

Military OneSource Podcast — Tips and Tools for PCS Success

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.

Military families move a lot. And if you're new to the military and haven't yet moved, I'll share with you an acronym that we'll use a lot during today's episode, and you'll be using a lot during your military journey. It's PCS. Technically, it just means permanent change of station, and you can simply use it as military slang for a move. PCS is a noun, it's a verb. Here's an example.

Our guest today has PCS'd many times. She is a PCS guru, and she has a lot of tips for you today that you can use during your next PCS. Our guest is Jennifer Rea. Welcome.

Jennifer Rea:

Thank you so much, Bruce. I'm so happy to be here.

Bruce:

OK, let's run through your resume for this conversation. You are the spouse of an active-duty Marine, a mother of four children under 6 years old. That's about to change, but why don't you take over the introductions.

Jennifer:

Well, thank you so much for allowing me to be here. I am truly honored. As you mentioned, Bruce, I am a military spouse to an active-duty Marine. Ten years now. We have four children: twins who are about to be 6 years old, a 3-year-old and a 16-month-old. We also have a 10-year-old pug. His name is Bandit, and he was our first baby, and he's been there since the beginning of our marriage.

I received my doctoral degree from the University of Minnesota in family social science, and I currently wear a few different hats. I work as an independent consultant with OneOp, which is a virtual professional development platform for providers who serve military families. And then I also work as an assistant professor in the Department of

Human Services and the director of Graduate Certificate and Military Families. Those are both at the University of Arizona.

Bruce:

So, you're a military family and you serve military families.

Jennifer:

Exactly.

Bruce:

All right. And in the process, because you're a military family, you have PCS'd a lot.

Jennifer:

Yes. Yes, we have.

Bruce:

I'm really interested in hearing about the first move. And the reason I say that is because a lot of people who are in the military and perhaps listening to this podcast, they haven't had that first move yet. And it's probably the scariest, the most life-changing one, the most uprooting one of all. Talk about that. What was that like for you?

Jennifer:

Yeah. I am going to consider the very first move as starting off our military journey. So that was, since the beginning of my husband's and I marriage, we got married, and two days later we moved from Minnesota to North Carolina. The only other time that I've been away from my family was about two hours away. I didn't do a lot of trips away from my family. So, getting prepared for this move was exciting, of course, because I was going to be starting a journey with my new husband, and we had spent several years just living a long-distance relationship.

And alongside that, it was also challenging having to say, "See you later." I don't really say goodbye, "See you later," to my family and my friends. And then, as soon as we get to that new duty station, as we're driving across state lines, I find myself excited and blasting the music. And then you find yourself crying, going through all of the rollercoaster emotions that I'm sure other people will experience as they experience that first move.

Bruce:

I just want to spend a little more time on this first move. Looking back, because I just think it's so perfect, because so many people have been in one place for a long time and their family has been there, and then suddenly they're just moving, poof, to practically the opposite end of the Earth. Looking back, what's something that you would've done differently and what's something that you think you really got right?

Jennifer:

That's a really great question. I think for differently, I would probably help myself prepare in advance to experience being away from my family a little bit longer and just really focus on, right now, what I've kind of learned is that it's more of a mindset shift. And so, you are changing the perspective to say, it's not, "Why me? Why do I have to move?" But to shifting that this is a great opportunity and I get to learn so much more about myself.

I think one thing that I did do right was that I felt very opportunistic about the move and I felt excited and positive. And I tried to be encouraging to my family that I wasn't leaving forever and that we would continue to talk through phone or social media, or not social media, but through video, things like that.

Bruce:

Yeah. Yeah, now you have social media. Not so much back then. But between now and then, you've moved a number of times and they've all been different. And that also is typical for a military family. They may move several times, but every time it's different. Talk about that.

Jennifer:

Yeah. We've actually relocated, we've PCS'd a total of six times. Both my spouse and I, and then with our children, we've PCS'd four times. So almost every year of my children's lives. A few different challenges or things that we face through each move is just going through and making sure that we have our orders in time.

One specific example was that we received orders on a Friday afternoon, that we needed to be at our next duty station within a week. And then, of course, the pandemic hit and we were kind of in a stand hold where the military said, "Nope, you're not moving. You're going to stay still." So, then we were told in the same day to move and then to not move. And then a few days later on Monday, we were told, no, we do, in fact, need it to move, so that was an interesting experience, I guess.

