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The Reservist's Unexpected War

With Dad in Iraq, the Medeiros Family Soldiers On

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WESTMINSTER, Md.

In the kitchen, a hurricane made up of three kids and a dog swirls around her: Emily paws through the freezer; Alex fiddles with his yogurt lid; Rita makes a bagel at the sink, and Blue wants a bite of it. Tamara Medeiros, mother of 8-year-old triplets, stands in the eye of the hurricane with a newspaper, trying to read about death in Iraq.

Yesterday was another bad day in Baghdad.

The newspaper means more to Tamara now that her husband's fate is tied up in the headlines. Staff Sgt. Jack Medeiros, her husband of 17 years, was a "weekend warrior" in the Army Reserves but is now stationed at Baghdad Airport guarding enemy prisoners. The newspaper calls the airport road a "deadly shooting gallery for attackers trying to kill U.S. soldiers." There have been "dozens of shootings, bombings and land-mine explosions in recent weeks."

Dressed in a lime-green sweater and black shorts, Tamara stares at the picture of a dead soldier on the side of the road, victim of a rocket-propelled grenade attack. He was traveling down the same road Jack travels regularly, sitting in the back of a truck with a machine gun and a bunch of Iraqi prisoners.

There are almost no phones in Iraq. No e-mail, either, and she hasn't heard from Jack in more than two weeks.

Her eyes dart around: dead soldier . . . guerrilla war . . . yellowcake uranium . . . 16 words . . . a Labrador-Great Dane mix jumping onto the kitchen counter, nosing in for a bite of Rita's bagel.

"Blue!" Tamara says. "Stop begging!"

She takes the paper and swats the dog's rump. She tosses the paper on the kitchen table. She can't worry about that stuff today, because today there are piano lessons and band practices and a home business and everything else that's involved in being the mother of 8-year-old triplets and a 16-year-old son, Justin.

"Worrying is not good," she says. "I miss him, but [worrying] just takes up space; it takes away from my being present to who I need to be present to."

She never figured that Jack, a 42-year-old reservist with the 443rd Military Police Company of Owings Mills, Md., would be gone this long: 18 months out of the past two years.

After spending two decades in the Army, Jack could have retired in the summer of 2001. But he hadn't received his "20-year letter" confirming that he was eligible for full retirement benefits. Just to be sure, he signed on for another year in the reserves.

A few months later, after the World Trade Center fell and the Pentagon burned, Jack was called to active duty. He served a year in Fort Sam Houston, Tex., working security.

That assignment, at least, was bearable. The family constantly talked on the phone, and Jack flew up to visit as often as he could. He served until October 2002. By then, he had received his 20-year letter and would have retired. But because MPs were in such short supply, the Army ordered a "stop loss" for all military police, which meant that no MP could retire or quit. In February, Jack was called up for another full year of service, this time for the Iraq war.

"I'm proud of him," says Tamara, 40. "I know that he's trained to protect the guys and women he's got under him. I think he feels responsible for them, using his experience to help everybody stay safe.

"But as soon as he gets back," she says, "he's quitting."

Jack Medeiros arrived at his post at the Baghdad Airport soon after President Bush declared on May 1 that "major combat operations in Iraq have ended."

But the peace still has to be won, and that task is increasingly falling to reservists like Medeiros, whose civilian job is driving a truck for Aramark Corp. and whose fatherly duties always included tucking the triplets into bed at night. Reservists are ordinary civilians who train one weekend a month and two full weeks every year, and whose specialties in the Army range from veterinarian to pilot to plumber.

Reservists have served in every conflict, but since 9/11, more have been called up for longer periods than at any other point in the nation's history, according to military experts. More than 200,000 reservists are on active duty in all branches of the service. Fully a quarter of all Army reservists are serving on active duty.

"It's really turning into an awful situation," says Loren Thompson, a defense analyst at the Lexington Institute in Arlington. "The reserves are expected to deploy relatively infrequently, to be away from their family relatively infrequently. Because there have been so many deployments in recent years -- the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq -- we are depending on the reserves far more than was originally anticipated.

"I think there's a growing feeling that an unspoken contract with the reservists has been broken, that many of them would not have signed up if they had known what kind of a burden would be imposed on them. When the time comes for them to sign on again, many of them won't."

