



The Road Home

Your Journey Begins



Why we're here . . .

Welcome to the next step in our journey together. Since 2003, I've been a part of all you've been going through with your military deployments and temporary assignments. The first part of the journey was preparing yourself and your family for deployment. The next part was keeping you strong and connected with each other throughout that deployment or as the case with many of you, multiple deployments. We've become friends. You've shared your families, your hearts, your ideas and stories with me over the years. I saw it as my honor and responsibility to share your ideas with many others in the books *I'm Already Home* and *I'm Already Home...Again*. I've learned so much from you and what you've been going through, and as an active civilian I've become a part of your journey, too. Now we're ready to begin step 3: your journey back home. I say that we're beginning this step because that's what this book is. It's the first look at the joys, challenges and issues involved in bringing you back together.

You've come to expect certain things from me and my books, and I won't let you down. I've helped you while you've been apart, so it only seems logical that I should be a part of helping you come home. As you know, reunion and the entire process of reintegrating is something that takes time. "Home" is a journey, not a destination.

Over the past year, I've begun talking with you to collect your best reunion ideas, stories and resources that were the biggest help to you as you reunited. There have been

so many that I often found myself delaying the start of my writing while I waited for all this wonderful information to come in. I can also tell you that this has been a painful process as well. As one woman wrote, “Homecoming is not all balloons and parties!” While bringing people back together is wonderful, many who are returning are not the same people they were when they left. I can’t write an honest look at reunion without sharing articles and input from experts on PTSD, combat stress, injuries, and loss. At times, it became a daunting task; one where I felt overwhelmed. I finally realized that I had to begin, and that this book, *The Road Home* is just that . . . a beginning. I’ll give you what I have now, knowing that much more will arrive via my website, interviews and phone calls. We’ll learn new things, discover new resources and government programs, and I can bring you updated editions over the coming years.

You know that my faith helped me write the first two books, and if I was having trouble getting started with this third one, I considered that maybe I wasn’t doing it in God’s time. I shared my thoughts with a very special friend, LeAnn. She wrapped me in a comforting hug and said, “If He calls you to it, He’ll sustain you through it.” It was exactly what I needed to hear. Now I’m ready to begin.

Reunion and reintegration has started to take center stage in the life of a deployment. It’s the part that most people look to with joy and anticipation. It’s wonderful that you can be together again with a loved one and feel that you can now move your lives forward. Yet even in this relief you find that some significant challenges are creeping in. Some of these are brand new and were

never even discussed before the deployment. You know what? That's okay! In fact, just recognizing that **it's not all a bed of roses** is the first step in helping you all get back to normal—whatever that is! You begin to discover that what's happening IS normal—it's just your “new” normal.

My constant piece of advice to you throughout this book is to encourage you to reach out. That means if you think your needs are beyond the scope of this book, please reach out to the support groups, FRG and FAC leaders, chaplains, and some of the myriad resources that are out there to help. We've taken care to compile many of them here for you in the back of this book under **Resources and Support**.

My prayer is for every serviceperson's safe return, and I hope that the messages in *The Road Home* will play a small part in easing your family through the fun and challenging experience of coming together as a family or community again.

That said, welcome to the journey home!

Where we're going . . .

Last year I was speaking for a Navy “Returning Warriors Weekend,” and after the general session, I led a smaller workshop addressing some of the concerns people have about returning home after deployments. There were about 60 folks in the room representing both the families at home and the sailors who had just returned. These sessions are usually fun and noisy with all the ideas being tossed out. To begin, I posed the following question to the group, “What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear that your spouse is coming home?” A woman about halfway back in the crowd jumped to her feet and without hesitation shouted out, I think, “*How the heck did my butt get this big?!*” Well, those weren’t the exact words she used; I toned them down a bit. No matter what the words were, everyone in the room knew exactly what she meant! In fact, one man stood up and said, “My wife is deployed, and when I know she’s coming home I look in the mirror thinking that my gut has gotten way out of control.” So with this, I’m thinking that it’s a “Butts and Guts” kind of thing.

