

In the sections that follow, we give you some advice on how to control the things you can control and let go of the other stuff . . . for now. Maintaining a good outlook ensures that you will be open to opportunities that present themselves.

Adjusting to different directions

So you may be thinking that your servicemember is given orders, you follow them, and that's that. Well, that's just the beginning. A lot can happen between being given an order and preparing for it. Be prepared to adjust to situations, such as the following examples:

- ✓ Just when you think you're headed to Hawaii on assignment and begin dreaming of Mai tais on the beach, a change in orders occurs and you're headed to Iceland — start dreaming about geysers and five-foot snow drifts!
- ✓ Your servicemember deployed in the last year and is not due to deploy again for another year, but the needs of the service prevail and you learn that he or she's scheduled to be on the next plane out for another rotation.



In the military, nothing is carved in stone.

Adapting to a changing homelife

You need to be flexible with your home as well. With bases spread out across the United States and overseas, imagine all the different floor plans you can look forward to. One assignment you might be living in a 1,500-square-foot ranch-style home and the next assignment, your same family could be expected to fit into a 900-square-foot apartment-style home. That gorgeous, comfortable overstuffed couch that seemed like such a great idea in Oklahoma might be a little less so when it won't fit into your little apartment in Japan. And the ceiling to floor drapes that were to die for in your German house with the tall ceilings, huge windows, and great light may not be as attractive in Florida when you're having to drill into cinderblock to hang them and then once you get them hung up, they block out all the natural light coming in through those teeny tiny hurricane-friendly windows.

Regardless of how well you might plan, none of your furniture will fit into the parade of houses you'll ultimately live in throughout a military career. At least, not necessarily into the rooms they were intended for. More than a few military families have had to live with a sideboard in the bedroom because that's the only place it would fit. And there's nothing stranger than seeing a huge, ornate crystal chandelier from Prague hanging in the foyer of a prefab base home in Grand Forks, North Dakota. As a fellow military spouse, you quickly learn to ignore these anomalies and sympathize with the need to adapt and make do.

Keeping education and employment flexible

The need to remain flexible is nowhere more evident than in spouse employment and education. There has been many a spouse who started a bachelor's degree at one institution only to finally graduate seven years and four different universities later. And what military spouse doesn't have numerous gaps in his or her résumé with a strange and seemingly unrelated range of jobs held over the years? The desire to create a life for yourself and the need to balance it with your servicemember's military service is a challenge that has faced military spouses throughout the years. More information on military spouse employment and education can be found in Chapter 11.

Unlike a lot of your civilian friends, you don't have the luxury of sticking around to finish your degree or work to climb the corporate ladder and build seniority. But think of it this way: How many other people get the opportunity to meet people from all different walks of life, travel around the United States, and possibly live in a foreign country?

Traveling the world . . . If you want to

Join the military, see the world. This is still true. Depending on how adventurous you are, you can see as much or as little of the world as you want to. Some people will spend their entire career in the continental United States. Others will grab any chance they can to travel. In this section, we tell you how, between overseas assignments and *space available* (Space-A) seating on military flights, opportunities to see the world abound.

Overseas assignments

If you've ever been curious about other countries and are offered an overseas assignment, seize the opportunity. You'll never get a better chance to immerse yourself in another culture. The greatest thing about being stationed overseas with the military is that you have all the benefits of living in a foreign country with a security blanket. Regardless of what foreign locale you may be stationed to, as soon as you make it back on base, the rules change, and you're back in Little America. Back to the familiar fast-food outlets, commissary, and exchange (more about these in Chapter 4). What could be better than the adventure of living overseas with all the comforts of home?

Space-available travel

If you want to see the world and aren't fortunate enough to be stationed overseas, take advantage of your Space-A (space-available) benefits. Forget reading just about riding in a gondola in the canals of Venice or gazing at the geishas in old Kyoto. With some time and research, you can soon be on your way to traveling there for next to nothing.