Jack Gordon, a spokesman for the regional support command that oversees the 443rd, concurs that the reserve is strained. "There is a huge, monumental challenge for these reserve soldiers," he says. "The reserve has never been stretched this thin. Will there be attrition when they come home? I wouldn't doubt it one bit."

Tamara says she sometimes gave Jack a hard time about re-upping right before Sept. 11, 2001, but Jack said he didn't regret signing up for another year. He had been on active duty for six years and in the reserves for 14 without seeing combat, and he felt he owed the Army -- and his country -- for all they had done.

"I'm a believer that we needed to do what we did" in Iraq, Tamara says. "Not doing anything about it would have been like letting Hitler do what he did."

With Jack gone, teenage Justin has had to pick up many of the household's Dad duties -- the trash

takeout and lawn mowing, sometimes making dinner. Tamara recalls asking him to take care of the yard "like it's your part for the Army." He replied: "I already did my part for the Army. I gave them my dad."

Justin spends most of the time in the basement of this well-kept, tri-level house. You hear him more than you see him. You hear the trumpets when he and his band mates practice; you hear his computer games beeping.

Justin has a streak of premature gray in his hair, near his forehead. He tends to keep to himself. But he isn't quiet when you ask him about the war.

"We shouldn't have been there in the first place," Justin says. "We have people in America who don't have health care benefits, and they're sending health care benefits to Iraqis? America's in the role of global policeman, and we're going to fill that role until it destroys us."

By "us" he means America. But it also seems more personal than that.

Having Dad gone for 18 months certainly hasn't been easy for anybody, but it hasn't destroyed the Medeiros family. Tamara won't let it. She scaled back her cosmetics business and stopped teaching Sunday school so that she can devote all her energy to grabbing the edges of her family and pulling them toward the center, which is herself.

The kids' activities tug on her. She's president of the booster club for Justin's high school band. She sits through all of Emily's piano practice, helping her and her teacher write a song for her dad. Its lyrics say: "I miss you acting like Eeyore."

Her business drags on her. She spends maybe 10 hours a week selling the Jafra line of beauty products. And unlike many other reservist families who are facing tough economic times, she says military pay is more than enough to cover household expenses. Jack's company, Aramark, also has extended medical benefits to the family even though it wasn't legally required to.

The triplets, especially, pull on her. Brown-haired kids with big eyes and sometimes crooked smiles, they race around the house like caffeinated hamsters. They're cute and unfailingly polite to strangers but love to nag each other, waging apocalyptic battles over everything, like whose seat is whose on the couch.

Jack, once an Army drill sergeant, is the disciplinarian of the family. Without him, the triplets can run Tamara ragged: Sometimes, after a particularly long and pointless fight, Tamara will start to cry. That's when she goes upstairs, closes the bedroom door and screams into a pillow.

Jack grew up in California, Tamara in Maryland. They met in 1983 on a blind date in San Jose set up by his brother. Tamara was immediately taken by his smile. He was tall, square-shouldered, laid-back, funny and soft-spoken. Even with the regulation haircut, you would never figure him for an Army guy. They married three years later.

"It's weird to sleep alone," she says. Emily gave her a teddy bear named Jack, and Tamara keeps it on Jack's pillow.

When Jack deployed for the Middle East, she went to the animal shelter and adopted Blue, a 107-pound beast who sits in the middle of the house and barks at anything that moves.

After talking to Jack almost every day for 20 years, she now talks to him only when he gets his hands on a phone, which seems to be about every two or three weeks. When he does get a phone, he can talk only for 10 or 15 minutes.

So he writes:

"Dear Tamara and kids,

"Well, another day in Iraq, and of course it is hot. Since I've been here I have lost 16 pounds. At this rate I will be a rail when I get home. Last night we had a real nice dinner. It was steak, corn on the cob, pudding and an ice cold Coke. Not bad for the Fourth of July. . . . It was like I won the lottery.

"Yesterday I and my squadron had to deliver prisoners to Abu [Ghraib]. It is a big prison here in Iraq, and all the prisoners thought we were going to kill them because that is where Saddam took them and they would never come back. We told them we would not do that to them. We are not Saddam. We will not do that for simple theft. . . .

"Every once in a while there will be some small arms fire, but none last night, and that was good for me. Thanks for all the letters and packages. It sure makes a difference.