But no matter what *your* first thoughts are, the preparation, excitement and apprehension begin to kick in from the moment you hear the words, “I’m coming home!” Deployment is not just about the time you had apart. Reunion is a vital part of the deployment cycle and it goes beyond the homecoming parties. And single deployments have become multiple deployments. At first, families would “stick it out” thinking that it’s only going to be this one time. That’s been a rude awakening.

Going through two or three deployments is becoming more and more common.

Even through the unknowns, the families I've met have stepped up to the challenge and continued to work harder and stronger to keep this from taking a permanent toll on their family. What do they say helps them a lot? Being "proactive" instead of "reactive." They know more now about what it's going to be like, and they know where to go for information. They know they have to take charge of their own lives and create the best environment they can for those around them.

We have also discovered that you aren't in this alone. I remember way back in late 2002 and early 2003 when it was determined that family support programs and resources were needed. There wasn't much in play before that time that we knew about. Over the next few years, I watched the development of amazing growth and response in this area as the need continued. The military "answered the call" for the families by establishing programs of support and readiness. The programs grew as the need grew, and it continues today.

The same goes for reunion and reintegration. As our servicemembers began coming home . . . and re-deploying . . . issues were arising in the families and communities. A lot of this stemmed from lack of information and misunderstanding. Once again, I'm seeing the military step up to put help in motion.

Is the system perfect? Far from it, but progress is being made. When this book comes out, the Yellow Ribbon reintegration program will be about six months old, and it resulted from federal legislation. At its very base level,

states are required to provide trainings 30, 60, and 90 days following return home. It would be great if circumstances would allow a servicemember to be actively involved in reintegration trainings even a year after his/her return, but that doesn't always happen. At one conference, this issue was brought up: How to track servicemembers in their command after 180 days or so and keep in touch? Some responses included:

- On the unit level, get their cell phone numbers and have a “well” call list just to find out how things are.
- Make better use of “exit interviews.” You can record information for follow up.
- Act in a “wingman” concept. No matter the size of the unit, someone out there knows “Joe,” where he is and why he left. Take care of each other.
- In each unit, assign someone specific who would be devoted to reunion and reintegration—or at least a contact person. This person could be available to connect people with foundations that provide assistance or other resources.
- Pay special attention to those whose lives take them away, like civilian job transfers, no support system for single servicemembers, and those who have drug/alcohol problems but are not in treatment.

I see the establishment of these programs being rooted in the belief that assistance and resources should be made available on an ongoing basis. I'm proud to be one of those resources.

How we'll get there . . .

Servicepersons don't deploy alone. When they leave they take with them the family members, friends and colleagues who care about them and their well being. More than 57.6 million people are impacted by soldiers, airmen, sailors and marines deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq.¹ When your loved one comes home he or she is also coming home to all those other people. That's why it's important to help everyone affected make this transition as smooth as possible.

The Road Home is designed to help you discover unique and wonderful ways to reconnect and find yourselves again following a deployment or assignment. It's as simple as that. You might 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 unique 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 the origination of a particular idea 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," and most of the ideas are applicable across branch lines.

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.

Above all, I find that people on both sides of deployment just want an answer to the question, “Am I normal?” Reunion requires change, and change can cause stress as you rediscover what “normal” is. Each chapter of this book will help you answer that question for yourself and most likely you’ll find that yes, what you’re feeling and experiencing is “normal” and others are feeling it, too. Together we’ll look at the blessings and bruises, tears and triumphs, hopes and challenges of your reunion and reintegration and learn what military families around the world are doing and using to smooth the transition back home.

Let me tell you how this book structure came about. As you know by now, over the past years I’ve spoken with thousands of families about deployments, assignments and reunions. When I knew that it was only a matter of time until I wrote a book about reunion and reintegration, I began to ask people, “What is an area of reunion that you have questions or feel apprehensive about?” As you can imagine, the answers were many and varied, from the wonderfully funny to the very serious. Out of all the responses, many seemed to fall into the nine general categories I’ve listed below in no particular order:

- Dealing with changed roles at home
- Personal image, sex and intimacy (back together as a couple)
- Getting back into routines with friends and family
- How I’ll adjust to my “New Normal”
- Reunion and the kids—especially dealing with discipline
- Fitting back in at work (outside of active service)

- PTSD and combat stress—how to recognize and handle it
- Initial homecoming activities
- How to be sure we are communicating—talking to each other again
- Dealing with loss and grief

Although not in the above “Top 10,” the following ideas and thoughts were also expressed:

- Fitting back into the world as a single person and/or single parent
- Recognizing those who return wounded
- A bit about reuniting “blended” families

I decided that each of the chapters in this book would address one of the above categories where I would share your ideas, resources, stories and solutions as they apply to each. Of course we know that there’s a lot more to consider upon reunion, but as I mentioned earlier, addressing these will be our first step.