Space-available travel is one of the greatest privileges extended to service-members and their dependents. The premise is simple, if there are extra seats available on the military aircraft flying around official cargo and personnel, and if the crew is not restricted by mission constraints, extra available seats are released to space-available travelers.

There are six categories of Space-A travelers, and seats are allocated by descending order with Category 1 (CAT-1) being the highest and Category 6 (CAT-6) being the lowest. Within the categories, passengers compete based on how long they have been registered in the Space-A system for seats on the flight.



Space-A flights are unreliable and should only be attempted by people who have a lot of time and flexibility. At any given moment, a flight might be terminated without notice and you may have to purchase a commercial ticket back. In other words, if your sister's getting married Wednesday on the west coast and you have to be back on the east coast by Saturday, Space-A is not your best option. However, given enough time, Space-A travel is a great and affordable way to see the world.

To address the questions of who's eligible and how Space-A travel works, check out the most up-to-date information on the Air Mobility Command fact sheet: <http://www.amc.af.mil/questions/topic.asp?id=380>.

In addition to the official information, there are entire books and Web sites dedicated to the ins and outs of Space-A travel, but here are some basic things to remember:

- ✔ Space-A travelers can register up to 60 days before their desired date of travel.
- ✔ Military personnel need to be on leave orders to register for Space-A.
- ✔ Although there is no cost in travelling on a military aircraft, there are some costs associated with traveling on a commercially-contracted airplane.
- ✔ If your flight has multiple legs, you can get bumped off at any time.
- ✔ Show times for military flights have a way of changing based on the needs of the mission, and there is no obligation to notify Space-A travelers of these changes, so stay close to the terminal or at least check in frequently for updates.
- ✔ While large Air Force terminals are your best bets, virtually any U.S. Navy, Army, or Marine airfield will also have Space-A flights.
- ✔ Travel light because different aircraft have different baggage restrictions. With a small plane like the C-21, you may be limited to 30 pounds of luggage.
- ✔ Travel with ample cash or credit cards because you never know how long you'll be out and food and lodging at some locations can really add up. Besides, you never know when you'll have to shell out cash for a return ticket home.

Speaking in Code: Learning the Military Language

So what does it mean when you're telling your family and friends about your impending move and they're looking at you like you've grown three heads? Stop wondering — you've become the latest victim of speaking in military colloquialisms and acronyms. Don't worry: Everyone is guilty of it.

Even though you may resist the necessity of learning a second language, eventually, your hand is forced. You try to maintain English as your preferred language, but you find yourself unable to converse with your peers because you don't speak the same language. So, at first you find yourself peppering your conversations with military lingo here and there, but then one day, you find out that you sound just like everyone else:

- ✔ A move isn't just a move, it becomes a PCS (permanent change of station).
- ✔ A DITY is when you do the move yourself — so DITY literally means “do it yourself.” And you thought some craft group thought that one up, huh?
- ✔ An installation becomes a base, a post, a station, or a camp, depending on the service and the size.
- ✔ TDY or TAD is another word for a temporary duty away from the home station.
- ✔ You're no longer stopping at Giant or Safeway on the way home; you're doing a commissary run.
- ✔ When your sister asks what you're doing tomorrow, you tell her that you have an OSC board meeting and can't miss it because you're in charge of Scholarships. You tell her that you can't stop by earlier in the day because your DH is going TDY and you've got to stop at the seamstress on base because you had earlier dropped off his new ABUs to have the Velcro sewn on. And after that, you've got to stop by the shoppette to pick up some hot sauce because there's never enough Tabasco in the MREs.