One of the challenges or different situations that we had experienced in a PCS move is not having the orders or those materials set forth for us well in advance. And so, finding housing and then locating where we were going to be living essentially was one of our big challenges that we experienced through a PCS.

Bruce:

Good grief. You went from hurry up and wait, to hurry up and wait and hurry.

Jennifer:

Yes.

Bruce:

Oh, nice, nice. How do you talk to kids about that? As to all of this, it's crazy enough for an adult, how do you talk to a kid about this?

Jennifer:

I think at the time, our children – we had three children at the time and our two oldest were only like 3 years old. So, to conceptualize that as a 3-year-old is probably challenging. But we had an idea that we were going to be moving. We had sort of an idea where we might be going. And so, we just tried to provide them some context of saying, “Here are our boxes. We’re going to fill these up and we’re going to go to a new house in a new city. It’s going to look different.” And then, we tried to show pictures on the internet of what the new city looked like. And we tried, when we were looking at houses, we kind of showed them maybe this will be our house. So just really communicating about the process has been beneficial. And that especially has been beneficial as my children have gotten older, talking about the process consistently and as early as possible.

Bruce:

So, there’s a pug involved, right? There’s also a pug. How do you move a dog? Or does that change from move to move?

Jennifer:

That has changed a little bit because pugs don’t fly well. They’re one of the breeds that are not necessarily recommended to be on an airplane. So, one of the things that we recently did in a move, and it was a miracle, I guess you could say, is my mother-in-law, one of her really good friends actually drove one of our vehicles from South Carolina to Arizona, where we’re currently stationed, and brought the pug with him. He took our car and our dog and drove across the country and we just paid him for airfare to fly from Arizona back to where he lives in Minnesota.

So, that was one of the experiences that helped out a lot. The very first move that we did, we didn’t have him quite yet. And so, that second PCS move was a drive. And driving with him can be challenging because he always wants to look out the window, but he’s a really good travel companion, so that helps.

Bruce:

Yeah, you can’t have him hanging out the window the entire drive across the country to Arizona.

Jennifer:

No, you cannot. Especially as it gets closer. It’s too hot.

Bruce:

Yeah, I think the tongue dries out over time. I’m not sure how that works. As you’re moving around, how does things like connecting with family over social media play in?

Jennifer:

Yeah, that’s a good question. It’s kind of challenging in some ways because some of our extended family’s super confused, why are we here in this state and now we’re in this

state? And so, sometimes we'll do a little family update and just say, "Hey, this is where we're getting ready to move to." And what is the beautiful and nice thing about it is that sometimes we do have family that are in and around the same area where we've moved to or PCS'd to. The nice thing is that we get to meet family members that we've probably never met before, but we're in the same region.

And then, also, the use of technology and be able to video with my parents so my children can talk to their grandparents as we're driving. And sometimes that's been a good distraction from some of the PCS drives, where they can talk to papa or grandma and just talk about what they're seeing and what they're experiencing and what they're feeling. So that's a nice addition to help get through this process.

Bruce:

OK, so that connects to the family and to the friends and that sort of continuity. So, talk a little bit about settling into a new community, resources that are available or strategies for learning what's what in the neighborhood.

Jennifer:

Yeah, that's something that we've kind of gotten better at over each move. We've had six moves. And, at each of those, from the beginning, I haven't reached out to neighbors. I'm just kind of very Minnesotan, I guess, staying in my own little corner, and I'll just figure it out when I get there. But then I slowly realized that that's not really helpful, especially when things happen, like your dog gets sick and you don't know anybody around because your husband's deployed. And so, then I had to reach out to a neighbor I've never met before and explain them the process.

So, from that, in some of our recent moves, we've literally just went over to our neighbors if they haven't already come up to us and introduced ourselves. The pandemic was a little bit difficult when we moved from Mississippi to South Carolina because that was exactly when COVID-19 hit. And so, that was a difficult time because we couldn't necessarily handshake our neighbors or be in front of them. But as soon as we are able to integrate and get into our community, we just introduced ourselves, told them who our children are.

And then, one of the things that I do as a mom is reach out to other parents at the playground. I feel like I like to give words of encouragement to other parents. And so, I'm like, "Oh, you're doing awesome. You look great today." Just kind of giving those positive things. And then, I introduce myself. And so, sometimes that can be difficult, but I have found that if you don't reach out and you don't start connecting to your community or getting involved, volunteering or even starting a new position, you can feel really disconnected. And so, those are some of the things that I've done to get involved.

