

Military OneSource Podcast — Finding Your Place as a New Service Member

Episode transcript

Intro voice-over:

Welcome to the Military OneSource podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit militaryonesource.mil.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast, I'm Bruce Moody. Today, we're going to talk about what it's like to be new to the military. There's a lot of great advice in today's episode, and it's brought to you by a private first class that I interviewed while visiting Fort Bragg.

Now, I suspect that many of you listening to this podcast are a bit older than the PFC in today's episode. I know I am, I'm a retired Navy chief and it's been years, but I can still recall the sheer velocity of life during that time.

And so, I'm going to ask that you think of someone you want to share this episode with, somebody who can benefit from getting an idea of what to expect, some tips on how to deal with those initial weeks and months of training and growing in order to support the warrior ethos. That's my ask of you.

And of course, if you have any questions or comments about today's episode, use the link in the program notes, we always like to hear from you.

So here's today's episode. We're going to have a conversation today with Pfc. Nicole Miller.

Pfc. Nicole Miller:

Hello. How are you?

Bruce Moody:

I'm well. So good. We were just chatting. You were telling me your life story, and I said "Pause," because I really want to hear this in the recording. I think it's a really interesting perspective on the military life, your view on the world, the view on the

military. So, let's go back as far as you want to go because it goes back beyond the date that you took the oath of enlistment.

Pfc. Nicole Miller:

Yes. So, I enlisted two years ago, actually on March 20, but before that I was a military spouse, well, since 2015. My ex-husband is a Marine. He's stationed currently at Camp Lejeune. So, basically through marriage, right outside of high school, got married to him. I was young; he was young. We did the typical military thing with getting married young and moving away for the first time from our families. We went to San Diego, MCAS, Miramar, which was a really cool experience. Being able to grow up there in your early 20s was nothing like it. And then from there we went to Hawaii. And we were at K-Bay for a few years, and that was an altering experience for me and for our relationship. It's ultimately what broke us, I would say. But it was paradise. So, there's that, nonetheless. And then from there, we went to Camp Lejeune in North Carolina.

I was there for about a year. During that time, I did have a son. And about seven months, when he was 7 months old, I left my eight-year marriage and decided to enlist into the Army myself. So, my decision to enlist was basically the cards I was dealt. I didn't focus on my career throughout that time of marriage, unfortunately. So, I was left scrambling with big life decisions, trying to figure out how I can support my son the quickest and most stable way possible. And with being affiliated with the military for so long, I was like, why not? So, I went for it. I studied for the ASVAB for about a month and a half. And mind you, I'm like 28 at this point, so I haven't been in math or any type of schooling for over 10 years, and I scored an 82 on my ASVAB.

Bruce Moody:

For folks who don't know, an 82 means?

Pfc. Nicole Miller:

Higher than average. So, 50 would be the average. Anything below that, pretty good. Pretty good. And I did that for the sole purpose of getting any job I wanted because I wasn't going to let them choose. So, I got the score I wanted. I got the job I wanted being public affairs. And all I had to do is now just ship out, which happened in less than two weeks after taking that test. That was pretty tough because I was a mother for over a year at this point, and I went from being a full-time stay-at-home mom and wife to now being away from my son and being freshly separated. It was pretty tough. And being in an environment I was not very comfortable in at first. But my why was always bigger than my can't. So, honestly, what allowed me to get through basic training and AIT.

Bruce Moody:

AIT being the school. We have a lot of people who don't know all of these acronyms now. We have to understand this. Okay. So, what was the first thing that you experienced that you said, "Wow, I didn't expect that?" From your days as a military spouse to being in the military, what was the first, "Wow, I wasn't anticipating this kind of a moment?"

Pfc. Nicole Miller:

I think the first experience would be, it goes back to when I was in basic training, how in their face they can get. And like I said, me being older and ...

Bruce Moody:

For those who get the wrong impression, they still get in your face. They get in your face and they're really, really good at it.

Pfc. Nicole Miller:

Yes, without touching you, obviously. And they'll call you names. That was the most shocking thing to me. Honestly, the way that I was raised, it wasn't hard, but the fact that I could not talk back or stick up for myself in a way that I would've liked just biting my tongue, it was different. So, that was hard.

Bruce Moody:

Now, as you're going through, you're going through basic training and then AIT again. AIT is your training, in your case, public affairs. It's all going at a very fast pace. Did it seem fast at the time? Or when you look back at it, did it seem fast? How do you rate that?

