

Military OneSource Podcast — Reunions and Reintegration After Deployment

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, I am at Naval Station Mayport in Mayport, Florida. We've got a lot of ships here. We've got a beautiful beach. Can't go on the beach because there's rip tides, right?

The signs are up saying don't go swimming. Don't even go on the beach. Don't even look at the beach. So, I am at the Fleet and Family Support Center with Susan.

Susan Shannon:

Yes.

Moody:

All right, welcome.

Shannon:

Thank you. My name is Susan Shannon and I am a clinical counselor here.

Moody:

OK. So we have five military spouses with us and they're going to be introducing themselves as they come into the podcast or the service member comes home, right?

Shannon:

Yes.

Moody:

There's a video we've all seen on social media, or a picture, and it's the reunion. Right? It's that amazing heart-wrenching, beautiful video of the service member.

And sometimes they're reuniting with the kids, the service member, a lot of times they're reuniting with the dog, and it's an amazing thing, and everybody thinks, "Oh, that's great. It's all over. They're home."

And I'm getting a lot of smiles from the room and people shaking their heads no. So that's why we're having this conversation, because there's a lot more than meets the eye.

And if you've not experienced a deployment before, you really need to listen to this conversation to understand that there's real stuff that happens, and you got to be ready for it when a deployment comes to an end.

So, Susan, let's start with you. Give us a general outline of some of the things that are going on when a service member comes home.

Shannon:

So when a service member comes home, generally, yes, it is wonderful, it's great, but then, whoever is at home, their life gets disrupted. They have a plan, they do things by how they've got it planned and without the service member, and when they come home, it kind of interrupts it.

The service member also comes back with some baggage of everything that had occurred while they were gone. And so it tends to not fit like a puzzle like everybody thinks. And it's difficult, and I think that they can speak to that, to get back on track because it's limited conversations while the service member is out.

Moody:

And you're all nodding. So does somebody have a story or an example they want to share of, oh, your hand is up. OK. You know the ground rules, we're going to introduce ourselves and then share with us. And I think we both need to lean toward each other a little bit more (group laughter).

Ashley Carmichael:

I'm Ashley Carmichael and I'm a spouse of a service member who is in a Navy station at CNSG South East. And experience, I have dealt with over 14 deployments over the course of us being married for 17 years.

We have three children. So, of course, when you're getting ready for return and reunion or homecoming, everything you can think that goes wrong goes wrong in the background.

Hair is not right, you can't find the keys, outfits get messed up prior to, ships may not pull in at the required time. So you're standing there baking on the side of the pier (group laughter).

Moody:

In Florida, by the way.

Carmichael:

In Florida, of course, yeah, because always usually when they come home in the summer, right?

But I think one of the things that kind of made me chuckle over to the side was, I remember a time where I had all these elaborate things planned out for my husband when he returned.

And I thought it was a great idea to have his family come up, us throw a luau party in our new house or whatnot, and that's not what my spouse wanted.

And so it did create some tension because, he was like, although I'm happy to see my family, I need to kind of decompress.

I need to know what it's like to take a shower without wearing shower shoes. I need to know what it's like to lay in my bed. I need to get reacquainted with my kids and with my spouse.

So I think that's why I laughed, chuckled a little bit over to the side, because it is a picturesque moment of the homecoming or the return and the reintegration. But there's a cycle too that goes with that once you return.

And to piggyback off of what Susan said is simply you have to get into the groove and be able to share with one another what it is, what your expectations are prior to you returning.

Do you want people around? Do you want a party? Do you just want a home-cooked meal? Do you just want to go to sleep? Do you want to be reintegrated with the kids immediately or is it going to take time? So, that's my input for that.

Moody:

No, thank you for that. Does anyone else want to jump in with an example? OK, we have a hand up again. All right, here we go.

Jacqueline Laureano:

So my name is Jacqueline Laureano. My husband is stationed on the USS Donald Cook, and unfortunately my husband's job is a quartermaster, so in order to do his job, he has to be on a ship. Even when he gets short commands, he's attached to a command.

