

Military OneSource Podcast — MilSpouse Month DASD

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.

Every year, the military community honors military spouses. They do it throughout the month of May, which is Military Spouse Appreciation Month. My guest today is the Deputy Assistant Secretary Defense for Military Community and Family Policy, Patty Barron. And ma'am, it's great to have you with us on the podcast.

Patty Barron:

Bruce, it's great to be here with you.

Bruce:

I'm thrilled. What I'd like to do to kind of get this rolling is to ask you to introduce our other guest.

Patty:

This is probably the most exciting introduction that I've done ever. And so, I'm very happy to introduce to the audience, my daughter, Megan Barron Zemke. And Megan is a veteran. She served in the United States Army for seven years, and she is currently a military spouse, married to a wonderful man, and also, has two adorable little girls, who happen to be my granddaughters, Sophia and Violet.

Megan Barron Zemke:

Hi, mom. Hi, Bruce.

Bruce:

All right. All right. Already, this is going to be fun, I can tell this. Megan, we're going to learn more about you. You're joining us from Germany, by the way, but we'll get to that. And I think that we'll go through time. Let's begin, Mrs. Barron, with you. If you could share us your story. And well, we'll leave it to you for the appropriate time to hand it off to Megan.

Patty:

Thank you, Bruce. You might be a little bit sorry that you've asked me to share my story. It's one that I absolutely love to share. What I will tell you is that I'm an immigrant from another country. I immigrated to the United States when I was 6 years old, raised by a single mom, and who was just an amazing mom, but very strict, and definitely wanted us to do as well as we could. She made sure that we were always out there doing our best, working hard and not messing around too much. I actually think that, in a way, I lost out on being a child, and I'm more of an adult. And I've been an adult ever since I was 6.

I met my husband when we were both in college. He happened to be an ROTC cadet. I fell in love with the uniform and also with him, I would say. And anyway, we got married and started our Army life journey together. And probably about two years into our marriage, I started to have kids. Our first one was Michael, who is Megan's oldest brother, obviously, and he was the hard one to raise. Then came Megan, my second child and only daughter. I wouldn't say Megan was hard to raise. I would just say that you had to convince Megan that it was her idea, if you wanted her to do something, I would say that was my biggest challenge with her.

Megan:

Words my husband lives by.

Patty:

Ten years later, my youngest, Joe, was born. But we've been on this military journey for 30 years, and then, Mike had subsequently retired. But what I have found the most fascinating part of my military journey is watching my daughter go through her military journey. And I'm going to turn it over to her, so she can explain a little bit about that.

Megan:

Well, the best part about that, Mom, is that I always have a sympathetic ear when I need to call and just cry and say, "This is crazy. I can't believe that this is my life right now. Where did I go wrong?" And I actually have my mom who completely understands what I'm talking about in the shorthand.

And so, my story, as a spouse, begins after I had already joined the military. So, I did ROTC, had a great time. I was put into an airborne unit in Alaska, and that's where I met my husband. We met on a prop blast. If you were airborne, you know what a prop blast is. And I can't imagine that anybody would think that they were going to find love on that. But there we were. And we deployed to Afghanistan as boyfriend and girlfriend. Came back engaged.

And this is a very true story. I am not exaggerating at all. We got married the same day my mom met Vance, and one day, one of my daughters is going to pay me back dearly for that, I'm sure. But that's a typical military marriage. She just had to trust me on that one. And luckily, it's worked out. I was, unfortunately, injured during an airborne jump.

And so, my career ended, after seven years, in a med board, and I became just a regular old spouse, following my husband around, from duty station to duty station.

Patty:

Can I jump in real quick? Because you left out two of my favorite parts? So favorite part number one is when she was in Afghanistan and she was getting R&R. And I couldn't wait for her to come home. I could not wait to see her. It's been a while. My daughter, she was at war, and so, I'm waiting patiently. And then, she tells me that she's not coming home. No, she and her boyfriend are going to Lake Como in Italy. I'm like, "Oh, how nice."

Megan:

I'm sorry I didn't come home and see my mother.

Patty:

No.

Megan:

I went off and got engaged instead.

