

Military OneSource Podcast — Keeping Your Relationship Strong During Deployment: A MilSpouse Perspective

Episode transcript

Intro voiceover:

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 keeping your relationship strong during a deployment. Our guest is somebody who knows a little bit about deploying. It's Tonya Murphy. Welcome Tonya. Glad to have you with us.

Tonya Murphy:

Thank you, Bruce. Thank you so much for having me here. I'm happy to spend time with you all.

Bruce Moody:

Glad you're with us. You are with us because you have a thing or two to say about deployments and relationships. So why don't you just give us a quick summary of who you are, where you come from, and then we'll get into the conversation.

Tonya Murphy:

All right, sounds great. Hi guys. I'm Tonya. I am a 20-plus-year Navy spouse at this point. I like to say I am one of the saltiest spouses out there after the last 20 years. I am the 2023 AFI, Armed Forces Insurance Navy Spouse of the Year. And so I have been around the block a few times, have a little experience with deployments, separation from your spouse, things like that. So I'm happy to share some stories from our life and from our experiences.

Bruce Moody:

Perfect. That's why you're here. Awesome, awesome. And in fairness to people who are listening, you and I have had a conversation before we started recording, and one of the things that we got into is this really interesting point I think to make regarding deployments. Everybody has their own military life, and sometimes it really helps to talk about deployments as simply time away because it doesn't have to be a deployment. It could just be the demands of life that have somebody apart. And maybe we can kind of start there. What are your thoughts about how we should phrase or look at deployments and time away?

Tonya Murphy:

Absolutely Bruce. I think traditionally when we say the word deployment, we think of boots on the ground, kind of that traditional Army or Marine Corps deployment. But being married to a submariner, deployments look a little bit different over here at our home and being a Navy family, time away looks different. Our sailors often spend time out at sea leading up to deployments with underways and weeks out at sea or depending on the mission, their time at sea maybe won't be that full, six months, nine months. Instead, it's these eight-week stretches, these 10-week stretches that look a little bit different. And for my family currently, while we are not experiencing a deployment, my husband's a geographic bachelor, which means he's stationed in one place and my children and I live in another so that my son can finish out his senior year. So again, not a traditional deployment, but definitely time apart as a family.

Bruce Moody:

And not to give away the location, because I don't want to do that. But we were saying that you guys are just close enough but also far enough to make getting together just a little bit tougher than it ought to be.

Tonya Murphy:

Oh, for sure. For sure. We are definitely just right on that cusp of an easy weekend trip making it fit around life. We have three children, and they are three very active children. So they often have events happening on the weekends where I can't get away or my spouse has work going on and he can't get away. And so even though we are technically close during this geo-batching time, there's been times where it's been three, four weeks we're all together as a family.

Bruce Moody:

Let's kind of break down some of the challenges you face. So let's talk about before a deployment, the lead up to a deployment. What are some of the challenges that you face as a couple?

Tonya Murphy:

The time leading up to deployment in some ways can be more stressful than the time that they're actually gone. There's this anticipation of the time apart. There's all of this preparation that has to be done for us because when my husband deploys, that means that we often don't have any kind of communication other than email. So I have to have all of my powers of attorney lined up in case anything should go wrong. We have to talk about the situations, the really tough times in life, whether it's a family member falling ill, a death, those kinds of things under which he wants to be notified immediately versus things that I need to maybe hold off on until he's at a port. And so those are really tough conversations to have. Navigating these challenges before they're even necessarily in front of us. It adds a different layer of stress to that preparation for, and then you're going to be gone and I'm going to be solo parenting, I'm going to be working, I'm going to be doing life without my partner. It is definitely a challenge.

And when you're on sea duty, so when your sailor is on sea duty, it's something that's kind of constant because you're having to be ready for a deployment. A lot of times, even if there's not necessarily one coming up, you have to be prepared for the possibility of an unexpected underway or an extended time away even before it actually has been officially set out.

Bruce Moody:

I wanted to ask you about something, and this is what I've heard from other spouses. They have to prepare for a deployment. I mean, emotionally, mentally, they have to prepare for that time that the spouse is going to go away and they have a date. They have a date that that spouse is going to go away and then the spouse comes home and says, "Hey, guess what? Good news. Schedules have changed. I'm not leaving for another three days." That's not always good news. Maybe you can talk about that.