We've been together now 16 years. For all 16 years he has been attached to a ship. And for us the hardest part was not necessarily the reintegration, it was the communication, because he's more worried about, "Hey, do I need to get you this? Do I need to get you this?"

And to get him home, he did not know what to expect, because every time it's different. You can think, you can do this a million times, but each reintegration is always going to be different. You can do it a million times and the previous one's never going to be the same.

Moody:

So is planning the way to go, or is sort of having the conversation?

Hanna Edenfield:

You have to have the conversation with your spouse. I'm Hanna Edenfield and I'm a spouse of a sailor on the USS Mason.

So I would say the biggest thing is you have to talk to your spouse. Everybody's different. Not every sailor is going to want the same thing. You have to see what they want.

And I would say from our experience, he came back from a combat deployment, so it kind of ramped up the reintegration process a lot.

So now that combat is being more seen, I guess, they're coming home and you're worried about PTSD, mental health and just nightmares. So it's a lot.

Moody:

It's a lot.

Edenfield:

And as much as you want to think, it is happy, I will say the moment on the pier, nothing will ever compare to that feeling. But as soon as you get home, normal life sinks in.

And I think the best way I like to compare it to is when you grow up and you go back home and visit your childhood bedroom, it feels weird at first, and then by the end of the trip it kind of becomes normal and starts feeling like home again.

Moody:

I had never heard of that. That's a really interesting perspective. OK, go ahead.

Philline Windsor:

Yes, my name is Philline Windsor, and I am a naval spouse. My husband is on the USS Indianapolis. This would be his second ship since being here at Naval Station Mayport. So he had back-to-back deployments.

So in my experience, I think same thing that she was saying, communication was a big thing for us.

And just coming back home, I think I set up a routine at home. I walked the dog a certain way, I took it to the same spots to use the bathroom. I took it, I fed him at the certain time. I fed him a specific way, I sang him a song, I did all these different things (group laughter).

And then he would come home and he's like, "Why is the dog not eating? Why is the dog not using the bathroom?"

"Well, did you sing a song?" It's just really quirky things like that they don't get to experience because they're gone for months on end and then just kind of missing out on like, our friends and family have inside jokes that they weren't part of and now they're feeling left out.

So it's just trying to find that balance of making new memories when they come home and making them feel like they're not left out.

That, you know, life did continue while you were gone, but that doesn't mean that it's stopped or yeah, I think they think sometimes that our lives kind of just stop when they're gone. But really we have to keep progressing and keep moving.

Moody:

So let's talk about that adjustment when you are going from being the full-time manager of a household.

Before deployment, you're setting up powers of attorney, you've got all this stuff so that you can run the house, and now you've gone from being the CEO to vice president or co-chair or something like that.

How do you navigate that aspect of it?

Shaquita McKinney:

My name is Shaquita McKinney. My husband is attached to HSM-70, which is at a different naval base. That, I believe is the most difficult part for me, because my husband does struggle with scheduling and I run a tight ship (group laughter).

So, it's just a matter of just really laying it out and becoming adjusted. And then, I too am like Hanna, where my husband came from a combat zone.

And it was an eye-opener for me because with that being his first time, he definitely came home with some different behaviors that I wasn't used to and just learning how to help him combat that as well as stick to that tight ship that I have, I found that to be very difficult.

Moody:

Susan, you want to help out with that?

Shannon:

Yeah. One of the things that we all need to remember is there is not constant communication between the spouses and whoever's the sailor is on the ship, which that creates a real void.

You can't talk to them and go, well, how are you doing today? How did it feel? They can't do that. There's lack of communication everywhere.

So sometimes what I tell spouses is, you are still on deployment when your spouse comes home, you can't just stop. It has to be a conversation. You can have the conversation before they go, but then what they experience and come back, you need to listen.

Maybe they do want to just spend time with their spouse instead, but the communication is so important and you have to watch, correct me if I'm wrong, you have to watch what you say so that you don't trigger something and an argument starts. Because everybody's on eggshells.