And then, of course, if we connect it to social media, there are Facebook groups in the new duty station areas that you can connect with for people and ask information like child-care options or schooling recommendations, things like that.

Bruce:

So, how do you prepare? What do you do? You sit down and you've got these orders, you've got the timeline, you're looking at the calendar. How do you sort that out? How do you prepare for all of that?

Jennifer:

Thankfully, we had a little bit of an idea of where we might be going, and we actually had some idea of when we might be there. And so, we kind of just had gone by the idea that we have to be there by next Friday. My husband and I just went into full search mode, looking for rentals and there was no other thing that we could do. You just have to move forward and you have to find, otherwise you would have no place to live. So, we just had to keep moving forward.

One of the other things that we do to prepare, we knew that a move is going to be coming within, when we look back a few months, we try to prepare for that financially. We set money aside because we know that sometimes in some moves you might have to pay for a lot of items up front. Some of those things like hotel and food and other things that will not be reimbursed, such as airplane tickets. And so, really setting money aside for those specific experiences is something that's been very beneficial and helpful for us.

In this specific example that I'm telling you about, we had already started packing. So, thankfully, we had quite a bit of our house already packed up and we were just kind of living out of camping chairs and one pan and just kind of making things work that way. Which is fun because our children kept wanting to take things out of boxes and using boxes to push around or using them as their own little tables. So, it became a different learning experience and one that we won't forget, but those are some things that we helped to prepare.

And then, also, we made sure that we had up-to-date children's vaccination records, passports, all that other information that's pertinent to moving. And we made sure that we had all that information up to date. And we also take that in the vehicle with us. We don't send it in the U-Haul. You just never know if that information might get lost or you might not see it for a while, so we just kind of keep those sacred items with us.

Bruce:

The sacred items. They really are, because if they're gone, life is just turmoil. I think what you're talking about is a lot. And I know in the program notes of this episode, we have a lot of links to articles on Military OneSource. And without inventorying all of them, can you kind of talk about some of the online resources that are available and what you think they have to offer other families who are preparing for a move?

Jennifer:

Yeah. One of the recent ones that I came across was Plan My Move, and that's through Military OneSource. And this one was really awesome because you get to pick what duty

station you are leaving from and which one you're moving to. And it just provides you a checklist of the things that you might not think that you needed, like a pet's vaccination records. And remembering to get wait tickets if you're going to be doing a diddy move or a move by yourself. And so, that checklist was super helpful, especially for my husband, who's very task-oriented and can check those things off and make sure they're on point. He is a Marine, so that makes sense.

One of the other resources that I also really enjoyed using was the Sesame Street, I don't know exactly what it's called, but it's a coloring sheet. And you can allow your children to color it and add stickers and then write their names. Well, we wrote their names because they were 3 at the time. But we cut out the little labels and you stick them on their boxes, so they might help you load up their moving box and then tape it up and then they can put their own label on it. So, my daughter's name is Adeline and we put Adeline stalls in one box and we put a label on it. I think it just gave them a little key piece of that puzzle into all this moving and gave them some responsibility and part of that family process.

Bruce:

This has been a very, very interesting conversation. I really appreciate the opportunity to talk with you. Any final words, any words of encouragement to families who are looking at their next move?

Jennifer:

Yeah. I just want to say that all things work out. And really there's always a silver lining. No matter where you move, you're going to build friendships that are going to be lifelong friendships and you're going to gain family. These friends are going to become your family and you're going to grow so much.

And there is so much that you'll learn about yourself, including the fact that you are capable of so much more and the more frequent moves that you go through that you'll build up, you'll become stronger. And all the grit will lead into determination and you'll have these really awesome resilient skills that I'm pretty sure your friends who are not military spouses won't have. You'll have a leg up for sure.

Bruce:

Jenny Rea, thank you so very much for joining us today.

Jennifer:

Thank you so much for having me.

Bruce:

Absolutely. I want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We're a website, we're a call center. We're all over social media and we are now a podcast, so please go ahead and subscribe. We cover all kinds of topics to help military families as they navigate military life.

I'm Bruce Moody. Thanks so much for listening. Bye-Bye.