

Military OneSource Podcast — Navigating Military Balls With Confidence

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 talking about attending your service birthday ball. This is an episode that a lot of people have asked for. It may be the first time for them; they don't know what to expect; they don't know how to prepare; they have questions. So, while I was visiting Fort Bragg, I spoke with a soldier, went through a whole lot of questions; got a lot of answers; got a lot of advice. This is an episode that I hope that you'll share with somebody who's preparing to go to their first birthday ball because we have the information that they need to turn the stress level down and make the experience more enjoyable.

This is all part of why we do this podcast. When a military family is strong, when the stress at home is dialed down, the service member is better able to focus on the mission, simple as that. So, I hope that you find today's episode to be useful. And we always like to hear from you, we have a link in the program notes. You can send us a question or a comment about what you've heard today. And here we go, today's episode. Good to have you on the podcast. Please introduce yourself.

Capt. Joy Ngon Ngon:

Hi, I'm Capt. Joy Ngon Ngon, and I am a PAO at XVIII Airborne Corps.

Bruce Moody:

Awesome, PAO being public affairs officer. And we're here to talk about, well, here's the background. So, we also have a blog. And on this blog, it's intended for military spouses. And it's written by military spouses for military spouses. By the way, if you're listening to this, we'll put a link in the program notes — you can write for the blog brigade. We'll put a link in the program notes to tell you exactly how to do it. But I will tell you, the most popular post on that blog is letting spouses know how to prepare for their service

birthday ball, which is why we're having this conversation because trust me, you don't want any fashion advice from me. Okay. Alright, so this podcast is for everybody across the military. But I do want to mention, because you said you wanted to mention, that this year, the Army turns 250 years. So, if you're wanting to go to a birthday ball where they're really, really trying to make it really shine, the Army birthday ball this year is the one to go to, right?

Capt. Joy Ngon Ngon:

Yeah, absolutely. You only turn 250 years old one time.

Bruce Moody:

Oh, yeah.

Capt. Joy Ngon Ngon:

So, there's going to be balls all over the country. The Army birthday is June 14. So, if you're looking for a birthday ball near you, just check with your local command and see if there's one happening because it really is a historic event. We're going to be celebrating a lot that week. So, there's an opportunity there, just more motivation to go see something extraordinary and exceptional and beautiful.

Bruce Moody:

Thank you.

Capt. Joy Ngon Ngon:

Make those core memories. It's important.

Bruce Moody:

Alright, we will. So, generally speaking, what do you want spouses to know about these service birthday balls, regardless of the service that they're affiliated with?

Capt. Joy Ngon Ngon:

So, most units will typically have a ball as an annual event, and they're there as an opportunity for you to go out with your soldier or your Airman or your Marine or whoever your partner is that is asking you to go to this event with you. And you get to see this incredible combination of people coming together to celebrate unit history and the morale between one another. So, it's really a special night, and it's something that you're making memories with your significant other.

Bruce Moody:

Is it fun?

Capt. Joy Ngon Ngon:

Absolutely.

Bruce Moody:

Okay. But if you're nervous, you're not going to have fun. And maybe we'll have a conversation, we'll go through some of the things that make people nervous, and maybe that will allow people to have more fun. Sound good?

Capt. Joy Ngon Ngon:

Sounds great.

Bruce Moody:

Alright, so where do we begin? Again, I'm going to be really relying on you to help me with this conversation. But maybe we can begin by unpacking, you mentioned what the purpose of a ball is. Maybe we can give people a sense of what generally is happening at one of these service birthday balls.

Capt. Joy Ngon Ngon:

Yeah. So typically, you are going to arrive. There's going to be a cocktail hour and a social hour. So usually, in most situations, there would be an open bar. Sometimes units are able to coordinate for childcare on site, so you drop your kiddos off if you've got them. And that will open up into a receiving line where you get to walk through, and you meet the command team with your date and introduce and make those formal introductions. And between that time, you're getting to just socialize, and get to know people that you may get to interact with on a sparse occasion. But it's an opportunity to solidify those ties and really build friendship and partnership within the spouses in your assigned location.