Moody:

Yeah, everybody's on eggshells. But also what happens when everything, all the emotions and all the anxiety, everything is, and the excitement, I mean all the happiness is turned up to 11 as we like to say.

Because sometimes when you're happy and excited and looking forward to something and you're redlining all that goodness, it actually becomes arguments. It becomes tears. What does that look like to you guys?

Laureano:

So for me, I have a child who is a special needs child, and when she gets too excited, she starts to get angry.

And homecoming for her is very difficult because of that, because she does get the excitement, she does get the happiness, but at the same time, we have to monitor it to make sure that she's not getting angry because she's too happy, because it is a disruption to her normal routine and everything.

Moody:

Let's talk about the kids. How are you talking to the kids about a deployment that's about to come to an end? What are you asking them? What are you asking of them?

Carmichael:

So for me, I have three different age group of kids. So it looks different for each one of them. I'll start with my 9-year-old. She's daddy's girl, so she is very in tune with what it is that dad has going on.

I usually let her know dad's getting ready to go, but listen, just because he's gone doesn't mean that we won't be able to do fun things like write him, do a kisses for daddy jar, different activities to kind of keep her engaged.

And so that usually helps throughout that time frame of getting prepared.

But when we are in that fight of going through the deployment, it is rough, it's tough. But that's where I show as a mom that extra TLC, that's where I am more receptive to her feelings, and not just her feelings, all my kids' feelings.

So I kind of give them a little grace, but I also run a tight ship like Shaquita, so it's like I'm only going to give you so much grace because we still have to do the right thing.

Because sometimes kids will regress in behaviors and they'll do things to, because they know it's only one parent (as opposed to two parents), and then they may act out.

So I've kind of caught onto that and learned about that (group laughter).

And then for my two teenagers, they're more understanding. They're the boys. They kind of get into this role of, I'm going to be the man of the house while dad is gone.

So then they kind of butt heads because they got to figure out who's going to be the man at what time, depending on what the situation is.

But the same thing with them. We have those open, honest conversations with them. We also let them know what the expectation is while dad is gone. We also give an expectation to my husband to say, OK, if you can't call, but so often then you need to be writing.

If you're not writing, then you need to send a picture via email or whatever it is that you can do to keep them engaged and let them know that you're one, still alive, and two, that you're still thinking about them.

So it is different depending on the age of the child, if there's special needs. And then also taking care of yourself as a spouse because you go through a cycle of, now I got to sleep lonely in the bed, I got to get up with the kids in the middle of the night.

I got to take the dogs out. I have to cook every day, which I don't do that. Actually I use that as a benefit when my husband's gone. But you have to take on different challenges that you weren't necessarily expecting.

And then like me, I would go crazy not sending emails daily, just kind of recapping our day so that he can feel integrated and knowing what has went on, because he may not have had any action or it may have been a rough day for him, but it provides that sense of closeness.

McKinney:

And just to kind of piggyback off of Ashley, it definitely does depend on the age groups. I have much younger children. I have a 4-year-old and a 6-year-old, (no), 7-year-old. (group laughter).

Moody:

Who can keep up with these things.

McKinney:

A 4-year-old and a 7-year-old. And my 4-year-old's first time experiencing her first deployment was when she was 3, which was a very difficult time for me in the family because she didn't fully understand what a deployment meant.

When I would tell her, "Oh hey, daddy's leaving for a while, he won't be back. How do you feel about that?"

"Uh, OK."

But it was as the deployment went on that she realized, hey, daddy's not here. Where is he at?

So having those conversations really was tough for me, and just being able to work around that as well as support my 7-year-old who does understand what that means because he's been going through it since he was 2.

So, just one thing that I've done to help keep our family together in those moments is I make the time away fun.

So we'll create different types of care packages full of pictures and I let them draw on the boxes and different things like that to really help them know that daddy is still there.

