

## Military OneSource Podcast — Deployment Stories from Submarine Spouses

### 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](https://militaryonesource.mil).

#### Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. Today, I'm in Georgia. I'm at Naval Submarine Station Kings Bay in beautiful Georgia. We got Spanish moss hanging from the trees. It's a really, really beautiful area.

I am joined today by three spouses. We're going to introduce ourselves and then we're going to have a conversation about deployment, because you have a really interesting deployment life, and we want to hear from that. Going to go left to right. Hello.

#### Annie Villafranca:

Hello. I'm Annie Villafranca. My husband is attached to the USS Wyoming Gold here in Kings Bay.

#### Erica Patrick:

Hi, I'm Erica Patrick. My husband is attached to the USS Rhode Island.

#### Tracey Brown:

I am Tracey Brown. My husband is also attached to the USS Rhode Island.

#### Bruce Moody:

Okay, there we go. One thing you'll have to get used to in this conversation is that we're not talking about ships, we call them boats. If it's a submarine, it's a boat. Right?

#### Tracey Brown:

Yes.

**Bruce Moody:**

All right, okay. There's aspects to deploying on a boat that are very, very different. Let's dive into that. How would you summarize just how different it is?

**Annie Villafranca:**

This is Annie. The difference between submarines and basically everything else is we get almost little to no communication during deployment. That includes everything, as far as hearing their voice or seeing them. We're lucky if we get an email.

**Bruce Moody:**

Retired Navy chief here. When you're on a ship, people are on Facebook; they're chatting — video chats. How different is that from your existence?

**Erica Patrick:**

Erica here. There is no Facebook; there is no video chat. We are very lucky if we get an email. There is no snail mail unless they pull into a port. Down here, they often don't do port calls. We tend to go five, six weeks at a sum, sometimes months at a time with absolutely zero communication. No emails, absolutely no communication with the boat whatsoever, which is really hard.

**Bruce Moody:**

This is going to lead us into what you have all learned when it's time for a deployment, of which there are many and some of the things that you do to keep the sanity. Any other perspectives on deployment life and just how different it is for boat life?

**Tracey Brown:**

This is Tracey. No, I agree with both of these ladies very much. Again, no communication. We just sit there; click that refresh button almost every day. It's a routine for us to click that refresh just in hopes that we get an email, something.

**Bruce Moody:**

Big grief, okay. How do you prepare for that? How does it work? Do you have a schedule of deployments? Can you say, "Oh, this deployment happens," and then they'll be time back in port and then the next one happens? Or is there a schedule and then it changes? What does that look like for you guys?

**Annie Villafranca:**

Annie here. For schedule changes, we get a very broad schedule that always comes with subject to change. It's probably always going to change, no matter what.

**Bruce Moody:**

Subject to change. Definitely going to change. Okay. What are the things that you do when you know a deployment is coming up and you're trying to get ready for it? Maybe we can break this up into categories. What are the categories? How do you talk to your spouses, how do you talk to your kids? How do you get ready with just taking care of the house, taking care of the home, taking care of the family? Where do you want to jump in on this?

**Erica Patrick:**

Erica here. We obviously have to get all of our powers of attorney ready to go. If, for some reason while our spouse is gone, we're going to sell a house or sell a car, we have to make sure we have all of the paperwork ready because trying to get that when they're gone is nearly impossible. We're also preparing so that our spouses feel supported when they're gone. I do a card a week for my husband, and I have to fill them all out ahead of time. Filling out 20-plus cards months in advance, knowing he's not going to read them for a few months, is challenging. But we do all that we can. We do calendar squares and different things like that.

Then on the other side, we do things for our children so that they can still stay connected to their parent while the boat is gone.

**Bruce Moody:**

What are some of the things that you do to make sure a child feels like they still have some kind of connection?

**Tracey Brown:**

Tracey here. For our family, something that we do, same as Erica. We do cards from dad. We do pre-things; we do everything ahead of time. Especially if we know we have a holiday or a birthday, some kind of a special event coming, we make sure we cover down on that. And those kids feel like, "Oh, gosh, dad thought of me." Even mom now, because we've got our lady sailors. We always cover down and make sure that those kids feel like dad, he remembered me.

**Bruce Moody:**

What kind of questions are kids asking?

**Annie Villafranca:**

When is daddy home?

**Erica Patrick:**

Yeah. Yes.

**Bruce Moody:**

Okay. It's not complicated, I guess. They want to know when daddy's coming home or mommy.

**Erica Patrick:**

Yes, first of all.

**Bruce Moody:**

Yeah. Again, it's very, very different when they're on a submarine and they're just nothing, not a peep, nothing. How do you talk to the kids? You talked about the cards and everything. How do you get them ready for maybe the time leading up to a deployment? Emotions are real. Kids definitely pick up on the emotions. What does that look like?