Tonya Murphy:

Absolutely. So they tell us... One of my favorite sayings about the Navy is that everything is written in Jell-O. So you can have that date and you're working towards that date and you really mentally set yourself up for that. I have even gone so far as having a deployment day plan that involves going to a friend's house, eating all the ice cream,

doing whatever I'm going to do to get through that day and then start the challenge ahead of us. When that day shifts and all of a sudden they're home again, it's such a limbo feeling where you're like, "I mean, I'm glad you're home, but also I'm really ready for you to be gone so we can just get this started."

I have friends who have set 24-hour rules, and what that means is their sailor is not allowed to come home without 24 hours' notice because they are in that mindset that says you're gone. And so I've got this work ahead of me, this challenge ahead of me, and I have a plan of attack for it. And when you show up unexpectedly for myself, for the children, for the pets, because our pets miss our sailors too, it throws us all out of whack. So if you're not going to give me 24 hours' notice and you're not going to be home for at least 24 hours, don't bother coming.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah. I mean it's reasonable. It's not always good news. It's a real challenge. People have to get ready for this. So you described yourself as seasoned, as salty, so you've learned a thing or two. So how has your approach to all of this changed over time?

Tonya Murphy:

It is an ever-evolving kind of situation because when my husband first joined the Navy and was getting ready to leave for time away, it was just he and I. So for me it was let me buckle down at work, let me find some time to hang out with my friends and make all of my social situations happen so that I had my supports for me personally. As our family has grown to include our children, as our children have gotten older, all of that has shifted a little bit such that A, the focus is not so much on how I'm going to navigate a deployment or time away because while I would love to make myself the focus of it all, I have three children I have to take care of as well. And so we have really intentionally built supports around our children.

This latest geographic bachelor situation has been really interesting because it is something that we walked into thinking that we knew exactly what we were getting into because we've done deployments, we've done time away, we've even lived apart for a few months at a time here and there while I was finishing grad school and he had to go on to his next duty station. But this is different. This is very different. It's a lot more challenging and it's a lot harder than we anticipated. And so the ways that we have found to support one another and to continue to pour into our relationship through that have been very unique and very different. They've adapted over the last 18 months as we've continued through this journey together. Even something as simple as...

Let me preface this by saying I fully recognize what a privilege this is, but being able to order groceries for one another whenever he has a long day at work and I know he's

going to cereal for dinner again, I'll just order groceries to be waiting for him on his front porch when he gets home. That way he's got something quick and easy to eat. When I have a crazy week at work and the kids have a million activities going on, he'll order groceries to just show up at my house and say, "All right, you don't have to grocery shop this week." Or he'll be like, "Just send the laundry out." Little things to help lighten our loads as we're carrying this challenge between the two of us.

Bruce Moody:

It does seem like addressing the little things as they pop up is the way to go, at least as far as I hear you talking versus having the big family meeting to figure out what's going to do next. Is it because you're trying to nip everything as it's coming in, or is it just a smarter way to maintain a relationship? How does that work for you?

Tonya Murphy:

I think there's a place for both of those. We at one point were having a weekly family meeting where we'd hop on FaceTime with him and we'd plan out the week. My oldest child drives. And so I'd be like, "OK, so you're going to drive your sibling here. I'm going to handle this." But the truth of the matter is that everything is so dynamic. Things change throughout the week, practices get shifted, schedules change. And so we have found that while it's great to have an overall general view of what we hope will happen, so much of it is that Semper Gumby attitude and being able to flex in the moment to address what that immediate need is or what that immediate concern is for either one of us.

Bruce Moody:

And for those of you who do not know the phrase Semper Gumby, please understand that you will become familiar with it. It's Latin sort of kind of for always flexible. It's just one of those things that everybody uses over time. You just become as flexible as Gumby over time because that's how you roll with military life.

Tonya Murphy:

Absolutely.

Bruce Moody:

We try to work through the acronyms and sometimes there's just little sayings that we have to work through as well.

So Tonya, do you have any tools or resources that you use to manage the challenges of deployment?

Tonya Murphy:

Yes. I mean there's so many great resources out there. Military OneSource has a lot of different resources online that you can utilize. We find that having a shared family calendar is a huge help whenever we're looking at, all right, so what do we have coming down the pipe this week? Who has to be where so that we're all kind of tracking on it?