Patty:

Absolutely. And then, my second favorite story is when Megan was wearing her uniform, Medical Service Corps, highly respected, and, as a captain, was doing some amazing work at her duty station. And then, she was medically retired, as she said. And I remember Megan calling me three days later kind of almost crying, saying, "What just happened? Just three days ago, people were saluting me. Today, they won't even let me volunteer without filling out 20 million forms." And I remember that. It was quite a shock, I'm sure, for you.

Megan:

Well, it wasn't even just the saluting, but it was just like you go from being, and this is such a unique experience, and I think that anybody who's listening, who has gone from being in the uniform and being dual military to just being a spouse, you go from being somebody to being just a spouse. And you are so and so's spouse. And "What is their Social Security number?" And, "Who is your sponsor?" And you're like, "Well, I was my own sponsor for a very long time, but that's not relevant anymore." And it is one of the biggest shocks I got. And it wasn't about the respect or anything like that. It's just that, all of a sudden, you don't have this identity anymore, and you're this identity that is attached to somebody else. And as a very independent person, that was a shock. It was hard to get used to.

Bruce:

That's going to be hard for anyone. Independent or not, that's a whole different way of representing yourself, of getting things done. I want to give some perspectives to people about military life. It's a time, especially when you're so new to the military, it's all

about change. Everything is different. And just when you think you've got it, it continues to change. So, what were some of the things that started to give you an idea of what you were in for?

Patty:

If I could start, Bruce, because I grew up as a military spouse in the Stone Ages. There was no such thing as cellphones or internet or anything like that. Absolutely nothing. And so, as a brand-new spouse, who had never left the state of California, within six months, we had moved to Fort Benning, Georgia. Let me tell you, the cockroaches at Fort Benning are no joke. And then, we flew on over to Germany, where my husband put me in a guest house, and we were together for a week. And then, he left me for three weeks, while he went to the field.

And so, it was just the loneliest, loneliest time at the very beginning, because I didn't feel like I had anyone that I knew in Germany. And I couldn't really reach out to my family, in the way that we can now. But I do remember telling my husband, when he returned from the field, that I would do almost anything that I could to support him in his career. But that calling my mother was never going to be a discussion of, "Could I?" I was going to, if I wanted to.

Megan:

She would've come home on a...

Patty:

Definitely would've done that. I think, for me, that was the biggest shock is just being this California girl, growing up in northern California, moving all the way across the country, and then, moving halfway across the world. And having to do it and just getting down to it and doing it.

Bruce:

Those of us of a certain age can remember that the phone bill was a real bill. That was on par with all of your other payments that you had to pay every month. It wasn't just maintaining a cellphone. And in particular for those who are overseas trying to maintain a long-distance relationship, it was just plain expensive.

Patty:

It was. But Megs, what about for you?

Megan:

I feel like I almost cheated those years, because I came from the military. And so, it would've been much stranger to me if I had married a civilian and settled down and stayed in the same house. I don't think, in my entire life, I've ever lived in a house longer than three or four years. And so, that part of the military life wasn't foreign to me. What I think has been something that I've learned, that I wish I could give a spouse who's just

starting out, is that there's more than one way to do the Army. When you're first coming in, and even from me, from my perspective, I came from the Barrons.

And so, they had this track that you guys were on, that was a very high-speed track. And I think, when you're seeing it, when you're first coming in, you think, "That's the way I have to go. I have to make sure that I'm always running at top speed." But you don't, necessarily. And I think that there is room for a very high-speed, successful career and family at the same time, but it's a little bit trickier. And you have to find it, and you do have to fight for it a little bit more.

Patty:

So, I think, Boop, excuse me, Megs, that's such a great...

Bruce:

Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. We have to explain. We have to explain, because now it's out there. I wasn't going to say it, but ...

Patty:

All of you listening that are moms know that you've got nicknames for your kiddos, and when Megan was born, she had the biggest eyes in the world, so we nicknamed her Betty Boop, which was shortened to Boop.

Bruce:

OK. There we are.

Megan:

And I will answer to Boop.

Patty:

And so, I do want to just chime in on what you just said, because that's a really important point. I talked about my immigration story a little bit, coming from another country to the United States. And I want to tell you that I've always been an all-in kind of person. I don't do anything without going full speed ahead. I think I was probably president of my kindergarten class.