Bruce Moody:

So how should a military spouse refer to their service member's boss when they're at one of these birthday balls?

Capt. Joy Ngon Ngon:

So, it would be either a sir or a ma'am or a sergeant. But if you don't feel comfortable reading ranks, which side note, there's always great resources out there, you can look up on Google and familiarize with ranks or tie in with your readiness group, and ask for support from a more seasoned spouse, but you can always just look at a person's name because at the end of the day, we're all human beings. And nobody is going to be offended from a beloved spouse referring to them as their actual name because guess what? It's on our uniforms.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, yeah, that's true. And that's the way life should be. It's so much easier in the military. But let me try it this way, would it be a good plan for a military spouse to talk to their service member at home before they go and say, "Look, I can study these ranks, but I'm going to be nervous, and I'll probably get them wrong. I need you to introduce me and help me through these social situations that are structured into the event?"

Capt. Joy Ngon Ngon:

Yeah, absolutely. And I think that goes back to just partnership. And when you're in a forum like this, and you're alongside your service member and you're supporting them, that's a reciprocal and a mutual thing. So, I definitely recommend, from experience, setting those expectations like, "Hey, I might feel a little bit intimidated here. But if I grab your arm and I squeeze it, I need some backup, bro."

Bruce Moody:

Okay, so there's that language that couple has, they really need to have worked out the signals beforehand.

Capt. Joy Ngon Ngon:

Absolutely.

Bruce Moody:

Now let's go back into the cocktail hour that you referenced before. So, there's drinking, and there's drinking, because there are toasts coming up through the rest of the evening. So, is it a matter that people need to pace themselves to be aware of some of the formalities to come?

Capt. Joy Ngon Ngon:

Yeah, that's a great point, very important to pace yourself and to know your own limits, and have obviously a designated driver plan built into your plan for the evening. But yeah, I think an appropriate number of drinks is like one, two tops for a cocktail hour. That's the personal opinion. But that's a great point and understanding the rest of the formalities of the evening. So typically, after that social hour, there's going to be those formal unit introductions, a guest speaker, toasts. We honor our fallen with a table in memory of a fallen soldier. So typically, all of those are built into a planned agenda or script for the evening. And then we get to conclude in dancing. So that's really where the fun starts. But managing your alcohol intake throughout the entire time and just being fully present in the moment and enjoying the night, whatever that looks like for you, in a tasteful sense. It's important to maintain that taste intact because at the end of the day, it's a professional setting, and you're representing something a lot greater than yourself when you're there.

Bruce Moody:

Okay. Now when you're there, let's talk about how to dress. Now when we're in uniform, when you're serving, it's super easy. We know exactly what goes where. And I'm going to really be 100% relying on you here. How should we advise spouses, significant others, girlfriends to be dressing, preparing for this event?

Capt. Joy Ngon Ngon:

Well, typically, depending on the time of day, there's going to be more of a formal attire for a ball. Anything after 1700, I would definitely recommend looking at something that's a longer length. And most units will put out some kind of dress guidance for civilian counterparts. There's also lots of guides online. If you just do a quick Google search and say, "Hey, what do I wear to a military ball in 2025?" We can get some good guidance there.

Bruce Moody:

They can be expensive, so what sort of alternatives, what sort of strategies might be available for a military spouse who's looking at the price of a gown, the price of whatever they're going to wear to the birthday ball and is feeling like, "This is a bit much?"

Capt. Joy Ngon Ngon:

Yeah, absolutely. There are a lot of different marketplaces, especially when you're on a military community. You can always set up that Facebook marketplace because there's some ladies out there whose closets are packing with some amazing gowns. And you just might get lucky and be the same size as some of them. Another resource is being

crafty and resourceful and finding some clearance options. If you've got to drive to a bigger city near you, there's a lot of great inventory. And then I recommend looking, depending on the base that you are at, there are some armed services YMCA affiliated locations that have a special room that is dedicated just specially for military spouses.