Pfc. Nicole Miller:

Basic training, it flew by. As far as the schooling went for AIT, that dragged really, really long. Just because our school is a little bit longer than a lot of MOS's or other jobs. I was there for about eight months in total, so that was eight months more without my son, along with the two months or two and a half months of basic training. So, AIT really dragged. But now that I hit my unit, it's flown. It seems like I just got here Feb. 8 last year.

Bruce Moody:

I wanted to talk about some of the resources that are around you. So, you're experiencing a lot of newness all the time. Again, when you join the military, the concept of something being new and just maybe you can give me your thoughts on this. But for me, everything was so new every day that you almost get into a mindset that you're going to experience something brand new today. And it's almost weird when you don't.

Pfc. Nicole Miller:

Yeah, I think that's one of the things that I love about the military, is every day it is new. Even if you have an office job and things are slow, there's always something to do. There's always going to be something new that they ask you to do. Whether it's learning a new task or being assigned some busy work per se, that you learn things through. It's not always fun.

But yeah, the resources here, as far as this installation in general, we have this soldier support center. I honestly thought it was so smart to have one building for everything that you needed when you first get here, because you don't always have a car. I didn't when I first got here, so I literally had to walk from the barracks to here and start my in-processing. And during the in-processing, you get all the information you need for all the resources that you can possibly use or that you will be using, which was really helpful. And that's where you learn about a lot of resources for not just yourself but your family as well. So, just this support center has been honestly very, very great.

Bruce Moody:

How important is it to understand all of the stuff that's available to you, versus the value of just speaking up to an NCO and saying, "I've got this issue," or "I've got these questions?"

Pfc. Nicole Miller:

In my opinion, it's very important just because our NCOs — they are just like us. So, my NCOs are great, and they help where they can, but sometimes they don't know.

Bruce Moody:

Is your NCO behind you?

Pfc. Nicole Miller:

Yes.

Bruce Moody:

Okay. That explains the flowery speech. But let's just ...

Pfc. Nicole Miller:

In all seriousness, he's really great. But he doesn't know everything.

Bruce Moody:

And none of us do. And that's the point. That's the point that I'm trying to get at is that really, there is so much around and there are so many ways it can be used. And two other points. You're not the first person to be in that situation. And when you are, don't think that you're taking somebody else's place in line. Don't think you're doing anyone a favor by saying, "You know what? I know somebody who needs this more than I do." That's actually the wrong way to be looking at it.

So, talk to me about the importance of just speaking up and talking to your NCO, because you've got a job to do. You've got to be ready to perform the mission all the time. But at the same time, you're a human; you're a mom; you've got stuff going on. And when you have those situations, you have a need, but you don't necessarily know everything that's available. So, the importance of talking to your NCO.

Pfc. Nicole Miller:

Yeah, so circling back, he doesn't know everything. What he does know, he tries to help me with, which is appreciated. But I have a son, he doesn't have any kids. There's some resources I might need that he doesn't know anything about. Believe it or not, I find a lot of resources through Facebook. There's community pages that I use for army moms. There's specifically one called Army Moms. And I get so much information through that. Or just the spouse pages. I'm still on some of those even though I'm not a spouse. But along with the things that I knew from being a spouse previously through the Marine Corps, they had their MWR. I don't know if it was called MWR, but we used their equivalent to rent kayaks or get tickets to Disney. It is amazing. So, through that prior knowledge and then now being here and seeing it for myself, I know how to navigate that a little bit.

Bruce Moody:

Now, in your personal resume as a former military spouse, as a mom, and you're also your fellow soldiers, are you talking to them? Are you giving them perspectives or advice or are you getting advice from them? How is that working?

Pfc. Nicole Miller:

I do talk to one particular soldier. Our office is very small, and we're pretty close. I love everyone that I work with. But I have one little private, but she's 19 and it's the first time she's away from her family. And I like to take her under my wing and be there for her how I can. And I feel like a mom to her almost because I don't know, she's not to ... I don't want to make it sound bad, but she's like a kid to me. So, her and my son, they get along so well because of it, and I literally just, I love them. So, I do take her under my wing and try to help her and mentor her in ways that I can.

Bruce Moody:

For those who don't know the military culture, the moment you learn something, you're training other people on what you've just learned.

Pfc. Nicole Miller:

So, it's just all of us learning together, even our NCOs. But I'll learn things from them that I don't know. Since they are younger, they'll teach me about lingo or what's trending. Specifically for our job, we need to know these things because we are public affairs, and we get our message out through social media. So, they might teach me something and our older NCOs as well. So, we all just bounce back from and get what we need from each other.

