

Military OneSource Podcast — Military Parental Leave Policy: One Family's Story

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. Last year, the Defense Department issued a new policy that provides 12 weeks of paid nonchargeable parental leave to service members who have a child through birth, adoption or long-term foster care. So, we're going to talk about that policy today with our guests, and they are Heather and Marine Corps Captain Richard LeCompte. Welcome to the both of you to the podcast.

Heather:

Good morning.

Richard LeCompte:

Good morning.

Bruce Moody:

Good morning. So we were getting ready to record, and you had noted that you guys are a blended family, so I'm curious. Let's just get started. Why don't you introduce yourselves and tell us a little bit about your family?

Richard LeCompte:

All right, so my name is Richard, and Heather is my wife. We have, as we said, six kids together through our blended family. We both had previous marriages that obviously didn't work out. Welcome to the military. And we went to high school together, so kind of found each other again in 2017.

Heather:

We have two 19-year-old boys. They're like Dumb and Dumber, if you've ever seen that show. Then we have a 15-year-old boy, a 14-year-old girl. Then we had two babies together, so we have a two-and-a-half-year-old and a one-and-a-half-year-old.

Richard LeCompte:

She's almost three.

Heather:

She is almost three.

Bruce Moody:

So I guess I want to compare the two babies, because one was before this new policy and one was after.

Heather:

Yes.

Richard LeCompte:

Yes.

Bruce Moody:

So, how do you compare the two?

Richard LeCompte:

Kynleigh was born in January of '22, and during that time, the Defense Department's policy was we had the 21 days of parental leave for the non-birth-giving parent. And then when Morgan was born, we got the 84 days, so that was the huge difference between the two.

Heather:

Yeah, it was pretty unique with the differences. With Kynleigh, when we only had the 21 days, although we were grateful for the 21 days, it almost wasn't enough, you know?

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, talk about that, because what is the difference in time? What does that do for you, for the baby, for the parents?

Heather:

Speaking from obviously the birth mother, I did have emergency C-sections with both of them, and I think everybody's situation will be different. We're all adults, right? Depending on if it's a vaginal birth versus a C-section, that already has its complications in itself with healing times and processes. So for me, I couldn't drive. I was pretty down afterwards, so chores around the house, picking up the baby, things like that was challenging. So him being home was great, but three weeks was almost just about the time that I was kind of feeling like myself again, and then he was back to work so then I was at home by myself.

And then with Morgan, we had the liberty to kind of decide what was better for us and how long did we really need. Since it was our second baby and I had a C-section, I was a little bit more prepared. I knew what to expect, so we were able to kind of plan that out to see how long did we need in the very beginning. And so for us, not trying to jump the gun, but we took a little bit longer in the beginning. I think we took four weeks in the beginning, and then we spread out the rest over the course of a year.

Bruce Moody:

That's a really important aspect of it, and I want to get into that, because 12 weeks is not... You can break that up as you see fit. What was your mindset behind that?

Richard LeCompte:

It's a little bit different, I think, with the billet that you hold and things like that, because I was on Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. I was in command. I had company command at the time. So my battalion and regimental commander kind of gave me that leeway to plan it out over the course of a year, because obviously it's difficult whenever you're in command and you can't be away from your company for an extended period of time because you had a baby, especially in that aspect. But on the flip side of that, I had Marines inside my company that were having children and things like that, so it really depended on their rank and their billet at work as to how we navigated those 84 days.

So it was good for us, because we were able to kind of spread it out. We used some like over the holiday periods and things like that, so we didn't burn our own annual leave, which was great. So now you look back on it and be like, yeah, I mean we took 84 days over the course of a year, which is extremely difficult by the way, for higher-ranking Marines, because your job is so demanding. For the younger guys, the corporals, lance corporal sergeants, that you can almost afford to let take those 84 days at a time, because you can put somebody in their position and take care of that, was a different story, so oftentimes we would allow them to take that total 84 days if they wanted to.

Bruce Moody:

I have a question, because I'm retired Navy and I totally get it, you know? The demands. I mean, you could be in the middle of a cruise, and you just can't decide that, "Oh, I need to take leave at this time." So I guess my question to you as a leader, when you're working with Marines, how can a Marine best position themselves to take the fullest advantage of this leave in a way that they feel is what their family needs? How should they communicate with you or their leader?