And then one tip that I got from another spouse that has leveled up the family calendar game, you guys, this one is key. So we have an app that projects to a TV in our house so that the family calendar is always up on a television and it's in our kitchen, it's in a common area so that my children who despite always having their phones in their hands, can't be like, "Ah, I didn't see it on the calendar. I didn't know it was there." It is in the kitchen, and I know you all ate today, so I know that you saw it on the calendar.

Bruce Moody:

Oh, good. Smart ad placement

Tonya Murphy:

For sure. It sounds silly, but it is one of those little things that really has kind of shifted the balance of things.

Another great resource that we really underutilize is our friends. When we talk about relationships during deployment, so often the first person that comes to mind is our service member, next is our children. But we forget that our friends are relationships as well, and those are relationships that we do really need to continue to cultivate and to pour into, but also to use as a resource and as support. As military spouses, we are so quick to help everyone around us. We will drop everything and be there for our fellow spouses, for our friends, for our family in a heartbeat. But we're very hesitant when it comes time for us to ask for help. We don't want to be a bother. We don't want to be a burden. And what we really have to learn how to do is to accept the help that we would give. If we would offer that help to someone else, we have to be able to allow them to be that same support and that same help to us.

Bruce Moody:

This is really important because the word service is just baked into everything that we do, and we're really good at it. That's what we do. It's our jam. Receiving it... We could do a lot better, but it's just as important. And maybe Tonya, you can talk about somebody maybe saying, "Well, my spouse is deployed, but they're in Germany right now. And you know what? They're not in the desert. They're not under fire. They're actually going out for beer and sausages at night," but they're still deployed, and the family is still experiencing a deployment. And regardless of all of that, regardless of what it looks like for that family, those stressors are still there, and they're still valid, and people should feel free to reach out to their friends to talk about what's on their mind.

Tonya Murphy:

Absolutely. The comparison game will get us absolutely nowhere, you guys.

Bruce Moody:

Exactly.

Tonya Murphy:

I remember my husband's first deployment. He was underway for six months, and my friend's husband was in the army and was gone for 12 months and I was like, "Oh my gosh, I can't even complain. He's only gone half as long." And she's like, "Yeah, but I get phone calls and you get nothing." Every deployment looks different, but when it comes down to it, they're still gone and we're still holding down the homefront. We are still navigating our daily lives, supporting our children, supporting ourselves, working our jobs, and doing all of that without our partner. They're physically by our side. That is still really hard. Whether they are going out for beers and sausages, whether they are in a submarine somewhere or whether they're boots in the sand, it's all very hard. And so we need to allow ourselves the grace and the space to embrace that and to acknowledge that. We don't need to diminish our challenge just because it's not the same as someone else's challenge. That doesn't make it any easier for what we're going through in that moment, and acknowledging that is really important.

Bruce Moody:

OK. I want to go back into your kitchen because you've got the calendar. The kids have presumably at this point in the day had a meal or two. They know what's going on. So you have the tools and the system in place. Are there any traditions that go into

preparing for a deployment, dealing with it while it's happening? Any activities, any traditions that you bring into your family?

Tonya Murphy:

Yeah. So this is a really fun one because they've changed over the years and depending on duty stations, so wherever we are frequently shapes what kind of additions we happen to have.

One of my children's favorites is from when we were stationed on Guam for three years. And when we got to Guam, I had a 4-month-old, a 4-year-old and a 7-year-old. So my kids were little, and the operation tempo out on Guam is very high. So my spouse was gone frequently. I always say he wasn't gone for a long time; he was just gone all the time. And so I would just be worn out at the end of the day some days, and I would let my kids have what we would call mini-mart dinner. And that was the night when Mom did not feel like making dinner. And so we would go down to the mini-mart and you could have your pick of anything in there, and that was your dinner. And my kids loved it. They loved it because it was like, oh, I could have cereal, or I could have a Lunchable. And I loved it because that was one less meal that I had to prep and cook and plan and do. Everybody got fed, everybody was happy, and we were all more relaxed for it.