But for me, oh, gosh, marrying a man that was going to be an officer in the military, a part of this culture that had all these traditions and all these things that were attached to it, that was me. I loved every minute of it. I was just very taken up with that. And as Megan said, we were zooming as fast as we could, to do lots of different things, because my husband is an infantry man. And that track is very spelled out for you. And Mike certainly did everything that he needed to do to continue on that track. I would say that, yes, I do bleed red, white and blue. And sometimes, that became an issue in our family.

Megan:

Poor mom, she's got three rebellious kids, who don't even celebrate the Fourth of July. I'm slightly joking, but that's a really funny thing. Because we are the kids of soldiers,

and so, these traditions and things, they're a normal part of our lives. We don't have the big sparkle in our eye that I think a lot of people have when they come in. And, I think that's what one of the things I looked for in a partner was not to have that running relationship, that I have to go, go, go all the time. And with my husband, Vance, he's very successful, and he's a wonderful officer. But we've kind of realized, throughout his career, that it's OK to downshift, just a little bit, so that we can do the things that we need to do. And Vance, he's an OIF vet, during the time that we were gone, for 15 to 18 months in Iraq.

He came back for about 10 months, and then, we deployed to Afghanistan for 14 months. So, he definitely did his time, and I think part of that made us together realize we don't want our entire life to be military and deployments and all of that. We kind of want to get the entire experience and enjoy where we are and enjoy our family. Not that I don't feel like we didn't do that when I was little, but I do remember a quote from my mom, just this last year, saying, "Well, they didn't have vacations when we were growing up. Nobody did that when we were younger." And whether that's true for her or whether that was true in general, I think my generation, who came up during the surge in Afghanistan and everything, and this younger generation, who's coming up during COVID, and work-life balance is very big, they're not going to say, "Well, nobody took vacations." I don't foresee that being something that they do.

Patty:

Well, that's such a super great point, because that's exactly right. That's what I'm always kind of in awe of the newer generation of military families is that there is a real emphasis on work-life balance. And I've told Megan this before. When she calls me and says, "I can't believe I have to go to the doctor and take these two kids with me. And actually, I'm going to the emergency room, because I just did something to my head or something." When I was growing up as a spouse, you would never call your spouse to say, "I need you to come home" or "You need to pick up the kids today" or "Can you make dinner because I'm going to be late?" You just didn't do that. It was almost like you had to take care of yourself and your kids, because the spouse and the career were super important. And that seems to have changed a bit. I could be wrong.

Megan:

No, I feel like you're definitely on point, because a lot of these spouses are coming in either later and have their own careers. But technology has a really big role in this, that you see what other spouses are doing, you also see what your civilian friends are doing, and they have these very well-balanced, equal marriages. And you want that, too. And so, I think there's less emphasis on making sure that your military member gets everything that they need and they get all the support they need and you're never going to question it, and you're going to say, "Hey, you need to be home for some of this stuff." I don't call my husband unless it's an absolute emergency, but I'm going to call him if it's an emergency. I'm not going to figure it out.

Bruce:

I have a question about that. So, you have an idea of when it's appropriate to call or when it's not. My question is, how do you have these conversations? What are your tips for a couple who needs to work out what it is that they want, maybe regarding the work-life balance, the personal career, the professional career? How do you have that conversation? And when it becomes an argument, how do you navigate that as well?

Megan:

Well, I will tell you, there have been wildly inappropriate times that I've called. And I remember, one time he was at Thailand and I was in Hawaii, but I was like 37 weeks pregnant and the dog had gotten out and my older daughter was screaming, because she was trying to go to bed. And I called him in Thailand, and I was like, "I can't believe..." And I had some loving words for him, obviously, and he's like, "I don't know what you want me to do. I am in Thailand." So, just to put that out there, we all have those moments, where we're just at the end of our rope. But I think, to answer your question, it's an evolving conversation. And one thing that has changed for me is that I used to be in. And so, I know sometimes it is very important and he's at work and he's got to be there.