Richard LeCompte:

The way I look at it, being open and honest up front with their leadership, letting them know, "Hey..." Unfortunately for us, Heather had to have the emergency C-section, so I let my commander know like, "Hey, she's going to have the C-section. The plan is to take this many days in advance out front, and then if she feels better, then I'll come back to work a little bit sooner." And they were very understanding about that, and my Marines did a lot of the same things. If they talked to us and like, "Hey, we would like to spread it out over the course of this time period," we just looked at our calendar and our training event schedule and made a decision together, based on the needs of them and their family.

Bruce Moody:

This is really interesting. So as you're talking to your Marines about taking parental leaves, what are the sort of questions that they had for you? Or maybe what sort of needs were they wanting to address?

Richard LeCompte:

Honestly, it's always going to be different. Some of them just don't really say much, and they just take their 84 days, because they're like, "Oh, I'm getting three months off of work." You know? But others, senior leaders have a little bit more understanding of the policy. This is still fairly new, so going through it, it's like, "How do we together navigate what's best for you and your family?" So we would always remind them, "Hey, coming from somebody that has multiple children, this is kind of the things that your spouse is going to need."

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, so you have the hindsight or the perspective of someone who is a little more seasoned in uniform, but also seasoned as a dad. For someone who's getting ready for their first child and they have this parental leave, what are some of the things that maybe they should have in mind, that maybe they're thinking about some of the things, but what do you think they might be missing when they're making plans?

Richard LeCompte:

The importance of helping out your spouse. I think oftentimes... We see things all the time on social media pages. Facebook has all these different pages that spouses are involved in, and they kind of vent to each other. But you'll see things. Yeah, you know what I'm talking about, but you'll see things where-

Bruce Moody:

I do. I do. I'm biting my lip.

Richard LeCompte:

Yeah, where spouses will complain to other spouses that their husband is not helping with the child and they just come home and they play their video games. And that's kind of concerning to say the least, because I mean, at the end of the day, it's learning how to be a parent, and it's a new thing, I think. So they're trying to navigate that, but at the same time, it's like as leaders, how do you teach these young men and women how to be parents? That's a difficult thing, because it could have been how they were brought up in their childhood as well, and what they saw growing up, so it's kind of second nature to them.

Bruce Moody:

Heather, you're still part of this conversation.

Heather:

I am, letting him do his thing.

Bruce Moody:

What would be your advice to Marines and their spouses on the subject of getting ready for their first baby?

Heather:

You know, I think taking advantage of what the military has to offer. There are classes. There are things that certain Naval Hospitals offer. There are resources out there that, quite honestly, it took me a while to know and to learn, and that's something that I wish was probably advertised a little bit more. And then budgeting. I think budgeting is super important too. But going back to the resources, there are a lot of things that I was not aware that they offered until you know another mom or a fellow spouse would be like, "Hey, did you know that Naval Hospital offered this class?" "Well, no, I didn't." And so for me, when Marines find out that they are becoming a parent, I would really tell them to really look into that.

You know, see What the Naval Hospital, whenever they go to the hospital to get their checkup, whether they're in the OB/GYN Clinic or family med, because that's an option too, ask them. Ask their providers, what does the hospital have to offer? What classes are there? I would like to focus on the budgeting issue. Depending on their spending habits, yeah, you're off, but with a baby comes a financial burden. I say burden, but you know what I mean? It's something that they're not used to, and they're not used to having to budget for a whole baby. That's diapers, and wipes, formula. If that's the case, it's expensive. And I mean, even for us. We had a baby that was on a special formula. We were spending close to \$500 a month in formula. You know, I say we're seasoned, so even that was a little difficult.

Bruce Moody:

You know, one thing that we haven't talked about, and I'm really curious about this, is that the bonding that takes place with baby, and what is the difference between the old policy and the new?

Heather:

Well, you get more time, that's for sure. So, we decided after having Kynleigh, our two-and-a-half-year-old, and only getting the three weeks, we really honed in on family time at home. And that included our older children. So, there were certain quality times that we had in the afternoon when the older kids got home from school, that they would come home, get their homework done, and then they got baby time as well, whenever they asked for it. But I do think that that's important, because it really sets your family dynamic for the future. So for me, you want to include all of your children. I've done this in the past too, where sometimes you're just tired, and you're just like, "No, no, no. Not right now. The baby's sleeping." But in reality, allowing that time, whether the baby's sleeping, to let your other kids hold them, or...

