

Welcome

If you've picked up this book, it's probably because you are personally affected by a military separation. Maybe you are a soldier about to be deployed. You've heard from the Family Readiness Center that you need to stay in touch with your family, and now you want to know how. Or maybe you're a family member of someone who's being deployed or on active duty training. The military doesn't enlist only soldiers, airmen, sailors and marines; they enlist families. You're looking for ways to lessen the impact of the separation.

That's what this book is about. It's about you. It's about your family. It's about keeping you close when you're apart. Togetherness—it's the heart of the family; it's the heart of your family.

For those of you new to *I'm Already Home...Again*, you are reading the second edition of the book that's been updated and expanded to better meet the needs of families. Over the past two years, I have had the privilege of meeting and talking with thousands of military family members.

You shared so many original and wonderful ideas about how you're staying connected that it was time to give 195 all new ideas and resources back to you. Also, times have changed. It was appropriate to expand the sections on returning home and family reintegration, address redeployment, and create chapters about ways your co-workers, extended families and communities can stay involved with you. I learned that pets suffer separation anxiety, too, so I didn't forget them either.

Don't worry, you'll still find 79 of your old favorites from the first edition like "Flat Daddy," the exchange of hand drawings, talking picture frame, and a conversation with Lisa White. Your resource section is updated and expanded with three times as many helpful websites that have been sent to me to pass along.

I define a family as a particular group of people who love, care for, and support each other. Family can also be considered a place. It's a place where you should feel safe and cared about even if other family members don't always agree with you. The family is a foundation for your social and emotional growth, financial stability, and education. You carry what you absorb from its teaching as you take your place in society. Families may look very different these days, but hopefully, they contain the same kind of love.

American families are being challenged by trying times in the current political life of our country. When war or the threat of war begins to infiltrate our nation, we have lots of moms, dads, sons, and daughters in the military waiting for deployment or extended assignments. This causes families to be separated for incredibly long spans of time and by phenomenal distances. Many spouses remain at home to handle the roles previously held by both, and the kids may be left to hear bedtime stories from others for a while.

No matter where we are, we need to remember that distance is just an illusion. When we take the time to stay connected, we can still feel close to someone who's thousands of miles away. If we don't take the time, we can feel distanced from someone who is at the other end of the house.

As someone who has many friends serving in the military, I understand the difficulty of being separated from one's family. I didn't grow up in a military family, but I don't think that's a requirement to be able to feel the impact that being in the military has on a family. Before I met him, my husband Larry served in the Army National Guard from 1969–1975. I was a carefree student in the late '60s and have two vivid recollections of the war in Vietnam. The first was when a friend of mine lost her brother; the second was when I watched a group of college fraternity brothers sit in silence in front of the television watching the draft lottery on December 1, 1969. I swear that was the only time I ever saw college kids so quiet. I remember feeling very lucky not to have close family members in the age range to serve.

During the conflict in the Persian Gulf, my own son was only eight. Things are different now. My son is 22, and I realize how close I am to being the mom of someone who could be in the military. Because of the tragic events of September 11, 2001, the United States will always be on alert for the threat of terrorism. At all times, we have over 60,000 troops stationed around the world on assignment to fight terrorism.

The faces of the brave people who serve in our armed forces have changed, too. In the Vietnam War, an overwhelming majority of U.S. service men and women were single. Today, 57% are married, and of those, 46% have children. 73% of those children are 11 years of age or younger. The biggest changes, however, have occurred for women. 14% of the military population are now women, and 20% of these women are in joint service marriages where both spouses are serving.¹

During the Gulf War we became even more aware that mothers, along with fathers, were being deployed. So, in addition to more frequent deployments, family separations are having a greater impact. It's no wonder that in a U.S. Army Medical Research report, 59% of soldiers stated that the number of deployments had hurt the stability of their marriage and put a strain on their families.²

The Department of Defense has responded to this need. They are working hard to provide support for its military families through the creation of Family Centers all around the world. These centers offer youth programs at a total of 320 locations to serve the 1.3 million children of military families.³

Family separations are occurring more frequently than ever before, and that's why this book is so timely. The ideas presented here are simple steps you can take to keep you and your loved ones as connected as possible. You'll see what other people do to bridge the distance, and I'll also be sharing some stories from my own life and family about keeping that strong connection. Some are funny and some are touching; I hope all will be inspiring.

I've interviewed over 600 military families, done personal research, and compiled the observations and ideas within these pages. While some strategies are specific to military personnel, others are tailored to the unique demands of the military family. Included are things your family can do before, during, and after deployment. Remember, most of these ideas are directly from you...what's worked for you in the past.

Technology has certainly helped close the gap between us when we're apart, but it doesn't replace the special times, the special moments, and the personal ways you have of sharing time with the family when you're right there with each other. This book will help you take your own special, personal times with you when you're away.

I'm Already Home...Again is designed to help you discover unique and wonderful ways to stay connected when you're apart from each other. It's as simple as that. You may already have a couple of traditions in place but would just like to try something new for a change. I hope you find at least a few new ideas that spark you to think, "That's cool. We should try that." Take an idea and apply a special twist to it so that *your* family can own it now.

Throughout the book I refer to soldiers, airmen, sailors and marines as they relate to where a particular idea originated from and who submitted it. Please know that I mean no disrespect when I use these references interchangeably. You're all part of our collective "military family."

I encourage you to write on the pages and make personal notes in the margins when something strikes you. Then you'll know where to quickly find that special idea.

My prayer is for every serviceperson's safe return, and I hope that the messages in *I'm Already Home...Again* will play a small part in easing your family through the challenging experience of remote assignments and deployments.