But I also know that, sometimes, you're at work and there's not much to do and you're maybe having coffee and telling old stories, and I'm not ever going to really know which one it is, because you're at work. And so, I have to trust him, that, if he can come home, he will come home. And he has to trust me that, if it's an emergency, I'll call him. But if it's something I can handle myself, I'll handle it myself. And it's an evolving conversation, based on getting, unfortunately, getting to the point where there have been times where I felt like, "I needed you there, and you weren't there. And that is a problem for me." And I think that, for us to have our marriage on equal footing, for me to be able to hold down the home front, I have to know that he's going to be there when I need him, if he can be there.

And so, that's also advice that I would give to the spouse is that, have these conversations. It's OK. It's OK to say, "No, I need this from you." It's OK to say, "It's important to me that you're here on my birthday" or "It's important to me that you're here for the kids' birthday or the kids' recital." "It's important for me that I have a career, too. So, let's work out who's going to pick up the kids, if there's..." Especially with so many dual military [families] now, you can't just be the one who is always there. You've got to work out who's going to step back at what time. And it's just got to be open communication. And I don't think that the military can necessarily always be sacrosanct anymore. I think it's got to be an evolving conversation, so that you know what to expect from each other.

Patty:

I think that's a great point, too, because it's those conversations that are so important. And I do feel strongly that the younger families of the military today get that better than we did. We found a lot of our conversations were about the career and about the Army

and about what we were going to be doing next or what we wish we had done before, just lots of those kinds of conversations. Whereas, Megan and Vance have conversations around what kind of wine pairs better with this type of chicken or...

Megan:

We're such yuppy ...

Patty:

You guys are, and it just seems like they're really fun conversations, as opposed to the real seriousness that we used to have when we were growing up in the military. But I would say that that's true.

Megan:

But I think that you need to have fun with your spouse. And I think one of the things that our generation of Millennials does well, and Gen Zs are experts at this, is self-care and advocating for yourself, and setting boundaries. And we're all very comfortable with therapy and our therapy talk and stuff. And that leads into the communication and the conversation and just making sure that your relationship with your military member is more than just, "I'm here to support you in the mission. I'm here, the Spartan wife." I think we want to have a fun marriage. And that his work, her work, is that. It's work. This is home, and this is supposed to be fun.

Patty:

So, you bring up a really, really good point, and it's one that you and I have talked about a lot. And that's therapy and how the younger generation views therapy, as opposed to maybe some of us older folks. But one thing that you know, because you used to be Medical Service Corps, you've seen service members that needed to get some support, because of their stress level or any behavioral health issues that they might have. It still feels like there's a big stigma for service members to go to therapy, and yet, they're in the generation that seems to embrace it more than mine. Can you explain that?

Megan:

Well, I think one thing that's really helped with that is technology, because we're always constantly in contact with friends, with family. And even if a service member might not want to go to therapy themselves or might be hesitant to get help, one, you can go online and get help, which is great. But two, you have a whole bigger network of friends, outside of the military, who are saying, "It's going to be OK. You need to go get help," and encouraging them. And just having that much more of a push, I think, helps. It also helps that everybody talks about it as a normal thing.

And so, it's being much more normalized now than I think, even then 10 years ago, when we were captains, it's much more of a thing that people do. It's just done. And so, you're going to hear people talking about, they go to therapy, you're going to hear talk people talking about, "Here's some things that I learned," and you see that they feel better and you want to feel better, too. So, I think having more of a support network,

having it normalized, and feeling like, “This is something that is going to help me feel better,” is part of what makes that difference. I think, and I could be wrong, but it seemed like, in your time, it was something that was whispered about.

Patty:

Back in my day, it was whispered about. Go ahead.

Megan:

And you were a counselor, weren't you, Mom? You were a counselor?

Patty:

I got a master's in community mental health, but because of the moves, you know how that goes, Boop, I never was in a state long enough to get my license. Go ahead, Bruce.

Bruce:

Oh, yes. You mentioned constant contact with friends, and that's something I really want to spend a little bit of time with. The networks around you, fellow spouses, friends, neighbors, people in the community, what are some of your experiences and some of the advice that you have? And what is really the value of really nurturing those relationships? And hopefully, what we're talking about is something that is beyond social media, actually going out and having a cup of coffee with a friend.