Skin-to-skin is also really important. I feel like it really, really helped with the infants, especially with us having preemies too. And that's something that they taught me at Naval. So we did that, and my older boys, they did it too. So, I think it's just having those conversations, and for Richard and I solely, with Kynleigh, it was a little bit more difficult, because of course, I was getting up every two to three hours to feed. So, you're tired. It's overwhelming. It can be a lot. And so with Richard home, he was able to take

over some of those duties when he could, and let me sleep. Let me catch back up. Let me take a shower. Let me eat a good meal. You know? Those things. And so with Morgan, with the more time off, we were able to really talk about what that time looked like. So, because we had a toddler at the time, what happened for us is I ended up having the baby and feeding her, and then he basically took our toddler. So it was almost like we divided and conquered with kids, because that's what ended up happening.

Bruce Moody:

Mm-hmm. You made a really interesting point, which is you were provided certain things to do, for example, the skin-to-skin time. Talk a little bit more, because people are having babies when they're young, and maybe they were anticipating having their parents in the home or across town, and now that's just not the case. Having those sorts of resources, there's two aspects of it. There's information, but there's a lot of heart that goes into those programs as well.

Heather:

Yes.

Bruce Moody:

Maybe talk a little bit about that.

Heather:

Okay, so with the skin-to-skin... Sorry, our babies just woke up so-

Bruce Moody:

Well, you know? That's okay.

Heather:

So with the skin-to-skin, we can start on that. And I also worked in pediatrics too, so it's something that they solely believe really helps create the bond between baby and mom, baby and dad. For us, we did no phones, no electronics, and you just hold the baby. You hold the baby's skin-to-skin. For moms, whether or not you just choose to breastfeed, some moms can, some can't, and that would be another thing too, is not to be discouraged. I've been on both aspects of that topic. But again, Naval has some lactation consultants that will also come to your home, or you can make appointments with them. They are wonderful, and it was something that I didn't know previous that they even offered.

Bruce Moody:

And we've got a bunch of links in the program notes, and we have a program called the New Parent Support Program. I just love this program. This one just really stuck out with me, I think because I was introduced to it so early in my career, and I met some of the people. And these are people who will come to your home judgment-free, ready to walk around your home, and they are dressed casually. And there's a reason for that, because they are going to get on their hands and knees and work with you and find is there an

outlet that needs to be covered? Are there cleaning supplies under the sink that maybe need to be moved a bit?

They're going to help you, and it is totally nonjudgmental, and they are just the warmest, most supportive people, and when they come into your home, you just feel like they're there to help you be a better parent, to just really get the most out of the experience. And the other thing I would say, because sometimes you don't know what you don't know, and really, the best place to start would be to call Military OneSource and say, "Hey, I'm expecting a baby, and I have questions, and I don't even know how many questions I have." They will just get you started on the right track. I just welcome any final thoughts from both of you on being parents in the military. I'll just throw it wide open.

Heather:

Yeah, give him just a second, because he's actually changing two diapers, so-

Bruce Moody:

Oh, that's awesome. No, no, no. We're totally going to wait for that.

Heather:

Yeah, no. And he's back.

Bruce Moody:

Let me ask you just one last question.

Heather:

Yeah.

Bruce Moody:

We're talking about working with programs and working within the family. What about neighbors and friends in the immediate physical community?

Heather:

It can be difficult, but it can also be a blessing. For us, fortunately, it has been a blessing. When we were in Lejeune, our best friends, Whitney and Chris, they lived across the street from us. We met them a couple of months after moving in. I just kind of made a post in our neighborhood. It was like, "Hey, we just moved in. I need friends. Help me." And she was like, "Well, I'm right across the street." And then it was just, we immediately... As soon as we got to base, we found out we were pregnant with Kynleigh, and so between them, they were there for, yeah, everything honestly, with both of our babies up until we moved. But finding your community. I found friends within my husband's command, their spouses and his Marines that he worked with as well.

