Extending a Helping Hand

When Airmen deploy, others help take care of their families

by Master Sgt. Chuck Roberts
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Servicemembers deploy forward, problems remain at home, assistance stands on the ready. *When the Larson's house caught on fire, Liz (top, left) was on the road to assist those whose spouses were deployed, while Scott (top, right), an Army staff sergeant, was deployed to Afghanistan. The Family Support Center at Offutt Air Force Base, Neb., pitched in to arrange billeting where Liz could better care for her daughter Raelyn and son Taylor. Liz says military support for families has become a "color purple" mindset regardless which sister service you belong to.*

Liz Larson helps family members cope when loved ones deploy. As a military family member, she knows first hand how important it is to get help during a crisis.

The family program assistant was on her way to Red Oak, Iowa, to provide redeployment briefings when her landlord called her. He told her to return home immediately, her downstairs neighbors had smelled smoke coming from her home.

About 45 minutes later, the fire marshal allowed her inside as firefighters were wrapping things up. She stood in tears while gazing in amazement at the fire and water damage surrounding her. An electrical fire destroyed her two children's bedroom. But it could have been worse. If she hadn't closed the door before dropping Raelyn and Taylor at her mother's house, the fire marshal said the entire house might have been destroyed.

Although she routinely counsels family members who've experienced similar situations, she said her mind went blank. This time it happened to her, and she had to go it alone. Her husband, Army Staff Sgt. Scott Larson, was deployed to Afghanistan.

But news of her misfortune traveled quickly to nearby Offutt Air Force Base, Neb., where Barry Wilkinson heard about the fire from a family friend while shopping at the commissary. Mr. Wilkinson, a community readiness consultant for the Offutt Family Support Center, called Mrs. Larson, and he soon had her and her children living at the base temporary lodging facility. Living at the facility saved money, and she could cook for the children. Plus, it provided a welcomed sense of security.

Such "focus on homecare" is a priority at Offutt, where deployments have been a way of life for more than a decade, said Col. John Daly, 55th Wing vice commander. The base saw almost 900 Airmen deploy at the beginning of the year. On Aug. 8, 1990, the wing was one of the first to deploy to the Persian Gulf soon after Saddam Hussein invaded neighboring Kuwait.

In many respects, the Offutt Airmen never left.

Tasked with providing worldwide reconnaissance, combat support and command and control to warfighting commanders, they're continually deployed somewhere in the world "24-7-365," Colonel Daly said.

A deployed way of life

Offutt's not alone, of course. Today, Airmen are expeditionary and deployable anytime, anywhere. Across the Air Force, Airmen must leave families behind when they deploy, most recently to fight the global war on terrorism. Many base support agencies — family support centers, services, squadrons and chaplains — and community and private base organizations have programs to help the families left behind.

Deployments have become a way of life for the approximately 8,500 Airmen of Offutt's wing, the largest in Air Combat Command and second largest in the Air Force. But the colonel said the base doesn't take for granted the effect the deployments have on those left behind.

Built in 1896 as a cavalry post to maintain peace between settlers of the Nebraska Territory and local Native Americans, the base relies on its support agencies and "tremendous community support" to help fill the void of deployed family members, the colonel said.

He said military support for the family has undergone big changes since he entered the Air Force 28 years ago when the Air Force was basically a garrison force. Supporting the families of deployed Airmen was more of a unit responsibility then. The unit still plays a significant role, but base support like the family support center play an increasingly greater role.

"I think we've gotten much better. I definitely think things have improved," said Billie Gaines, director of the Offutt Family Support Center. Many new programs evolved to handle family issues and problems that have remained much the same since the 1950s, when the wing flew RB-50s for Strategic Air Command. They include dealing with financial problems, depression, house repairs, cars breaking down and behavior problems with children at school.

Left alone with no one to turn to, it's easy for spouses to develop a "my spouse is gone, nobody cares about me" attitude, Mrs. Gaines said. "We don't want that. You don't have to feel like the lone Soldier."

Before deploying, Airmen and spouses should attend a family support center predeployment briefing to increase awareness of issues, like powers of attorney and finances. It can also reinforce that the center is a point of contact for free phone cards, child care and car inspections, video phone access and details on volunteering and employment.

Unfortunately, Airmen don't always convey key information to spouses, said Tech. Sgt. Kevin Friday, support center readiness non-commissioned officer. Knowing where to go or what to do can be daunting, he said, especially for someone new to the military and left behind for the first time.

"It's a huge learning experience for those families," Sergeant Friday said of first-term Airmen, guardsmen and reservists. The Offutt support center's umbrella extends to 20 Guard and Reserve units, and encompasses about 5,000 servicemembers.

As a member of the Iowa Interservice Family Assistance Committee, Sergeant Friday and the Offutt Family Support Center staff assist units deployed for the global war on terrorism. Deployments can be especially tough on the family with a guardsman or reservist activated for the first time and deployed "down range" for a year. With no military installation nearby, in many instances, Mrs. Gaines said the Offutt center can step in and help. Its staff deals with issues such as the gap that can occur when a civilian paycheck ends and military pay begins.

"When units call us and ask, 'Can you help us?' We pack up our suitcases and go out and support them," Mrs. Gaines said.