**Erica Patrick:**

Erica here. It's tough. There tend to be fights. I hate to say it, but it happens. There's the degrees of separation leading up to deployments, patrols. I've learned over the years it's so much easier to say, "Go away, I don't want you here," than it is to say, "I'm going to miss you." I feel like fights tend to break out between the kids, between spouses. Unfortunately, that can be very real.

But just reminding them that, "Daddy's going to be home. He's always coming home to us." That's the most important thing.

**Bruce Moody:**

Everything is pretty much turned up.

**Erica Patrick:**

Yes.

**Bruce Moody:**

The volume, the intensity of everything, so tempers, all of that. When it comes to leaving, there are times when service members with a boat turns around and comes back. Let's talk to people who have never experienced a deployment and may be under the impression that seeing off the service member for a deployment only to have them come back the next day, "Yay, they're back." It's not like that at all. What is happening when that happens?

**Tracey Brown:**

Okay. This is Tracey. For us, our family, we've been on plenty of boats that they turned around and come back for whatever reason. When my kids were younger, I did not really say, "Oh, hey, dad pulled back in." If dad happened to be able to call us, great, but I didn't let them know. Because it was too much because they had that expectation, "Oh, dad pulled in? He's coming home tonight." That was usually never the case.

Now that they're older, if we do get a call, which we typically don't. But if they do, they're able to talk to dad and they're able to just say, "Hey, it's great to hear from you again." We say our goodbyes one more time and, "We love you," and that's about it for us.

**Bruce Moody:**

What's the communication network like for the kids when they're at school? What are they talking about and what kind of information are they getting? Or would you call it information? What does that look like?

**Erica Patrick:**

Erica here. One of the really great things here in Kings Bay that is new that we have not experienced at other bases is each of the schools has an MFLC, so a military family life counselor.

**Bruce Moody:**

Yeah.

**Erica Patrick:**

That MFLC at each of the schools will bring the military kids together. I know at my son's middle school, they get to eat on the stage. I think at the elementary school as well. All the military kids get to get together once a week, a couple times a week, and get up on the stage and eat together as a military family group. It's just a great way to bring those kids together so they all know that they have support from each other as well when their parents are deploying.

**Bruce Moody:**

MFLC, that's the military family life counselor. Let's talk about them a little bit more. It's one of the things that we do. MFLCs are literally physically at the schools. What does that look like to see an MFLC at a school?

**Tracey Brown:**

For us, we are actually not in the Kings Bay area. We live down in Duval County in Florida. We do have those implemented in our schools as well. Not all of our schools have them. Our high schools typically don't have them and those kids suffer. Our older kids suffer a little bit, but that's where mom comes into play. For my youngest, he's in middle school. I absolutely love our person because she knows us, she knows my face, she knows my son's face. They're phenomenal.

**Bruce Moody:**

Yeah. Talk a little bit about what this person is like. They're literally in the school, they're in the lunchroom, they're hanging out with the kids. Talk to us, give us a sense of what that looks like.

---

**Erica Patrick:**

Erica here. I know whenever my husband's getting ready to leave, I will contact our MFLC and just remind them or let them know, "Hey, he's getting ready to go. If you could just check in with the kids." Any time that I know they're struggling at home during a deployment, I can reach out to that person and say, "Hey, will you bring them in and just see how they're doing?"

I know with my youngest, when my husband went out to sea for the first time since he was born, she brought him into his office and gave him this whole package of a teddy bear and little dog tags that said, "I'm always with you." It was something that had been donated to the MFLC program. He was so excited to bring it home. It was something that he could help start the discussion of, "Daddy's leaving, but he's coming back" and those kind of things.

It's like a school counselor but they're specifically focused on our military kids, especially when they need that extra support.

**Annie Villafranca:**

Annie here. I know that the military person in our school at the elementary, great with my daughter. My middle schoolers, they high-five in the hallways when they're passing by. My daughter comes home and says, "Oh, yeah, we were hanging out today and talking about stuff." I really do appreciate them, especially at that teenage level, middle school level. I think they're great.

**Bruce Moody:**

They understand military life, they understand the community, and they understand how it plays out in the kids. Let's change the subject a little bit and we can talk about spouses helping spouses. Particularly maybe we can start with spouses who are experiencing their first deployment or first separation. What are the sort of the things that you see that they're experiencing and what do you bring to that?

**Erica Patrick:**

Erica here. When you spouse first leaves and it's your first patrol, it can almost feel like a death because you have this person with you all the time, and then all of a sudden they're just gone and there is no communication. One thing I really encourage young spouses to do is to find a "sub-sister." Now we have male spouses, so just a buddy. Someone that can check in with them on a daily basis. Someone that they can get together who are in the same stage of life as they are, whether they have kids or whether they don't have children, that they can hang out with.