We were fortunate one of the guys that worked with him in Lejeune also got orders to Pendleton. And guess what. They ended up becoming our neighbors. They just happened to get the house next door, and she's helping us watch Morgan right now. So really being open and joining the communities. I was part of some of the spouses clubs

that the base offers, and I met a lot of wonderful women, and I met a lot of seasoned wives, and they were able to help us with things that we didn't know, because I think that everybody has experienced something different along the way in their journey of being a Marine or a military spouse. But having friends and family in the military, because for us, we are not usually around family.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah. Speaking as a former sailor, I will tell you, if you're new to the military, look around. Look at the people around you.

Heather:

Yep.

Bruce Moody:

You're going to see them again and again-

Heather:

All the time.

Bruce Moody:

... so get to know your neighbors and be nice to them.

Heather:

Be nice to them. Help. Give them a cup of sugar.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah. I mean, totally. But here's my last question. Maybe we can wrap up with this, because whether you're a Marine going to talk to your leadership, or you're going to talk to a neighbor just to introduce yourself or to ask for help, or just to hang, I think the most difficult things is the first time you reach out, that icebreaker. Maybe you think that other people are having it harder than you and you don't warrant asking for help. What is your advice to people who are anxious about that first call, that first speaking up and asking for help, or just asking for a cup of coffee?

Heather:

It can be intimidating. We've all been in that situation. I think just, honestly, going for it. I mean, just doing it, just reaching out and not being nervous. Because here's the thing, is everybody... If they're in the military, they've all seen and they've all had to travel. They've all had to start over. So, I think where some people might think that it's super difficult, and it can be, the bottom line is, is that they've all done it. You know, the other spouses are probably thinking the same thing, so for me, I'm a social butterfly, so it comes pretty naturally at the park, seeing a mom, and she's there with her kids, just walking over. "Hi," and usually that's all it takes. It takes a simple hello, a wave, and just introducing yourself. You know, if they want to... Sorry. This is Morgan.

Bruce Moody:

No, don't apologize.

Heather:

If they want to engage, they absolutely will, and honestly, that's how a lot of my friendships have started, is just-

Richard LeCompte:

Finding common ground.

Heather:

Finding common ground.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah. And Richard, from the uniform side of the question, what are your thoughts?

Richard LeCompte:

It's a lot of the same. And I know for some junior Marines or junior leaders, it's a little bit more intimidating and difficult, obviously to go and speak to your commanding officer or your leadership. With my MOS specifically and AMMO, it's a little bit unique because all the officers in our field came from the enlisted side. You know, we were all warrant officers becoming LDOs, so we have a pretty good understanding of what it's like to be a PFC and a lance corporal, up and through those junior staff and CO ranks. So having them navigate how to speak to their leadership, I think was a little bit easier for us, to bring them together and get them inducted into the parenthood aspect. You know, I would encourage them, when your baby's born, bring your baby by the office, so they can meet everybody, because we become a little mini-mafia.

Bruce Moody:

But also, I really want to impress upon people, when a service member can focus on the mission, that's a good thing. When they are given a task and their mind is on stuff back home, that's not good. That compromises the people around that service member. So when you speak up, you're really speaking up on behalf of the mission and behalf of your unit, the people you serve with, that you know, the people that you really have bonded with. This is your way of saying, "I want to be strong for you, and one of the ways of being strong for you is to make sure my stuff is taken care of back home." And you can't do it alone. You've got to ask for help.

Richard LeCompte:

Right. And that's something we harped big on too, was their family care plans, explaining to them what a family care plan was and how it can help you. And it's difficult, because the military kind of puts a hard constraint on how far away a short-term caregiver can be, and to a long-term caregiver, you know? They got to be within an hour of being there, and it's like, well, that's kind of difficult.

Bruce Moody:

I'm so glad to have had this conversation with you. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Heather:

Absolutely. Thank you for having us. We really appreciate it.

Bruce Moody:

Heather and Marine Corps Captain Richard LeCompte, thank you so much for joining us today.

Heather:

Thank you.

Bruce Moody:

And I want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. If you have a question or a comment about what you heard today, maybe an idea for a podcast in the future, send us a note. We have a link in the podcast notes where you can go ahead and do that. And be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts, because there we go.

Heather:

Yeah.

Bruce Moody:

You heard it. 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.