And so, one time a year, you bring your ID card, and you get a completely free dress. I've been on the one on my base and they actually have a really amazing inventory. And most of the dresses are brand new and have tags, and they're just spectacular to look at. So that is a resource that might be available on your installation. So, I recommend just looking it up. You can always call Army Community Service because most of the Army community services have a roster of all of the numbers on the garrison, and you can find out how to reach them that way.

Bruce Moody:

And of course, the family support centers of all the services are going to have that sort of support that Army community service has to offer.

Capt. Joy Ngon Ngon:

Absolutely.

Bruce Moody:

So, what else do we need to know about these birthday balls? Tell me a little bit more about once the cocktail hour is over, maybe break down some of the specifics of the event.

Capt. Joy Ngon Ngon:

Yeah. So, depending on what echelon, an echelon is the size of the unit that's hosting, so you could have anywhere from a battalion of about 500 or a squadron of 500 for our Air Force brothers and sisters, but that commander and that command sergeant major is going to have an opportunity to address everybody. So, they might take their few minutes. You'll have an invocation typically done by a chaplain around that time. And you'll have toasts. So, you'll look in the program for the event itself, which will probably be on the place setting where you're sitting, and they'll have a script there. So, they'll say, "A toast to our allies, to our partners, to our nation, to our unit." So, there's a call and response there, so that'll take another few minutes. I would guesstimate that there's probably about 30 minutes of formal events that are tied to a ball. And then sometimes if you're lucky, there will be a really amazing guest speaker. So that person will come in and just give words of wisdom and motivation to everybody before the formal events are concluded.

Bruce Moody:

So, when a service member finds out that a birthday ball is scheduled, how soon should they notify their spouse? How soon should they call up somebody that they want to come as a date in terms of giving them the time that they need to get ready for this sort of thing? People don't want to have to feel rushed, and they want to feel like they have time to find the right thing to wear and all the other stuff that you do to your hair and your nails, and I'm out of my element here. So, how much time does all of that take and how much notice should you give somebody that you want to invite?

Capt. Joy Ngon Ngon:

I think probably between two or three months is a fair timeline; it's a backwards plan. But this is my mantra recently — where there's a will, there's a way. But there is that aspect of child care coordination that some families have or don't have. That's really important to take consideration, especially when you're looking at the budget for the evening. But yeah, I think it's completely achievable within a two-month time span. I think that that's a fair ask, but it's always good to convey information within a timely notice.

Bruce Moody:

Okay, okay. Good, good. See, we're getting dating advice in here as well. So, this is really helpful. I'm really grateful that you're shedding some light on this. So there are other formalities, there's the cocktail, and we should get into the dancing afterwards. But through it all, what are the socializing opportunities? Obviously, the cocktail hour sounds pretty sociable, maybe not so much during the formal toast and the speeches. Is the service member and the spouse or date, are they linked arm in arm the whole time or are they wandering around and socializing? Give me an idea of what's happening during this time.

Capt. Joy Ngon Ngon:

The great thing about this situation — there is typically going to be an assigned to seating roster. So, after you get that social hour and you're ready for a little quick break, guess what? You get to go back to your assigned seat, and you get to sit there and reset, and get to the point of just feeling comfortable; get settled; get something to eat if there's a little appetizer there. And you get to leave that seat whenever you feel like it. So, the thing about a scenario like this is it's on you to make it what you want it to be for yourself. I really recommend just taking the opportunity and putting yourself out there. And if you're an introverted person coming out of your shell, if you're an extroverted person, looking for that introvert and just saying, “Hey, let me get to know you a little bit,” because you never know what kind of friendship that could be made from an event like this. You never know who you're going to meet.