What military families need to know— Ideas to get us started . . .

As you'd expect, not everything that I want to tell you fits neatly into one of the categories. Unlike a duffle bag, I couldn't cram everything I wanted to say into chapters, and some things just seemed to be over-arching themes that encompassed so much more. There are some general thoughts I want to share as we begin because I liked them!

1 I heard this quite a bit: Be realistic in your expectations of others. This will involve patience on everyone's part, and I know it will take some time, but it's worth it. Someone told me once that if you don't "over expect" a certain response from someone then you won't ever be disappointed. I guess that kind of sums it up, and the reality of what happens will be so much easier to deal with.

My grandparents on my mother's side were married for over 65 years, and from what I saw were very happy. When I was first married, I talked to "Mimi" about what made them get along so well. Her response was short and to the point. She said, "There are two things. First, always sleep in the same bed (they never had twin beds) and never let the sun set on an argument." They could be arguing about something during the day but would always try hard to come to a solution or compatible breaking point before they went to bed. Mimi said that the two pieces of advice went hand-in-hand because it's really hard to sleep in the same bed when you're mad at each other. I know from my own marriage,

that's the truth! So to follow on my grandmother's advice, here's what Cheryl said:

2 Remember that if you left a problem on the table when you deployed, it will probably be there when you get back. These concerns just don't disappear—especially when they involve people or money. So what does this mean? Clear up issues before you head out. It's hard to have a disagreement hanging over your heads while you're thousands of miles apart for many months, and who wants it there when you come back?

The next two are ideas that combine what they did during the deployment to stay connected and how it carried over to coming home.

3 “When my husband was deployed to Afghanistan '05—'07, I bought a nice journal and gave it to him. I asked him to write his first letter home in it and mail the book back to us. In return I wrote a letter back to him in it and had our kids do the same, and then I mailed the book back to him. My husband got the idea and kept it up. At the end of the deployment the book was full. All the letters, photos, drawings, poems, news clippings—you name it—were in the book (in order of date written or added). It made us all feel connected in a way that regular mail could not have done. We sent individual letters back and forth, too, and added them to the book later since it took a few weeks to get the book back. We wanted Daddy to get MAIL all the time, not just when we were waiting for the book. He brought it home with him, and the coolest part was looking at it again together when he came home. It makes a wonderful keepsake, and it's something that

you can take out anytime and share with others, or just look at it again yourself. It was a great idea and well worth the effort.” Thank you so much for sharing that, Irma.

4 Speaking of bringing something home, here’s what Nicki did: “I sent him a small jade turtle that he had given me for one of my birthdays. I collect turtles, so he knows it is special to me. I instructed him in my six-page letter to make sure that he returns it to me personally!”

What is something special to you that you can send overseas to be returned personally?

5 Be ready to adapt to change because there will be a lot of it going on. Neither people nor situations will be the same as when you left, even if you were only gone on a short-term assignment. It’s important for me to say that as I get to know you better, I see a great deal of resiliency in military families. You put up with a lot, which causes you to stretch out of your comfort zone; when you need to, you can spring back to normal again. It’s that resiliency that makes you all so special.

One thing that I heard a number of times in sessions brought by youth and family counselors is to have patience. Please realize that reintegration is not an overnight process, and that’s normal! It can take some families up to a year to totally readjust. Not a happy thought, but one that just might help you take everything day by day.

6 Are you a Family Readiness or Family Support leader? Be sure there are systems set up and in place for reintegration issues that families might have

so you can be ready to help with the challenges. Know who and what your resources will be when you need them. It's been suggested that you set up your support systems to address the needs in three areas: Short-term immediate needs, moderate needs—those that will begin to show up three to six months after return, and Long-term and ongoing needs. These might involve health and child care, care for wounded, and marriage/counseling assistance.