A new fun thing that they have now is a lot of ships have Wi-Fi, so he's able to communicate a lot more than what it used to be, what, two, three years ago. Just really having those conversations with them and still having that family bonding time.

And when he calls, we all get excited. Just really making sure that they know that yes, daddy's here. He's just not physically here.

Shannon:

I have a question.

Moody:

Yeah, go. We're raising hands in this room. It's like a classroom.

Shannon:

Well, with you guys said the ages. OK, but is it different between the boys and the girls?

Carmichael:

Absolutely.

Moody:

Oh, good question. I should have asked that.

Shannon:

Now you can edit it and make it sound like you asked it.

Moody:

That'll be an edit. Sure, sure, sure.

Carmichael:

You have one?

Jacqueline Laureano:

No, I've only got one.

Carmichael:

OK, I have three.

Moody:

OK.

Carmichael:

So for me it is definitely different when it comes to girls and boys. The underlying issue for both is that they're both sad. They recognize the missing piece to the puzzle.

What I have seen with my boys is that they will act out where they're aggressive at times, where it's like, I don't know how to express what I'm feeling, but I know that it's surrounding daddy not being here.

Because there are certain things my sons will say I'd rather talk to dad about. And I'm like, well, I'm here and I'm open, but I also have to respect that too because that's their thing.

But then you also have my daughter who is like, mommy, mommy, mommy. But then if daddy comes in the picture, she never knew mommy.

So I think when it comes to between the males and the females, they internalize it differently. They respond differently. And it may surface out as anger, it may surface out as anxiety. It can present in different ways.

Moody:

So the deployment is over. Maybe spouses were checking up on each other during deployment, but now that the deployment is over and families are united, how are spouses keeping the communication open?

Sorry? Oh yeah. You know where I'm going with this.

Edenfield:

Yeah, well I'm on the ombudsman side of it too. So as an ombudsman, that time when they come home, it's crucial for us because we are people's lifeline when they are having those issues at home after being gone so long.

And I will say spouses, you create bonds during these deployments that you will still check up on each other the entire time.

I mean, probably for the rest of your life. It's something that other people don't understand until you are going through it. And those connections is something that you will have for a lifetime.

Moody:

When you're in the military especially, you have these really intense experiences as a group, and that forges friendships that are incredible. I mean, I'm still keeping in touch with people that I serve with back in the day.

So, I want to get back into the kids. And specifically talking about when the deployment is over. I wonder if the military family readiness counselors, MFLC, play a role in the kids' lives after a deployment. Is that something? OK.

Carmichael:

Yes. So my daughter attends Mayport Coastal Science Elementary School, and her MFLC, they have lunch bunch while they're deployed so they keep connected, but even when the service member returns, they still have these lunch bunches.

They still have this opportunity for them to do exercises during lunchtime. And it's a group of military kids. So it does extend past the deployment cycle. Because people are rotating in and out when it comes to deployment schedules, but they do keep it ongoing.

Moody:

Nice. I want to talk a little bit about the ombudsman's role after a deployment, but also we're going to talk about the Fleet and Family Support Center of course, because that's where we are today.

But this is a conversation for everybody in the military. So any family readiness center, by whatever name, is there for families. So what are these centers doing for families after a deployment?

Shannon:

We do provide the clinical counseling piece of it, so that if it's just a service member who wants to come in and talk about things they can't talk about with the spouse, if it's couples because they're struggling with reunification, we can do that as well.

We have a child therapist who will also see the kids, because it's all disruption. You get used to something and then something changes. So I think that is a really big piece of it, is to be able to unload something that maybe the sailor can't say yet to the spouse.

And so you get them in so they can just kind of run through what happened and what they went through and then we can move on from that.

Moody:

So from the Fleet and Family Support Center, which is an organization on the base part of the base, we have the ombudsman, which is somewhat different from that because you're the liaison, you're the link, you're a military spouse who is sort of doing shuttling between the spouses, the families and the installation.

And so people from other services, they go by other names, but the spouse who is the liaison between the command and the families. Talk a little bit again about what you have to offer families after a deployment.