There's definitely this space where you have to protect your well-being and your time to some level, even as you're in the thick of parenting. That has carried over. We still have fend-for-yourself dinner. It looks a little bit different because my kids are a little bit older, and we don't live on base at our current duty station, and so they're not going to the mini-mart, but they know that if I look at them and I say, "It's fend-for-yourself night," then they've got to get in there and they've got to figure it out themselves. We also have Friday night pizza night. That is without question one of my favorite things because it means that on every Friday when they inevitably look at me and go, "Hey Mom, what's for dinner?" I can go, "I don't know, dude. What day is it?" And that's all I have to say.

Bruce Moody:

So I'm retired Navy and I'm totally relating to a lot of what you're saying, but as the spouse who as you're describing, you have to have a system and you have to be in control of the situation, even in letting go is still in control. You have a system and approach to all of this, and then it all ends with the homecoming. And I want to talk about the photo that we've all seen. It's the photo when the spouses get together, the deployment is over and it's a warm embrace and everybody cries. There's a million YouTube videos showing this. Sometimes there's a dog involved, and it's a great hallmark moment and everybody says, "Great, the deployment is over. Everything is

great. Let's leave these folks alone." Talk about after a deployment because this is as much of the whole process as during the deployment.

Tonya Murphy:

Oh, it absolutely is. You have that beautiful moment on the pier, wherever you are, where you see your sailor and you're just like, "Oh my gosh, I'm so happy and glad to have you home."

And then you go home, and you have spent the last however long creating these systems and these methods for your children, for yourself, for your world to continue. But now you have to figure out how to integrate your service member into it. And that is hard. That is probably one of the biggest challenges that I experienced over the past 20 years. And I can tell you that for a long time I did not do it well. As you said, control was a big thing, so making sure that I knew where everybody was supposed to be when and how they were doing it, and I didn't always communicate that to my spouse as well as I could.

With us being Navy, there's this cycle between sea duty and shore duty, and I found that even on shore duty...so when he's on shore duty, he's not typically deployable, typically home every night, that kind of thing. Even during those times, I was not sharing the load of running our household, of parenting, of all of those things. And it took the pandemic for him to call me on that. The world shut down in March of 2020. We had moved permanent change of station, PCS, just about five months previous. So we didn't quite have our footing at our new duty station. And I found myself really struggling to keep control and keep everything going. And he finally looked at me one day and he said, "I'm right here. I'm right here, and I can help. You have to let me help." And that call out turned out to be a calling in where I really was like, you know what? He's right. I had not fully reintegrated him into this process of how our household was flowing and what we were doing and how things were going.

Even as much as saying, "Hey, you've got this kid for this practice or this whatever," and kind of turning over the reins on some things, it's tough. It's really tough. We hang on tight because it can feel like whenever we're in a season of deployment and a season of separation as though we can't count on our spouse because whatever service they're in has got first dibs on them. But the truth of the matter is, at the end of the day, that is still our partner. And so we have to find that balance. And sometimes I carry a little bit more, but it's also for me to shift that load to you and to split it evenly or even sometimes let you carry more because otherwise we just end up burnt out and resentful. And that's a really tough place to get out from.

Bruce Moody:

So to bring this all together, how would you talk to another couple, another spouse who are looking at their first deployment or time away?

Tonya Murphy:

So it sounds cliché, but one of the very first things that I always say to do whenever you're facing time away and time apart is to set personal goals for what you want to accomplish during that time. It stinks to be away from our partners. It's also time for us to grow, and it's a unique opportunity that a lot of our civilian counterparts don't get to have throughout their marriage, to be able to cycle in and out of that self-in-coupledness. We are who we are with our partner, but we don't want to lose ourselves in that. And so that's one is look at some of the benefits of that, getting to have that space for yourself, but additionally make sure that you're communicating with your partner about what is important for each of you to accomplish as a couple through that time as well.

Whether that be making sure that we're communicating clearly and effectively with one another regarding ourselves, our children, our professional goals, and making sure that you're taking full advantage of it. And that again, sounds really silly, but when I say taking full advantage, I mean for us, he's Navy. So the beautiful part of a deployment is port calls. I cannot tell you how many...I've been on some port calls where I just had an absolute blast visiting places that I never would've gone, had a submarine, not decided to pull in there for a few days, and it's been such a cool experience and it's been such a great opportunity for us to connect in the middle of these extended separations as well.