"Phones are going to be harder to get to, but when I get a chance I will call you. Love you all. XOXO. Dad."

She writes back:

"Dear Jack,

"Please keep your faith, God protects those who pray to Him. I know you will come back to us because we are a family of faith.

"Today was hard because I miss you so much. The sun was shining, the kids were smiling, and all I can think about is your safety. . . . We'll be together again. I can't wait to hold you in my arms again and feel your warm body next to mine.

"It's 12 midnight. I'm reading Harry Potter #5 and I suddenly had the urge to tell you I love you. So here I am! . . .

"I wish you could be here to support us. I know you would. You've always been that way for me. I love knowing deep in my soul that you are my best supporter. . . . I love you always and forever. Tamara."

The triplets miss him all the time, but they miss him most at bedtime, too. Tamara often worked nights, so Jack was the bather, the teeth brusher, the story reader. The night before he was deployed to Iraq, Jack tucked his kids in one last time. He held back tears as he pulled up their blankets and kissed them on the lips.

"He kissed me 15 million times, all over," Rita says. "Not enough for every night that he's gonna be gone."

On the way to the airport, away from the kids, Jack finally let himself cry.

Tamara encourages the kids to talk about their feelings. Rita, the bookish triplet, writes in her diary every night. Today, she grabs a reporter's notebook and writes her own article.

"My dad is very strong," she writes. "His favorite colors are blue and purple. Our dad likes football and loves the family very much. Our dad likes the Army but he doesn't like getting sent away to Iraq. . . . He likes my mom's cooking better than the Iraq people's cooking. . . ."

"The mom Tamara hopes to see him soon too, and it is hard to take care of four kids because one is 16 and the triplets are 8 and [the family] has five animals to take care of too: a dog, two hamsters and two turtles.

"The dog is like [Dad] but he's slobbery . . . and [Dad] is not so slobbery and he's not a dog. . . . And they're a good family, so the kids do good without their dad."

During the school year, the triplets attend sessions with the school guidance counselor, where they talk with other military children. Rita and the others sometimes visit what her sister Emily calls a "talking doctor."

"When people have a really bad thing," she explains, "they go see a talking doctor."

Alex doesn't like the talking doctor. He doesn't seem to know what to do with his emotions. A patriot who wants to be brave, he refuses to cry, instead channeling his rage at Saddam Hussein, whom he claims to hate more than anyone.

"Dad needs to help the country by getting rid of Saddam Hussein," Alex says. Rita and Emily look at each other. They aren't sure what to make of Alex's selflessness. They say Dad needs to be home.

When the parents convened a family meeting to say Dad was leaving again, this time not just to Texas but all the way to the Middle East, everyone else reacted: Rita threw a tantrum, Emily tried to make jokes, and Justin railed against U.S. foreign policy. But Alex just withdrew into a little ball on the couch. He has never really come out.

"He's a quiet soul, conflicted," Tamara says. "Alex has a true understanding of responsibility, and he knows it's his dad's responsibility. So I think that's the conflicted part of him -- knowing that it's necessary but that it doesn't feel good."

Tamara has a meeting with her fellow Jafra distributors tonight, and it's a mad dash to get ready. She does the dishes while she puts on makeup while she talks on the phone about "bingo" and "corn on the cob" -- or maybe she said "singer" and "worn out from the job" -- it's impossible to hear her over the squawking triplets.

Since she's in the beauty business, part of the job is looking great herself: great skin, great hair, no bags under the eyes, no worry lines, no pants wrinkled from cleaning up messes, no dog hair on her nice green sweater. She leaves Alex with her sister and takes Rita and Emily along. They paint pictures in the basement while Tamara runs her meeting, trying to look perfect and happy and not the least bit tired, and she pretty much pulls it off.

It's past 9 when the meeting ends and she drives the kids home in her minivan. As she passes a house with lights on the roof that spell U-S-A, Tamara looks exhausted -- and today was a quiet day. "I used to hate it when he was gone two weeks out of the year," she says. "Now, it's a complete sacrifice, not just

his, not just mine. It's the children's, it's everybody's."

She picks up Alex and returns to an empty house -- Justin is out with friends. The morning paper is still sitting on the table, but she doesn't have time to read the rest tonight. There will be more bad news tomorrow. Right now, it's long past bedtime for the triplets, and she's the only one here to tuck them in.

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