Edenfield:

So we are there for any resource they may need. Mental health is always a big push for us all times of a year, but especially after their last deployment, we are constantly pushing that. We're also, if there's a crisis, we can get in contact with the ship quick, get them what they need.

We are pretty much just their lifeline for whatever they need. They will come to us with any questions, big or small. And our job is not to solve the problems, but get them the resources they need.

Moody:

So that's a really important point, especially if somebody is new to the military or new to a community, they may not know where the resources are or what sort of resources are.

Beyond the family readiness realm, I mean, there's the local DMV, there's the town dump, and these are not trivial. These are important things that people need to take care of.

And so what you're saying is that an ombudsman or a key spouse can be a good conduit to finding that information, whatever it might be.

Edenfield:

Even if we don't have the answer, we will find the answer for families. Whatever you need, that's what we're here for.

Shannon:

And she does that while reintegrating with her husband who has been gone. OK.

Moody:

Does that make it more difficult or does it give you a better sense? Now we're getting into private life.

Edenfield:

I don't think it makes it more difficult, but it also doesn't make it easier because my husband and I could be in the middle of a conversation working through something and if my ombudsman phone rings, I have to answer it.

So, as I say, sometimes he always has to put the Navy first, I have to do that as an ombudsman. I have to put the families first because if I don't answer a call, it could be a crisis call, it could be emergency. So we don't get the option. I have to put my life on hold sometimes to help other people.

Moody:

I'm really getting really interesting observations from you this morning. This is really interesting. Maybe we can just wrap up with any final thoughts that you might have about that period of time after a deployment and what families, what individuals, are experiencing.

McKinney:

My advice would be to give yourself some grace. You, your spouse, the service member, the children. Reintegrating is hard, and I don't think people really give it that type of recognition that it needs is yes, it's perfect, the pictures, everything is so lovely.

But at the end of the day, we need to give ourselves some grace, give our partners, our children and utilize the services that are out there.

Moody:

You were kind of nodding along to what she was saying, so can you add to that?

Windsor:

Yeah, I would say my final thoughts and advice along with giving yourself grace, I would also say I'm kind of a newer military spouse compared to a lot of people in this room. But I would say just make sure you have your own identity.

I have met so many women just working here at Fleet and Family that just don't have just who they are. They lose themselves in the deployment. They lose themselves in their husband's career.

They lose themselves in the children and they don't know who they are before and after and during this whole entire career. So just have time for yourself, have time to find new hobbies, have time to get a job, have time to get that schooling.

That's all available for you as a military spouse. So just do that so that 20 years from now when you're looking back, you don't know who you are. That's definitely my big advice.

And during that, after deployment, just have those conversations. If you did find yourself differently, if you're changing, if your spouse doesn't know who you are, have those conversations, what did you find out about yourself?

Because they may have changed too. That's OK. Just grow together and know that every single deployment's going to be different.

Moody:

That's a great way to wrap it up.

Shannon:

Communication is key.

Moody:

Communication is key.

Shannon:

Communication is key. And it's not just what you think, it's what they think because they're not going to come right out and come home maybe and tell you exactly what they've been through. So you're guessing kind of, the spouse is guessing. So it's big communication.

Moody:

Got it. Well, thank you. It's great. I feel like I've made a bunch of friends here today. This is a lot of fun. Really appreciate your insight.

I think they'll resonate with people, and I encourage people to share this conversation with somebody who might be getting ready to experience their first deployment because I think there's a lot of good insights here, and I thank you all very much.

Shannon:

Thank you.

Moody:

So now what you're going to do is you're going to watch me do my readout and it's not going to be at all awkward (group laughter). All right, here we go.

The Military One Source Podcast is an official resource of the Department of Defense, and we always like to hear from you.

So we have a link in the program notes where you can send us a question, a comment, maybe an idea for a future podcast, or maybe you can invite me to your installation to do something like this.

Be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcast because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life.

I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you so much for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.