Bruce Moody:

I did say I was going to wrap up, but I'm listening to you, and I have another question and maybe you can talk about this because you are saying that for a spouse they need to find a purpose, a goal, and maybe talk about this. It's OK for a spouse to find this as a period of growth, a period where it's pretty awesome. They're learning, they're growing, they're expanding, they're deepening. For some spouses who see the possibility of this becoming a real growth opportunity, they should take it and feel good about it.

Tonya Murphy:

Absolutely. It's not just OK. I think it should be embraced and it should be done. We should not lose ourselves in who we are and the personal goals that we have because we get married, because we become a parent, because of these life experiences that we have. They should just add to that fullness of who we are. So for me personally, one of

the separations that we had, as I alluded to previously, was I was finishing graduate school. We had two kids. I found a window on a shore duty where I could get into grad school and complete a program, and I had about four or five months left following my husband's next set of orders. And we made that decision that I would stay behind with our two children and finish out a personal goal of mine, which was to go to grad school and get my master's degree. It was so empowering to me to be able to do that and to have that opportunity.

Other goals that I've done while he's been away, I've run a half-marathon during the pandemic and all of that crazy. I went back to work full time. Each of these moments has poured into who I am as an individual, and as I have continued to strengthen my sense of self, that has also continued to strengthen our relationship, and it's continued to empower me more as a mother as well. I am not one thing, none of us are. I am not just a spouse. I am not just a Navy spouse. I'm not just a mom. I am the rainbow of things that kind of blend together to create Tonya, this beautiful unicorn of a salty person. And being able to take advantage of time apart and really pour into that, it's really powerful, and it's really important even now as we're living apart.

Yes, the big motivator was my son and him finishing out high school, but professionally, it's been a benefit to stay in the area that I am in to continue to grow my career before I go ahead and uproot it and move it. And yes, my job will move with me, but again, it's been another opportunity to pour into me to continue to develop my network and to grow professionally. And having that balance of support and back and forth, it's been really good for us as a couple and as a family.

My husband asked me not too long ago, because he is over 20 years now, and retirement is somewhere there on the horizon. Not anywhere too close, but it's coming. And I remember he looked at me the other day and he said, "Yeah, so when I retire, you get to choose where we go. You get to choose what's next based on what's best for you. What do you think about that?" Bruce, when I tell you my mind was blown, I have spent the last 20 years having the Navy tell us where to be and when. So hearing my spouse ask me that and me being the center of the next big decision, it is the result of taking advantage of the times apart and the growth opportunities that I have had. I felt like the Grinch. My heart grew three sizes because I was like, "OK, the Navy didn't get everything. There's something left for me here."

Bruce Moody:

This wonderful conversation, there's so much goodness. And what I would say, I want to talk about Military OneSource just very, very briefly because if any of this resonates with a spouse, with military families and they just want to do something with this. I want to talk about Military OneSource just really quick because you could simply call or even just text them and just say, "I got a deployment coming up, and I have questions." And they

will set you on a path. They will help you out. It is free, it is confidential, and if you don't want to call them, we're going to put a whole bunch of links about deployment life in the program notes to just give you things to think about. Tonya Murphy, thank you so much, so very much for being with us today.

Tonya Murphy:

Thank you so much for having me. And let me say, I should add, as we're talking about these really great resources that Military OneSource has, some of the ones that I forgot to call out that really helped me. When I was going back to school under MyCAA program, I found all that information on Military OneSource to get me started. As I've been building my professional career, the LinkedIn resources that you guys provide for the premium account has been huge. And one of my personal favorites that I forgot because it's been so long since I had little bitty kids, the work that you guys do with Sesame Street Workshop, oh my gosh. Listen, Elmo and his how to move, how to deploy, how to navigate these things for little kids has been just phenomenal. So Military OneSource has all of these really great resources for navigating, not just deployment, but military life.

Bruce Moody:

A couple of episodes ago we had Sesame Street on the program. For those of you who don't know, Elmo is in a military family. That is his life, and he talks about his life in a military family, and we just think it's the most awesome thing ever.

Tonya Murphy:

It's the best.

Bruce Moody:

It is. It is. All right. All right. I got to wrap it up. There's so much goodness here. I'm so grateful. Tonya, thank you so much for joining us today.

Tonya Murphy:

Thank you so much for having me.

Bruce Moody:

Awesome. Awesome. Want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We have a link in the program notes. Send us a question, a comment, 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.