Bruce Moody:

Now, I want to get your perspective on being a mom in uniform. What sort of resources do you have available to you so that you're able to do your job?

Pfc. Nicole Miller:

So, I think the resources right now, like obviously childcare. The CDC is where I take my son, and that's the child development center here on post. There's quite a few of them actually. But without that, I would not be able to do my job quite literally. So, they take him; they feed him; they potty-train him; they do all the good stuff since I'm away from him for almost 12-hours-a-day, most days.

Bruce Moody:

We would include the gym in all of ... I mean, the commissary. All of these things are convenient, fun, but they just make you better able at being ready to do your job, to support the mission. They do such a good job of just sort of being there for all of the various things that you have to do in life, and it can almost seem seamless and obvious.

Pfc. Nicole Miller:

Yeah, I mean, I guess I never really think about it. I'm doing it right.

Bruce Moody:

That service is just so complete from one program to the next. You're getting a lot of support. You're getting advice, you're getting stuff, fruits and vegetables or you're getting a gym and it's all there so that you're ready to do your job.

Pfc. Nicole Miller:

Yes, all of it. The gym, that's such a good point. Since it is just me out here with my son, I need all these things. And these guys, my team in particular, if something's not working, something's out of alignment, I'll say within that daily routine. So, the CDC today wasn't able to take my son. They help me. So, right now, I just have support from all angles that do allow me to fulfill my mission for the most part, which is very fortunate for me and my son. So, that. But also, again, prior to being here as a single soldier, whenever I was married, I used a lot of therapy, counseling, and that was helpful. And then I used my CAA. I got my NASM, National Academy of Sports Medicine, so I was a CPT or a certified personal trainer, and I was allowed to get that through a \$4,000 grant from my CAA, which was super awesome. If people don't know about that, that's \$4,000 worth of any schooling you want or most schoolings certificates that you can get as a spouse or even, yeah, as a spouse.

Bruce Moody:

We've run these programs, so I'm just thrilled that you're talking about them. We'll put a link to the My CAA Scholarship in the program notes. Obviously, we are the Military OneSource podcast, and so yeah, we do offer training. We offer non-medical counseling of a variety of types, and I'm glad to hear that it was there and available for you. What do you see in the future for you?

Pfc. Nicole Miller:

You know what? That's a great question because I'm still trying to figure that out. I think if I reenlist, I want to go either to Italy or to Washington or Colorado. Those are the three hopes. But with that, I want to try to go the officer route so that I can expand my education, so that I can provide better for my son and for myself, and so that I can just see life through that perspective in the military as well. So, try to touch all bases. But yeah, that's really the goal, is just to get more school done and to hopefully go the officer route so that I'll set myself and my son up for success.

Bruce Moody:

I appreciate it. Maybe as we wrap up this conversation, maybe you can talk to somebody who's at that earliest stage. As you said, it's not the most freewheeling autonomous experience. But as they're thinking about what's coming their way, what's next? Maybe they're getting ready to finish up with school and go to their first command. Let's start there, because that's really when people have to start making decisions about their lives and how to manage it. What would be your advice to someone who's brand new to a command?

Pfc. Nicole Miller:

I think my advice to someone that's just getting to their command is finding your tribe. That's one of the main things that I can remember from each place that I went that was new. Being able to have one friend or one NCO that you can count on and talk to if you need about your struggles or even the great things that are going on in your life. Just having that support will help you no matter where you are, make that place a home. And whenever a place becomes a home, that's whenever the real fun starts.

And for me, having the military, you get to choose your family, and that's a beautiful thing. Being able to choose, hand select the people that you want to be a part of your life because you get people from all walks of earth. And it's something that unless you're in the military, you won't really understand. But it's a great thing. So, just finding your tribe, making the most of the resources around you and the area in itself because you might not always get where you want, but if you have that good group of friends, the place is going to be awesome no matter what.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, and I'll elaborate on that. Find your tribe and then be nice to everybody else because you'll meet them over, and over and over again.

Pfc. Nicole Miller:

Small world.

Bruce Moody:

Even me as a civilian, I keep bumping into the same people that I've known some unknown number of decades ago. So glad to have you on the podcast. Really appreciate you being with us today.

Pfc. Nicole Miller:

Thank you for having me. I was so glad to be here.

Bruce Moody:

And I want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. If you have a question or a comment about what you've heard today, we have a link in the program notes and you can send us your thoughts, maybe an idea for a future episode. Be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts, because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.