So, just personal opinion, I recommend not staying glued to your service member's arm. I recommend finding a balance and just going out and making a new friend because that's a really special, unique opportunity where you have so many different people. Think about it, what other community in the entire world do we get people from every single state, like multiple different countries? We've got international spouses that met their service member when their service member was stationed. This is literally such a beautiful, diverse community that we have. So, I look back on some memories that I have of balls and other spouse events, and I can pinpoint some of the best friends that I have from Dallas, Texas and from Italy and from Michigan and from California and from Germany too because of events like this. I wouldn't have had them otherwise.

Bruce Moody:

Okay, so dancing. So, we're onto that part of the evening and what would be the level of party that we're at this point? We've gone through the formalities. We're not toasting anymore. There's no more speeches. We're dancing. So, if a speech is a zero and you're on a scale of one to 10, where is the dance portion of the evening?

Capt. Joy Ngon Ngon:

Well, you're asking a person that has two left feet about dancing.

Bruce Moody:

Okay. Well, alright, I've got two right feet, so yeah.

Capt. Joy Ngon Ngon:

So, it is a fun time. And at that point, you're there to have fun and let loose. So, I would put dancing at an eight, but I also just like to watch people too because I will go dance and it will not be a catastrophe, but it will not be exceptional. But I really, really do just like to see the love and the joy happen and the exchange that happens in that kind of climate. And I think it's also up to the DJ. Hopefully the unit planned for a good DJ with the good sound system because that can make or break it. There's also typically some lighting. You get some lights, different colored lights in certain forums as well. So it's really just a fun time. I would say dancing as the highlight of the night for me.

Bruce Moody:

Okay. Okay. Photos. Now, are there couples photos taken, and then are there photos taken during the event? And how do you avoid getting your picture taken with a fork full of food in your mouth, which is a real thing?

Capt. Joy Ngon Ngon:

That is a real thing. So typically, there will be a professional photographer on site that you can go to. There's typically a line. And some units are able to coordinate for photo booths, which has been a recent thing that I've seen to be very, very successful. So, it's nice to have that option. And then sometimes you'll have our public affairs soldiers that will walk through and take photos as well. And you can find those photos typically on social media or your spouse could ask their public affairs shop for official photos of the event. As far as getting no photos taken of you with a fork in your mouth, I don't know the antidote to that because I wouldn't advise people to not eat. But you show up, you're going to get your picture taken, just be watchful. It might be a spoon.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah. So just so you know, it's going to be the public affairs folks, of which I was one of these people walking around during these events taking photos. We generally are not taking photos during the meal portion, but there are a lot of exceptions. But we will try not to get a photo of you really excited about the main course.

Capt. Joy Ngon Ngon:

We call it candid.

Bruce Moody:

Oh, yeah, candid. Candid means your cheeks are full of food. We'll try not to take those kinds of photos. But generally speaking, maybe we can wrap up this conversation with just letting people know that they should be looking forward to the opportunity to go to a birthday ball and that the service member should given them enough time to get ready for it.

Capt. Joy Ngon Ngon:

Absolutely. Yeah. That's a good policy to go by or a good practice to have. But when you're a military spouse, you're prepared for pretty much anything to happen. So, I think taking advantage of the opportunity to just go out and relax and have an amazing time, and just try a new experience, whether it's good or bad. You know what? Hey, you did it, and there's something really beautiful about that. Ideally, it's an amazingly planned event and it's a highlight for you and for your service member looking back when they retire, and you've got amazing photographs of an amazing night. But if it's not the most effectively planned ball on the face of planet Earth, you made a core memory and you

made connections and you made an adventure for yourself, which only leads to more adventures. So, go have your adventures, military spouse.

Bruce Moody:

Excellent. We'll leave it at that. Thank you so much for joining us today. I really appreciate it. Thank you for all your help and your advice on this. Let me just remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. If you have any questions, any fashion questions, send them to us, we have a link in the program notes. If you have any questions or comments, maybe an idea for a future episode, that link in the program notes is going to be where you want to go. Be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts because we cover a wide variety of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.