I know my first sub-sister, she would call me up in the afternoon and say, "Hey, we're going to do this today." I'd say, "Okay," because I had nothing else planned. Maybe I would say, "Oh, I'm working until this time, but we'll meet up afterwards." Even if it was just to watch a TV show. Just someone to go through some of those daily things with so you don't feel so alone. The friendships that you make and the bonds that you make are just incredible.

**Bruce Moody:**

That includes with being new to a community.

**Erica Patrick:**

Yes.

**Bruce Moody:**

There's just the newness of being in a community can be a real stressor. We were just having a conversation earlier about knowing where the DMW is, knowing where you can get a nice lunch or something. What does it mean to reach out to fellow spouses and help them understand their new community?

**Annie Villafranca:**

Annie here. It means a lot to the new spouses. I can remember being a first-time spouse, I had never left Texas, and I was stationed in Connecticut. I didn't know a single soul. We got married, we got there, and he left immediately. I remember before he left, he gave me the number of a person who was in a family readiness group, an FRG. I called out, reached out, and they're like, "Come join a meeting." I'll tell you that changed my perspective and my way of life the next four years there because I made some of the best friends in that group who I still call friends 19 years later today.

**Tracey Brown:**

Definitely.

**Bruce Moody:**

This is for the service members out there. When you PCS, when you arrive at your new duty station, you have, boom, instant community. Instant. You just have to walk through those doors and you suddenly have people that are going to be your friends, your colleagues. They're going to look after you. You have all of that set up for you. The spouse is still home. It's a two-way street. That person has to branch out, but it can be a really, really tough thing that first step.

Let's talk about the importance, or just the openness that maybe a spouse who is new to the Navy, or new to the military, or new to a community, just how open the doors are that they may be looking at.

**Tracey Brown:**

Tracey here. As a former FRG president, former ombudsman, I truly, honestly, I always try to make sure as soon as I knew we had an incoming sailor I was like, "Are you married? Where's your spouse? Let me find her." That was just one of my biggest things that I honed in on because I needed her to know, "You are welcome here, you have family already. Yes, your husband is going to come in and he's going to do all of this stuff, and you're just going to sit there. But with me, you're not because we're going to bring you in and we're going to show you what it is to be in this community with us."

**Bruce Moody:**

Yeah. There's a couple of things I want to get into. One is social media, which is a good tool in moderation.

**Erica Patrick:**

It's toxic sometimes.

**Bruce Moody:**

Yeah. It's good to connect people, but you need to get out and meet people in real life. There is no comparison to being with people in real life. I don't want to preach about it, but it is a really important topic. People experience face-to-face, in-person contact when they're new to a community, and it's really encouraging to hear about you reaching out and making sure there is that contact with spouses.

What were your thoughts about maybe that mix of social media and real life? The need to incorporate real life and not be terminally online.

**Erica Patrick:**

Erica here. I think a lot of, especially the younger spouses coming in, they grew up with the internet a lot more, they grew up with Facebook a lot more. I think it's natural for them maybe to just stay in touch with their friends or family back home. But especially during deployments, our FRG is constantly having events and different things to bring people together. There's just something so different about being with people who are in the exact same place as you at that current moment.

I'm lucky I came from a Navy family. My dad was service, Navy, for 30 years before I married my husband. My parents are a huge support. But at the same time, their journey was different than mine. Being with people who are going through what you're going through at the exact same time you're going through it, there's no match to that.

**Bruce Moody:**

Also, for a service member, they need to be able to focus on what they're doing.

**Erica Patrick:**

Yes.

**Bruce Moody:**

If you're stuck on a boat for an extended period of time, and if you left things off at home in shambles, you're just not going to make it.

**Erica Patrick:**

No.

**Bruce Moody:**

What do you see in a service member who is able to step on the boat knowing that the family is in good hands, is taken care of, that their spouse feels okay with getting out and being a part of their community? What do you see?

**Tracey Brown:**

Yeah. This is Tracey. The only reason I say I would love to answer this is because I've dealt with it quite a bit. Erica knows well that my whole goal of being a Navy spouse, and if I'm stepping in the role as an ombudsman or anything of that, if our families are squared away, our sailors are squared away. They can mission first. They can do their job; we've got their families here. That's one of the biggest things that we try to focus on is letting that sailor have that peace of mind. Your family is okay, we've got them. We will jump through every hoop to ensure that they are squared away, and they are good to go.

**Bruce Moody:**

I see a lot of nodding heads. I'm so glad to be talking with the three of you about the environment of being on a submarine because it is just deployment turned up. It's everything matters to a degree that's more so than others. Every deployment has its own challenges, but you really need to have things in a certain state of repair when you finally say goodbye even though it's a very emotionally-charged period of time.