Megan:

Well, here I have to shout out to my very best friends in the whole world. We call each other the LBC, because they are friends of mine from high school, who I moved to that high school when I was a junior, and they accepted me into their fold. And we've been in constant contact ever since. And I mean daily, via text messages. I am such a huge proponent of technology for friendships and FaceTime and texting and sending memes and pictures, of keeping those up. Because I think, especially when I think about my amazing military sisters and friends, they're constantly moving. And you meet someone, and they're like your best friend at that duty station. And then, they're gone. And by keeping up with them, either via social media or by texting, you're able to easily bring them back into that fold. And I'm sure that's true with any friendship, even before technology, but it makes it that much easier.

I have a friend now, who's my best friend here, and she was my best friend four duty stations ago, before I even had my children. And just being able to reconnect, now we both have kids that are small. We're able to go on mom trips. I have friends that were in Hawaii, and I'm seeing them do amazing things. And we might reconnect again, if they come out here. I have friends that are neighbors, that I'm able to really just bond with, and they might leave. And I might not see them again, because now we're getting to that retirement time. But I feel like I will know their life, because I always have this tiny little box, where I can send them a note or I can send them a meme, “Hey, this reminded me of you.”

Or I can comment on their Facebook wall and say, “Hey, that was so cool to see your pictures.” And you just always feel close. And for a lot, I’ve always wondered how my mom did this without that kind of connection, because there’s always somebody to talk to. Even if I can’t get out of the house, because I’ve got kids and they’re sick and my husband’s gone and it’s just one of those times, somebody is there, always. And that is so helpful. And I’m sorry, Mom, I don’t know how you did it.

Patty:

So, back in the Stone Ages, there used to be an apparatus that had a big wheel in the middle and numbers through their wheels.

Megan:

Wait a minute. You called people with your voice?

Patty:

We called people with our fingers and our voice, yes. But I would say yes. So, for me, the sisterhood. I know that I talked to you about that so many different times, and sometimes you’d say, “I don’t know what you’re talking about, because there’s nobody around.” And then, sometimes you call and you say, “Oh my God, I totally get it now.” But for me, the sisterhood always started with knocking on your neighbor’s door, asking if they would please be your emergency contact on the school forms. That still happens, yeah, because you didn’t know anybody. And then, you got to know them. And I swear to gosh, those of you that are listening will know this, that quarters or where you live, especially on the military, are kind of connected to your rank.

So, you get smaller quarters when you really need bigger quarters, and you get bigger quarters when you need smaller ones. And so, my friends and I would really bond over walking over to the officers’ areas, like the field-grade areas and kind of peeking through windows to see what kind of furniture they had in their homes and how pretty it looked and all that. And that just kind of made us kind of like, “Yeah, one day, that’s going to be us.” And then, I have to also say that one of the things, I’m a jack of all trades, I’ve done everything as far as careers go, because I’ve always tried to work around my kids’ schedules. And so, for a long time, I sold Longaberger baskets, and there are many, many friends of mine out there that have a stash of Longaberger baskets. And all of their husbands always want to know, “OK, who was your dealer? I need to get after that woman.”

Megan:

What I love, though, is that there’s always a trick to finding ... I got a dog, because my neighbor had a dog and she was walking her dog. And I was like, “I should be walking a dog. If I had a dog, I could go walking with this neighbor.” And that’s how I made her ... literally, that’s how I got my dog. Or somebody’s kid is outside, and you have a kid the same age. So, you just rush over there, and you’re like, “Our kids are the same age.” And just the grace of trying to make military spouse friends.

Patty:

It's an art.

Bruce:

So, at this point in the conversation, what I'd like to do is note that we do have a number of events happening in May, in observance of Military Spouse Appreciation Month. And what I'd like to do is ask, Mrs. Barron, if you would talk a little bit about what we have in store.

Patty:

Thank you, Bruce, for that, because I'm really excited to talk about this. And I'm especially excited that Megan's listening, because I hope that she'll join in and register. We are having something called MilSpouse Month 2023. And what we're excited about is that it's going to happen throughout the entire month, where it's basically a summit for military spouses.

And it will cover tons of different topics, a lot of it around employment: how to rebuild your resume after you've been out of the workforce for a little while, how to think about pivoting from one career to the other. We're going to have our SECO career coaches on live, that you'll be able to chat with them. And what I love about this is that, before, we used to do this for three days, and you had to sit in front of your desktop or your phone or whatever, during that three-day period.