Personally I find www.MilitaryOneSource.com to be a valuable resource for all three of these areas.



An open letter to the returning servicemember:

Things happened while you were gone, as they had to in order for your home to continue to run itself. Responsibilities changed and sometimes people had to change, too, in order to meet the needs of the household.

The person who remained home discovered that he/she really could balance the checkbook, call in repairmen, do the cooking, get the kids where they had to go and when they had to be there, and make the available money last for the expected length of time. Those successes make people feel good about who they are and what they can accomplish when the need arises; however, feelings of inadequacy may develop if it didn't go as well as planned. Look for positive changes that have occurred, and don't jump on what you perceive as negative changes. Watch for how the changes are working.

You're home now, so everything can return to normal—whatever that is—but probably not right away. There will be a transition period where you'll become “reacquainted” again as a family. If you have small

children, don't be alarmed if they cry or resist your hugs immediately. They've been without you for so long, and it takes a while for them to get comfortable with you again. Take time to observe your children in their everyday routines, and slowly allow yourself to become a part of those routines again.

You'll need to reacquaint yourself again with your spouse. Talk about how everything got done at home in your absence. See what worked and what didn't. Maybe things don't have to go right back to the way they were; it might not be the best solution. The key is to share your expectations with each other. Ask your spouse, "Do you want to hand over the checkbook right away, or did you find that you enjoyed that responsibility?" Perhaps he/she would like to continue to be an active part of your family's financial planning. Oh, and don't forget that compliments and expressing appreciation for the extra work he/she did go a long way!

Don't keep all your thoughts secret, but do allow for some "welcome home" time to pass as you bask in the rediscovery of each other. Here's a tip from a family counselor: "Remember that if you maintained closeness and intimacy during the absence, as well as when you're together, then it will feel just like the continuation of what you've been building all along." She also offers, "Love is a decision; decide on romance." We'll talk more about that in the chapter on intimacy. In the meantime, welcome home. We're really glad to have you back!

There is one thought that I want you to keep close throughout this entire time. Everything doesn't happen all at once. You have to continually watch for the little things that happen and cherish the impact that each has on your life. Remember:

Don't expect Miracles; expect Moments!



Chapter One

REUNION - First Days Back



Reunion—First Days Back



Everything starts with “The Call” . . .

At first, my logical mind was telling me that reunion begins with your first day back together. Boy did I have that wrong! Preparation begins way before that, at the time you get “the call” that your servicemember is finally coming home. I will start with some general advice from a few people who would like to share what they’ve learned because they’ve been through it before. Realize that everyone’s experiences with both deployment and reunion are very personal and can be extremely different. My hope in bringing you the thoughts of others is that somewhere, sometime, you’ll stumble upon something said that will just “hit home” with you. You’ll think to yourself, *Was this person sitting in my kitchen watching us?* I don’t want anyone to miss that moment. So pick out what you like best and what you need from the advice given and put it to good use.

I found the most sage advice about where reunion really starts came from Jenn. Her husband is a SSG in the Army. We sat in my office talking about this entire process and her ideas were so good that I just told her to write them down herself so they can come to you directly. Here’s what she said:

7 “Weeks before the actual ceremony you will start thinking about all the things you wish you would

have accomplished before he returned. Don't stress yourself out unnecessarily. When your soldier returns he will not notice that you haven't cleaned the tub in weeks or that the carpet needs to be cleaned. He will notice if you are there to greet him. If it is at all possible, meet your spouse at the homecoming ceremony. I have heard from more than one returning soldier how terrible it was to arrive there and see everyone else be greeted by loved ones. So focus on what is really important.

Also, stay flexible. Your FRG or FAC's really will do the best job they can communicating to you when the ship or boat is returning or when your soldier or marine will land at the airfield. However, as with anything in the military the only constant is change. Stay flexible and "keep your eye on the prize" so to speak. Ultimately, your soldier will return home when the military says so. Try to be ready when the call comes. Often times change occurs at the last minute, so plan to arrive early just in case!