Leading up to a deployment are these pre-deployment gatherings. What do you call them and what do they bring to you? What's the purpose of them?

**Tracey Brown:**

Yeah. Tracey here. Pre-deployment nights are a fantastic way to bring all of our families together. It brings your sailor together; it brings their spouse together. That's to give knowledge to understand that those families know who your ombudsman is, who your point of contact will be. If there's an emergency, you contact your ombudsman, and they will help you. It's all about knowing about fleet and family, Navy Marine Corps Relief Society. We have everybody there from financial advisors to the ombudsman, to the triad that's there. Everybody is in that facility covering down on everything that we think that every family member needs to know.

**Bruce Moody:**

This is a constant. When an organization, when a unit is getting ready to deploy, that gathering puts you in touch with the family readiness people. Those people have a knowledge of everything from the relief societies, from the command, all the people who can address everything. That includes out in the community as well.

Among the spouses are those who step up to volunteer for the various positions. For those who are not in the Navy, explain what an ombudsman is? Because other people in other services will come to understand is, oh, it's just like a key spouse. It is and it isn't. I'm seeing heads shaking no. What is an ombudsman doing?

**Annie Villafranca:**

Annie here. An ombudsman. I was an ombudsman for four years. I remember my first ombudsman, seeing her, and she sometimes looked like a chicken without a head. But I appreciated her because she knew everything there was to know. If anybody had a problem, she got it fixed. She helped you; she pointed you in that direction. That inspired me to later on in life, sign up to do that. An ombudsman is a command liaison, a person that talks family life to the command, to the captain, to that triad. And helps them balance out things, situations and just have everybody well-informed while supporting basically the entire spouses and family members, because we have moms and dads. Just keeping everybody informed, up-to-date, and there at a moment's notice, morning or night.

**Bruce Moody:**

Alrighty. I wanted to touch on something that everybody in the military has to deal with and that's operational security. We call it OPSEC in the Navy. We say, "Loose lips sink ships," a nice little tongue-twister for you. But it's the real deal for submariners, submariners. Which do I say?

**Erica Patrick:**

Submariners.

**Bruce Moody:**

Really?

**Erica Patrick:**

Yeah.

**Bruce Moody:**

Okay. All right.

**Annie Villafranca:**

I say submariner.

**Erica Patrick:**

If I say submariner in my house, I'm corrected very quickly by not just the husband, but also the children.

**Bruce Moody:**

Oh, submariner. There you go. Oh, it's the opposite?

**Annie Villafranca:**

We're submariners.

**Bruce Moody:**

Okay.

**Erica Patrick:**

Tomato, tomato.

**Bruce Moody:**

Got it. Back to OPSEC if you will. All right. It's a really, really big deal for you. What does that mean? You're both pointing to each other.

**Tracey Brown:**

I think all three of us are well-versed on OPSEC just because we've been around for quite some time. There have been many times that we've seen it on other boats, we've seen it, it's happened on our boat where somebody has leaked a date, someone has spoke too much. Someone's accidentally posted about it on Facebook.

**Bruce Moody:**

No!

**Tracey Brown:**

Our dates have been changed. They will push it to the right, it'll slide to the right. They will not come back when they're scheduled to just because we cannot put them at risk.

**Erica Patrick:**

Erica here. I have heard of boats that are on their way back in and they will turn them around and send them back to sea with no idea of when they'll be coming home. It's tough in a day and age where people post what they eat on Facebook or on Instagram. They're posting every little aspect of their lives.

Especially in the sub force, we don't want to post, "Oh, our husband's going to sea tomorrow, I'm so sad." You can't post that. One, it's not safe for you and your family to announce that your husband's going to be gone for months at a time. But two, just anything related to boat activity, we don't want to think about the dangers out there. But at the same time, there are very real people who would like to do harm to our submariners, to our submarines, our sub force. We've had issues of people trying to gain access to our Facebook pages. We have to keep our subs safe and that includes social media, it includes what we say.

I think a lot of people tend to take that too lightly. We really have to remind, especially these younger spouses who are not used to this community, just how important that OPSEC is.

**Bruce Moody:**

Yeah, hugely important. Yeah, so glad you brought that up.

Okay. Well, I just am so grateful to have this conversation with you today. What an interesting perspective that you're sharing with me on military life. I think a lot of people will benefit from this. I wish you all the best. Again, thank you so much for joining me today.

**Erica Patrick:**

Thank you.

**Annie Villafranca:**

Thank you. Thank you.

**Bruce Moody:**

All right. Now you're all going to stare at me while I do my readout here. Here we go. Military OneSource, I want to remind you all that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always love to hear from you. We have a link in the program notes. You can send us a question, a comment, maybe an idea for another episode or maybe even suggest which installation I should visit next. 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 and take care. Bye-bye.