But so many of our spouses said, "I've got a life and I've got children and I'm not going to be able to sit for three days." And so, being able to spread it out throughout the month is fantastic. And I think that it's going to be available, so that folks in different time zones will be able to listen in. And besides the career piece of it or the education piece of it, we're also going to have lots of discussions around health and wellness, around relationships, around just a plethora of other things, that, I think, our military spouses are going to enjoy talking about.

Bruce:

And these are going to be sessions that will be available on Zoom, and we're going to put a link in the program notes. People can click on that and get more information about the events that are coming up. Now, while May is Military Spouse Appreciation Month, we want to remind listeners of the year-round support available. And so, Mrs. Barron, can you touch on these briefly?

Patty:

Absolutely, Bruce. So, one of our most important platforms is, of course, Military OneSource, and on Military OneSource, we have support to our service members and families, 365 days a year, 24/7. You can call an 800 number to get connected. We have so many different areas, where we can provide you with support. Probably, one of our top ones is non-medical counseling, as well as new parent support, the SECO program, which I mentioned before, the Spouse Education and Career Opportunities, as well as

even helping you, if you're a foreign-born spouse, with language translation of documents or other things. So, if you go to militaryonesource.mil, you'll find lots and lots of great information there. The other thing that I would mention is that, at the installation level, of course, we have our family centers. For the Army, it happens to be Army Community Service. For the Air Force, it's Airmen and Family Service. And then, Fleet and Family Service, and so many different family centers throughout the services. And make sure that you're checking in with them, also, following them online, to not miss out on any in-person opportunities that you might have.

Bruce:

Wonderful. We're going to wrap things up. And the way I'd like to do this is to give each of you the opportunity to say something to a brand-new spouse, who is just wondering what they've gotten themselves into. What words of wisdom would you like to share with them?

Megan:

You go first, Mom.

Patty:

I was going to say, you go first. So, I think what I would like to share is that this can be a very isolating life, if you allow it to be. And so, it really is important that you start to make connections as soon as you join a unit or a neighborhood. So many of our families now live off the installation. I would say about 70%, which makes it a little bit harder to make friends. And that's why it's so important to kind of keep track of the things that you might be able to join on base, but also, through the other activities that you would normally find, whether they're sports teams that your kids are part of, your church, cooking clubs, whatever it happens to be, make sure that you're making those connections.

And the other thing I would like to say is that, for the time, you are a part of the military and the military community, it can seem very daunting, and it can seem very stressful. But I like to think that it's also something that not everybody can do. And so, you should be really proud of your ability to be that flexible, that adaptable, and it's not always easy. But it can be done. And I think my daughter and I are proof of that. So, Megan, over to you.

Megan:

Well, my mom gives great advice. It's what she's amazing at. And so, I'm going to just say that's wonderful advice, and I'm just going to validate. This is hard. It's really hard, and it's OK to say it's hard. What you're going through is tough. And it's OK if there are days that you hate it, and it's OK if there are days that you want to throw in the towel. And it's OK if there are times when you tell your husband, "That's it, I'm going home." Everybody has those days. And what I want to say, too, is that you matter, and this is your life, too. And communicate with your spouse, tell them your needs, and tell them what you need them to do for you, in order to feel like you're secure. And it's OK.

Patty:

And I have to add this, because I'm a mom, but I'm so incredibly proud that Megan Barron Zemke is my daughter. I truly would worry sometimes that I wasn't going to stay relevant in the job that I have, because I've been out of it for a little while. But Megan keeps me relevant. Megan and her friends and her perspective and the conversations we have, they really keep me relevant, and I am so proud to be her mom. And she is definitely my best friend.

Megan:

I'm proud of you too, Mom. You're amazing.

Bruce:

Fantastic. I'm not going to try to top that. I'm just going to end it right there. Thank you to the both of you for being on the podcast today.

Patty:

Thanks so much, Bruce.

Megan:

Thanks, Bruce.

Bruce:

And I want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department, and we want to hear from you. We have a link in the program notes. You can send us a comment, a question, or your idea for a future episode. And be sure to subscribe to our 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. Thanks for listening. Bye-bye.