

For military families, the conflict never ends

By Jennifer Swanberg
Work/Life Columnist
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"Family and friends may have marked the end of summer, otherwise known as Labor Day, by grilling favorite summer meals, escaping to the lake for a long weekend or engaging in a seasonal purge of unnecessary clutter from closets, drawers, and basements. Labor Day first originated in 1882 when the Central Labor Union wanted to create a day off for the "working man." Congress later declared Labor Day a national holiday in 1894.

While many of us have enjoyed the summer holidays, whether it was Memorial Day, Independence Day or Labor Day, military duty prevented millions of U.S. workers and their families from the benefits associated with these bonus days off. Somewhat vague estimates suggest that between 250,000 and 300,000 U.S. troops are currently deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Add to these statistics the men and women recuperating around the world from physical war wounds, preparing for deployment, or waiting to be called up for service. Regardless of your beliefs about the war, most agree that military service during wartime creates a sundry of work-family conflicts for military families.

Local and national media outlets have illuminated a range of strains that military families encounter: children missing parents, parents missing children, spouses managing households alone, family members coping with loss and soldiers recovering from life-threatening wounds. In my travels this summer in Kentucky and throughout New England, I heard other "extreme" work-family stories from military families and veterans, stories I want to share in my column because they are seldom heard.

Most of us look forward to the joys of the Independence Day holiday, especially the fireworks. However, after hearing one man's story, I thought the most patriotic gesture we could make as a country would be to silence the fireworks until the war ends. My sister phoned me on July 3, informing me that the man she had been dating for nearly half a year seemed a little strange. He left a series of 15 voice and text messages on her cell phone over a 30-minute period. When she called back, he was unreachable. None of the quick messages made sense. We speculated whether this seemingly kind, loving and loyal man might have another side of his personality worth paying attention to. When my sister finally spoke with her friend, she learned that the sounds of the pre-holiday fireworks ignited his Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome symptoms. The only place where he found respite while the neighborhood children lit cheap fireworks was in the shower; the water falling on his body calmed his anxious feelings and deafened the noises that reminded him of gunshots from the Gulf War. I have since learned that he toured twice during the Gulf War; his second tour was truncated due to a parachute mishap leaving his pelvis, legs and ribs shattered. After being stranded alone for days, he spent 15 months in a military hospital in Germany, fighting for his life and relearning how to walk.

While visiting a bayside town in Rhode Island, I stopped by a women's boutique to peruse the wares. I soon overheard the shop owner's distressed voice as she pleaded for help from the person on the phone. She was asking a travel company representative to honor her fiancé's

airline ticket. Her fiancè was scheduled for a three-day leave from military training. This young couple decided to marry during his leave. In the frenzy of preparation for this quick wedding, the woman purchased a roundtrip ticket for her fiancè for the wrong date — July 2008 rather than July 2007. The customer service representative from the Web site where she purchased the ticket would not exchange it for another date. The young shopkeeper was frantic; she paid for the ticket from her checking account, she did not have a credit card, and she and her fiancè could not afford to purchase another ticket. With his deployment date set for August, this was their only chance to marry. I almost charged his ticket to my credit card — in the spirit of supporting our country's service men. Why, I wonder, did corporate America not make an exception to the rule in the spirit of patriotism?

The other situation happened at a gas station in Kentucky. A young, physically fit man with a very short haircut and an amputated leg entered a mini-mart on crutches. Upon his entering the store, everyone stopped talking, and the silence was noticeable. We all must have been thinking the same thing — a recent veteran of the war. He was wearing painter's clothes; I imagined he was on break, stopping for cigarettes and soda. The only person who could not see below his waste was the cashier. Noticing the man was on crutches, in a concerned manner, she said, "I hope your leg feels better, sir." He replied with a quick, self-conscious remark: "It will never grow back." She did not understand his quip until he left the store. Before he drove away in a truck with a U.S. Marine sticker adhered on the back window I overheard him say to his buddy, "I'll have to live with the memory forever. It never goes away."

Jennifer E. Swanberg, Ph.D., Associate Professor in the College of Social Work and Executive Director of the UK Institute for Workplace Innovation, studies work-family issues and assists companies in creating policies and practices that promote employee engagement, strong business outcomes, and work-life integration.