These acronyms and lingo all sound logical unless you're on the outside. To the uninitiated outsider, you're speaking a foreign language. But don't fret. After a few years, your sister will pick up that you have an Officers Spouses Club board meeting and can't miss it because you're in charge of the Scholarship program for the club. You can't stop by earlier in the day because your Darling Husband has Temporary Duty away from his home base and you've got to stop at the seamstress on base because you had earlier dropped off his new Airman Battle Uniform to have the Velcro sewn on. And after that, you've got to stop by the small convenience store on base to pick up some hot sauce because there's never enough hot sauce in the Meals Ready to Eat (rations they get in the field).



Your sister may now understand you, but just when you think you've got the lingo down perfectly, your DH is given a joint assignment (with a different service) and you realize that the language doesn't translate from service to service. Army does not speak Navy; Navy does not speak Air Force; Air Force does not speak Marine, and so on and so on. Just when you think you're getting ahead, you're back at square one! Don't worry about it: Everyone is in the same boat. Even though there is a movement afoot to think "purple" (terms and programs that transcend all services), each branch of service likes its own service idiosyncrasies. So just embrace your service's culture and language freely. Once you understand the natives, you'll begin to settle in.

Embracing the Place Where Everybody Knows Your Name

Forget keeping up with the Joneses. The military is a great equalizer. When everyone wears uniforms, shops at the same stores, belongs to the same clubs, sends their kids to the same schools, and shows up at the same hospital, keeping up with the Joneses tends to be a nonissue.

Better yet, not only are you all doing the same things, but at parties, you know everyone, and if you don't, everyone wears nametags! Imagine it, no more pregnant pauses or awkward silences because you can't remember the name of the guy who's walking toward you with an expectant look on his face. One quick glance at the nametag and you're back in business. What could be better?

And it still gets better: How about an additional patch that makes it easy to identify the other people in your unit? It doesn't even matter if you know them; that kinship of being in the same unit is an automatic icebreaker. No more wondering about a person's name and no more hunting for something in common with someone. The military boosts your social quotient, and you don't even need to develop any additional skills!

Choosing to Live on the Installation — Or Not

Living behind the fences of a military installation provides a fair amount of comfort to many people. In addition to living in a guarded, gated community, you're living among your peers, people who understand exactly what you're going through. In a traditional neighborhood, people come from all walks of life and work in different career fields. Neighborhoods on a military installation take the term "cookie cutter" to an all new level. While the types of homes may vary, every person in those homes has the same employer — Uncle Sam.

People choose to live on base for one or more of the following reasons:

- ✓ **You can save money.** You have no out-of-pocket expenses associated with living on base:
 - Utilities are covered.
 - The installation or privatized housing contractor takes care of maintenance issues that arise.
- ✓ **You have ready access to resources and services.** Some of the greatest benefits are attached to brick and mortar buildings on the installation. Since most base housing is either on the base proper or at least very close, the commissary, exchange, and hospital or clinic become much more accessible (more about these services in Chapter 4).
- ✓ **You find comfort being surrounded by other military families when your servicemember is deployed.** Because your neighbors understand what you're going through, they will invite you to dinner and watch your kids in a pinch. Sometimes you'll come home frazzled the day before inspection to find that your lawn's already been mowed because your neighbor knew your husband was gone and did it while he was doing his own. Everyone keeps an eye out for each other and that can be quite comforting.

Of course, you have to do your part as well as in any community, civilian or military:

- ✓ Residents are expected to maintain their quarters in an acceptable manner that includes maintaining the lawn and taking care of routine maintenance issues. Your installation housing office can give you the specific parameters of what "acceptable manner" and "routine maintenance" mean as each base differs in its regulations and requirements.
- ✓ Standards are maintained through weekly inspections.
- ✓ Warnings can be issued for violations and, with enough warnings, you can be kicked out of base housing.

On the flip side, some people choose not to live on base because of the exact same reasons other people *want* to live on base. All that closeness and support makes them feel like they're living in a fishbowl. The lines between your public and private lives fuzz a little and some people feel like they're never able to get away from work. For those reasons and more, many people choose to live off base. Find out more about your other housing options in Chapter 10.