A year ago, Sergeant Larson would have been surprised to arrive home from Afghanistan to find the Air

At the Early Childhood Center in Bellevue, Neb., *early childhood teacher Mary Walters (left) keeps an affectionate eye out for children and parents who stop by the free center while loved ones are deployed from Offutt. Tina Buchanan (gray shirt and glasses) visited the center about once a week with her 3-year-old daughter Brianna (wearing pink barrettes) while her husband, 1st Lt. Mike Buchanan, was deployed five months to Tyndall Air Force Base, Fla.*

Sarah Tagel, a student of the Just Relax Massage Co., *gives Amy Cox a massage during the Spouses Spring Spa at the base Community Activities Center. The spa is one of many activities coordinated by the family support center to thank military spouses for their support. The center offers activities year-round to keep spouses and families involved in the base community — also serving as a way to support each other during times of separation.*

Force helping his family. But that wasn't the case after nearly a year of joint duty there, where the Army Guardsman experienced the teamwork among the U.S. military services.

Liz is used to working in a "purple" environment at her job with the National Guard Family program. But the house fire has given her a new perspective on jointness.

"It's just like our Army Family Assistance Center," she said. "We help anyone who comes through the door." But, back at home for the first time since the fire, she said, "You have a fuller understanding of how the services work."

Although the family support center is there to help, sometimes family members need look no further than their deployed spouse's squadron for help.

Leah Maggio didn't feel abandoned when her pilot husband, Capt. Kevin Maggio, deployed with the 343rd Reconnaissance Squadron for 75 days in the "sandbox." However, she did feel a bit overwhelmed. The Maggios had just moved into a new home, and he was gone days two days later, leaving her with a young daughter and a house full of boxes to contend with.

But she wasn't alone. Squadron members helped move them in. When their dog, Maddy, went missing, Mrs. Maggio dialed the squadron's spouse support hotline to get a hunt for the missing mutt underway. And help was available from weekly phone calls from the squadron. With a little more help from the squadron, Mrs. Maggio also was able to install new faucets and light fixtures. And thanks to volunteers, she only mowed her lawn once.

"I could handle any problem as if he were here," she said of the support received while her husband was away. "I never felt alone, or that there was no one out there to help me."

For Captain Maggio, it was a "huge benefit" knowing his family was in such good hands. The peace of mind allowed him to focus on his job. Fellow Offutt Airmen agree.

"It's a given here. We take care of our own," said Senior Master Sgt. David Palugyay, 38th Aircraft Maintenance Unit assistant maintenance supervisor. When the wife of a deployed troop had early morning car trouble last winter, squadron Airmen started it and dug it out from under a few feet of snow. It's not just the right thing to do, he said, it's also vital to the mission.

"I want my people focused on the mission," Sergeant Palugyay said. "We have to remove the stressors."

Helping relieve stress is the job of Chaplain (Capt.) Randall Jamieson. He said requests for counseling usually increase the first few months after a deployment.

"They have a lot on their plate," he said, of concerns that often include money and problems with children not dealing well with their parent's departure. A key element to a successful deployment is keeping lines of communication open through e-mails and morale calls, he said.

And contrary to what might be expected, Chaplain Jamieson said the long-awaited reunion after a deployment doesn't always turn out as expected. Family routines have changed during the deployment, and husbands or wives need to be aware of that.

Tech. Sgt. Phil Fisher *(left) conducts RC-135W Rivet Joint station orientation training at Offutt Air Force Base. When not training, Airmen at the base are frequently on the road as much as 200 days a year. That means family members are just as frequently left behind, but the base has built support networks for them to reach out for help as part of the Air Force expeditionary mindset.*

The folks downtown

At Offutt, coping with deployments is easier because of strong community support, said Mr. Wilkinson, also the president of the private organization, Friends of the Family Support Center.

"Most of the time, people are calling me to help," the retired master sergeant said. That includes downtown agencies like the Offutt Advisory Council. It hosts the annual Harvest Ball that annually raises $10,000 to provide direct support for deployed troops and their families, and an annual base picnic for 12,000 military family members.

At Clear Channel Radio in Omaha, Neb., *disc jockeys Craig Allen and Gina Melton said they have an easy job tapping into community support for deployed Airmen and their family members. They've done it the past two years to the tune of $135,000 in phone cards, amounting to 2.6 million minutes. Says Mr. Allen of deployed servicemembers: "Those guys put their lives on the line every day saving the lives of kids and democracy. It makes everything else take a back seat."*

"What can we do for those who are left behind?" is how John Hansen said the advisory council approaches helping family members. They donated $10,000 to help fund a new juice bar at the base field house, a place where spouses of deployed Airmen can workout while their children play.

At Clear Channel radio station, KAT 103 in nearby Omaha, the staff helped raise $135,000 for phone cards over the past two years — 2.6 million minutes — so deployed Airmen can stay in touch with families.

"It just seemed a natural thing to do," disc jockey Steve Lundy said. "We have citizens all over the globe in harm's way supporting us and the families left behind. We respect people who take the load upon themselves," he said, whether they're on the front lines or helping troops at home station.

The local school system, where about 4,500 military students compose almost half of the district school population, is equally engaged in supporting Offutt families.

"Our job is to keep the situation as normal as possible," Bellevue Public Schools Superintendent John Deegan said. "Teachers have to reach out and help the child."

Working in conjunction with the base Family Support Center, local teachers are given a guide to help recognize signs of separation anxiety and methods of dealing with them.

Although such base and community support is available, it's no guarantee things won't be stressful or lonely for those left behind. But knowing how to react to what lies ahead can make all the difference, Mrs. Maggio said.

"It was a wonderful experience for me," she said. "I know I can handle any problem."