8 In preparation for the homecoming ceremony, do take care of the things that have been neglected, but consider that messy yard your "gift" to him . . . "I know how you love yard work, Honey, so I saved it for you." It's been said that the state of the yard is directly correlated to the length and number of deployments, and I think it has to be true. When you are the "spread thin 'single' parent" you prioritize, and somehow pulling weeds never made it to the top of my list until the HOA (Homeowners Association) told me I had to. Neither did changing light bulbs.

9 Communicate with your ombudsman or FRG leader. They will be a direct link to those who are in the know. They are hopefully doing a good job keeping

you informed as they get updates, but don't be afraid to call and ask or send an email to your FRG leader or FAC if you have questions. Those last few weeks or days before the ceremony were crazy at my house. My own To Do List went right out the window because there were so many "inquiring minds," and that was okay. Ultimately when Mike came home, he didn't care about all the things I hadn't had a chance to finish. But he did appreciate being home and sleeping in clean sheets in his own bed and that first home-cooked meal.

10 Attend any demobilization or reunion info sessions you can. Even if you hate your FRG, and we know some of you do, there will be information presented that will be valuable to you. Once your soldier gets here, you might not want anything to do with the military. TRUST ME, that might be the case for at least a few weeks, perhaps even months. So now before your world turns upside down with his return, attend these meetings and make sure your name and information is updated to get last-minute phone calls and emails about homecoming changes. There will be important details distributed by people who know things that you don't even know you need to know!

Everyone else you know will start asking when he is coming home weeks before he actually does. And they will all say, "Wow, ___weeks; that is really getting close." Resist the urge to scream! However many weeks is short compared to what you've endured, but it will still drag by at moments. In hindsight, it will seem to have flown by! In those moments of inquiring minds, be careful what info you release. Unfortunately in today's world, we do need to be cognizant of operational security. For the safety of your soldier or sailor, limit

the details you divulge. Unless they are a family member planning to attend the ceremonies, they do not need to know exact times, dates and locations. Of course, you can probably trust your friends, but you never know who else is listening when you are having a conversation, so use caution just in case.

As you prepare for the return, know that all your feelings really are normal. All those doubts, questions and worries are being had by other loved ones in your battalion, and so rest assured someone has been there. I by no means mean to trivialize what each individual is going through, but older, wiser, experienced friends or FACs can be a great resource.

All those *Will he still love me? Will he be different? Will I still like him?* thoughts are normal. In no time at all you will have one of those *Ahhh, I forgot you do that* thoughts about some annoying habit you romanticized in his absence. It will all come back to you quickly enough. So enjoy for now.

Even happy change is stressful. Be flexible, be patient, and communicate with each other and those who know something you may not.

I promise there is nothing else like the energy you will feel in that gymnasium, hangar or airfield as the guys deplane or disembark or even just march through the door. The first time you lay eyes on him again will be a moment and a feeling that you will never forget. It's overwhelming being surrounded by a crowd of strangers or even friends who feel the same way about seeing their own servicemember for the first time in weeks, months or even years. You will feel a connection to those people, even though the moment is an intimate one.

11 Be prepared for your kids to feel a sense of being emotionally overwhelmed, as well. I did not expect my kids to be so emotional. They are boys and they rarely show emotion, but we all sobbed that day. Of course, they were tears of joy at his safe return, but nonetheless it was emotionally draining.

12 If possible, do make friends with others who are going through it. Your sister and friends from your hometown are great, but having someone who is feeling it while you are is a great comfort. I could not have survived without my battle buddies, and through my FRG involvement I met quite a few.

13 Also, if possible bring a personal photographer to the ceremony. If it is someone who knows you but doesn't feel the need to participate in the hugging, great! Count yourself lucky! That will allow you to focus and so can he, without extra people to hug and kiss. Having those photos to look back on will be something you cherish. My friend Deb took pictures for us and I am so glad she did. She had never met Mike, so there was no expectation or sense of obligation for either of them. He did hug her hello after our moment was finished, but he didn't even know she was "with us" until the excitement settled down and I introduced them.

Overall, try to limit the extra people who attend. There will be a time and place where your hubby can greet his neighbors, your best friend from college, and his football buddies, but here in this homecoming moment, less really is more. Mike was so appreciative that it was just the kids and me in that moment. Weeks before he told me his ideal homecoming would be just the boys

and me in an empty room. Well, the event center wasn't empty, but everyone else there was enjoying their own intimate reunion moment so it was the next best thing. No one else was standing there waiting to hug him, so he could and did focus on each of us individually and as a group.

14 Prep your kids for the things you know. “Dad will be less patient than you remember,” or “We need to give Dad some space.” It will be tempting not to let him out of your sight for the first few days, and most units do a good job forcing you to by requiring demobs and refits. You may need to reassure your kiddos that he will go to work . . . “but just until lunch time,” or “Dad needs a little break.” I also tried to get my kids to understand that Dad really missed us. He had only his battle buddies and coworkers, and he was in a strange place with no one who loved him. We at least had each other this whole time, our house, our dog, our friends, our schools, all the people we normally saw. Sure our routines had been a little different, but we got to sleep in our own beds and celebrate our holidays at home. We missed him and only him, while he had to miss everyone. That really helped my kids.

15 In the first weeks back, I made sure to spend alone time with my kids without their dad. They were used to having my attention and talking to me about their feelings, and those first few weeks were stressful. The first time Mike snapped at one of the kids, I felt the need to “circle the wagons” and protect my kiddos, even though I love my husband. Make time to pull kids aside or at least be open to moments of conversation where they can release what they are feeling about Dad being back. I found that driving

somewhere with the two of them worked great. Just me and my boys. We could have a conversation where no one was forced to make eye contact—the rear view mirror is not as intimidating as Mom staring you down, and we could really talk about it. It was a natural opportunity, not forced; it worked great for us.

A few different times Grant said, “Dad sure is grumpy,” when we all came down off of the adrenaline high of homecoming. I tried to get him to see and understand that Dad had even more changes to adjust to than we did. At ten, he really was able to understand that. He’s a little sponge and implements the things he hears easily without much effort. That helped him to realize he needed to be mindful of his behavior and not try Dad’s patience more than necessary. Of course, he was still a kid, and I circled the wagons a few times in those first couple of months. I did run interference for them, acting as a buffer sometimes to make it go more smoothly for everyone involved. Mike didn’t want to feel like he was yelling or getting impatient either. So I did feel a sense of responsibility to make sure everyone had all their cards on the table, so to speak. And the kids knew what was expected.

16 Immediately after the return home, if you can avoid it, don’t force anything to change such as discipline, haircuts, budgeting, etc. Rash decisions can be made in the days that follow that “reunion honeymoon,” but those changes are sometimes irreversible. Kids are stressed, too, about how Dad will feel about them, so accept what you can. Mike had to endure a “hippie” haircut on Grant for a bit. When he couldn’t take it anymore he forced Grant to get his haircut, and boy was Dad sorry. The barber didn’t listen, and Grant

ended up “scalped.” Dad realized that having his kid feel like he hadn’t “fit his mold” made Grant feel terrible. Mike will never force a haircut again, and even though I know Grant has forgiven it, he will never forget “the time Dad made the barber shave his head.” More importantly, he will remember how that made him feel.

17 Driving: Most units will caution service-members not to drive for a little while post deployment. This is for many reasons, so take it slow. Many freshly returned servicemembers commit traffic violations and are issued tickets in the first few days back. The “deployment” card doesn’t usually work in these instances. They may need some time to adjust back to our traffic rules. If they’ve been driving with no speed limit in which every lane is empty, even the oncoming one, they may still instinctually try to do that once they return. Allow some time before driving is expected or even allowed.

How’s that for jumping right in with some great overall advice? Thanks to Jenn and her family for letting us take a look into that critical prep time.

Now let’s hear from Ashley. What I like especially about her advice is that even though it’s written with her spouse in mind, I found it to be good advice for all family members of a serviceperson. I’ve taken the liberty of substituting “servicemember” for “spouse” so that you’ll all identify with what she shares.

“We have had many deployments and many homecomings over the last seven years. Before your servicemember leaves overseas, you might be talking about big plans for when he/she comes home. You want

this time to be special, so you might be thinking about a vacation or having lots of things planned to make this time special, but one that would throw him/her face first into the world that was missed. I caution you, for their sake and yours, this might not be the reality you experience when he/she gets home. Many times we make plans to do special things, to go here or there when we're together again. So . . .

18 Try as hard as you can not to get hurt when only some (or even none) of those plans really happen. The reality is that he or she will be sooooo very tired from jet lag and will have just traveled several days to get back to you here at home. He/she will be tired. The truth is, after the welcome home celebration he/she will want to SLEEP.

Of course it's normal to be offended that sleep is taking priority, but try to cut a little slack. For the past year, your servicemember has been on a very different time schedule from yours. It takes time to adjust. Be patient. He/she really does want to do all those things you have planned, but for right now is happy with just sitting on the couch watching TV or doing things around the house. Remember that when your servicemember gets home, those plans you made will not be as important to your loved one as just being there in the same house with you."

19 Here's something that Ashley did to let the others in her husband's unit know that they are all part of the same military family. "I made three slideshows while my husband was gone. The first and third were for our own family, and the second is a tribute to him and his fellow coworkers. Throughout the

deployment he sent me pictures of everyone, and I used these in their slideshow. I wanted to pay tribute to all of them for their time and sacrifice and tell them that all they went through was not forgotten or overlooked. I am proud of each and every one of them. This was THEIR TRIBUTE! If it weren't for them risking their lives, we wouldn't have the freedom we enjoy. I made copies of the slideshow and sent them to the people who were in the photos. This was sent in support of the red, white and blue!"

You know the best part? Ashley sent me the slideshows she made so that I got to see them, too. They were wonderful, and Ashley says that they weren't all that difficult to produce.

20 Jean's advice starts at home. She suggests that you "only make minor decorative changes to the house (who cares if it's clean or not), indulge in primping yourself so you look and feel your best, get the kids to design *Welcome Home* tee shirts with fabric paint, and then go to the MOB site and wait. After all it's one of the best days of your life!"

James agrees. He says to go easy on the decorating and rearranging. He and many others really want the comfort and familiarity of coming home to exactly the surroundings they left. It lends a great sense of security. In fact, he said, "After the Gulf War, I wish my wife had labeled items around the house! I felt like I was in someone else's home, not mine. I had to ask where the towels and soap were and things like which cabinet the canned goods were in now." He may have said this with a bit of jest, but in reality, "It was weird not to know where things were."

Our next pieces of sage wisdom are from two women who are in dual service marriages. I guess that gives them twice the insight. Our first, Angela, says that “Reunion and reintegration for our family presents new challenges each time we go through it. The things that worked best for us were:

21 Have few expectations and be very patient with one another.

22 Another helpful thing was to blank out time on the calendar. We limited visitors to very select people and did not plan to travel or vacation right off. We took things very slowly while getting to know each other again and fitting back into one another’s routines.”

Melanie says, “My husband deployed to Iraq in 2004. We both serve in the military so it was easier for me to understand what he was going through. Even being in the military I found myself losing patience with not knowing what was going on, when they were leaving, when they were getting to their FOB, when he was coming home for R&R, etc. The most difficult was when he was returning for good.

23 The best advice I can give is to remember that everyone is different in what they envision for their reunion. Communication is essential. I envisioned a romantic dinner that night with no kids and a night on the town. He envisioned going to bed to sleep and unwind and then some ‘cuddle’ time. Like I said, communication is essential! If I had gone ahead and made my plans without talking with him, we’d both have been miserable.

24 I also remember that my first reaction was to meet him at his MOB site when he first returned. From our experience, this wouldn't have worked. He was exhausted from his long trip. He had several long days ahead of him to complete everything he needed to get done in order to be done for good. Those few days allowed him to get readjusted and catch his breath.

(Author's note: I have now presented both sides of this issue, so be sure to evaluate your personal circumstances and do what's best for **your** family and not for others.)

So for me, the two major keys I found to a successful reunion were communication (as much as possible) and patience! I wish you all a safe deployment and a wonderful reunion. God Bless!"

You remember Melanie saying that you really do need to communicate about what your homecoming plans are. Most families are just fine showing up at the airport and continuing home to a planned event that you all are expecting. Not sure exactly what to do to make this event even more special? Let's hear what others have done.