

# Preparing To Go

By Virginia Kiernen

On Sunday, February 8, only three days after the deployment announcement was made, we found our small start-up church was already jumping to help military families. Our church, Gateway Christian, was only three years old and meeting in a community gym. The makeshift nursery was in the racquetball court and the older kids met in one of the two side rooms where the ping-pong and pool tables were located. Gateway used a computer generated (Power Point) slide projection, which displayed words to the music we sung, sermon notes, and announcements. A slide was displayed during the service with a list of soldiers who were members of the church. There was a note asking for any other soldiers who considered Gateway their home church to add their names to the list. One of the church members, Kelli Hill, stood up during the service and announced that anyone who wanted to volunteer to adopt a military family to please see her after the service. Many members went to Kelli after the service, and I saw her write down their names and thank them for signing up. Everyone made a point to tell me that they were praying for us. I was awed at the outpouring of support by the church. Their support was like a warm, comfortable blanket that helped me chase away the fear.

There was also support from the unit. Each unit would leave behind a few soldiers designated as the Rear Detachment (rear D). They had the official duties to assist family members. Each unit also had a Family Readiness Group (FRG). The commander was responsible for the FRG, but it was mainly a voluntary group of spouses. It was different than the coffee group I belong to because there were really no limits to membership.

Anyone who wanted to join the FRG was allowed, including spouses, parents, fiancés, and friends of soldiers in the unit. The reason for this group was mainly to communicate to those who care about the soldiers during a deployment. The FRG used a simple phone tree for communication. It relied on volunteers to pass information down and problems or rumors up the tree. The Battalion level FRG published a newsletter to keep members informed about what the soldiers in the Battalion were doing, what was happening in the local area, and what the FRG might be working on. The FRG conducted meetings on a regular basis. When the unit was not deployed, the FRG existed but the activity was limited. Sometimes they might help plan a children's Christmas party or raise money for the unit with a bake sale. Now that the 101<sup>st</sup> was deploying, the call went out for more volunteers. I volunteered to be a Point of Contact for the Artillery. It meant I would be a branch of the phone tree, passing the info up and down for a group of about twelve women. Verner also made sure I was on the Infantry FRG list. He wanted to insure I was in the infantry communication loop, since in Iraq he would be living with the infantry unit.

The next big event that we went to was a pre-deployment briefing for the infantry. We met in a small chapel in the 1st Brigade area. I saw most of the women I had met through the infantry coffee. Holly's husband, COL Ben Hodges, told us that he thought the Brigade would be leaving around February 24, give or take a week. He also told us that the deployment would be for six months to a year, and the best way to think of the deployment was to plan for our spouses to be gone a year. So if Verner were gone for any time less than that, it would be a gift. The company commander, CPT Greg Holden, had power point slides he projected on a portable screen to give order to the meeting. We

were introduced to the rear D commander, CPT Justin Cook. He would be the one left behind to assist family members. Next, a lawyer talked about all the legal issues that might occur, and encouraged everyone to get a Special Power of Attorney for each area they may need, whether for getting ID cards or selling a house. A General Power of Attorney might work for other legal issues, but being specific now can prevent problems when an establishment, such as a bank, needs your spouse's signature. Another briefer went over the increases in pay—all Verner's income while overseas would be tax free, plus he would get combat pay and hazardous duty pay—all total about \$500 to \$700 extra each month.

Another briefer told us how the mail works; once it is set up the soldiers would be able to get mail, but letters took about two weeks and packages would take up to four weeks to reach him.

The Chaplain talked about the separation and encouraged us to be strong. His main message was that if the marriage had problems now, they would only amplify over time, so he encouraged everyone to get help now. I was so thankful that our marriage was solid.

After the meeting we stuck around to get a few more Power of Attorneys (POA) signed. CPT Andres Marton was the lawyer notarizing the POAs. I'd met Andres a year before at a unit social. He had a cute baby face, and when the women at the social found out he was single and a lawyer on top of that, they immediately started telling him about all of their single friends, and vowed that they could find him a wife. He blushed and said he would welcome any help. It was a fun and energetic conversation as we all argued which friend would be best for him. Today, Andres was notarizing a POA for us. He

blushed when I asked him if he had found his wife yet, and said he was still working on it.

A week went by. All the vehicles and equipment had to be loaded up on trains and sent to the port in Florida. The equipment traveled to the Persian Gulf on a boat and the soldiers would travel by air. It was important to get the equipment out quickly so the soldiers don't have to wait too long for it once they get overseas. Verner's days started getting longer. He still went in for PT every morning at 5AM, but instead of coming home at 5 or 6PM, it was usually 9 or 10PM. One night he called me to let me know his vehicle was supposed to be loaded on the train at around 2AM, so he would stay and try to get a few hours sleep on the couch in his office. The next day he came home around 6am. His HMMWV (Military vehicle similar to a Hummer) still was not loaded, so he would have to return later for another night at the rail yard. I knew he was exhausted. I had to wake him up at noon so he could head back to post. The hectic schedule was ironic. I knew in a month Verner would be gone. I wanted to spend some quality time with him so our relationship tanks would be full, but he was so busy getting ready to leave I realized that it would be impossible.

There were more meetings, and more late nights. I spent my days and nights watching the news to see what was going on in Iraq and in the UN. Verner started to wonder if they would get to Iraq before war broke out. The anticipation started building. *When will they go?* On TV, I saw a report of how the Kurds were gassed. *Will this happen to our guys?* I watched another report about how ruthless Saddam and his sons were, how they tortured and killed thousands (including women and children), and how many Iraqis died after the Americans pulled out after Desert Storm. I knew that the US

needed to go, and that Verner wanted to answer that call. He wanted to do what he had trained for. I wanted him to go for those reasons, but it was so hard.

Each of our kids responded to Daddy's deployment a little differently. The three youngest, ages four, five, and seven, really didn't understand. They didn't understand the term "war," so we explained that Daddy had to go fight the bad guys, and that he would be gone for awhile. Their biggest worry was that Daddy would miss their birthdays.

The next oldest, Christopher (eight), was aware of an impending war, and he had an idea of what war meant. He had seen war clips in some movies and wondered, *is that what Daddy will be doing?* It was kind of cool, but he realized the danger too.

I knew our two oldest daughters, eleven-year-old Susan and fourteen-year-old Laura Beth, were worried because they asked so many questions. Most of their questions came late at night behind closed doors. I knew they wanted honest answers, ones that couldn't be talked about with their brother or sisters around. They heard a lot at school. Some teachers allowed the kids to discuss the world tensions in class. They wanted to hear my opinions on some of the classroom discussions. They came in and asked if they could watch the news report I was watching. I wanted to be open with them, and I wanted them to be able to come to me with their fears and questions, but I also didn't want to burden them with too much information or scare them with some of my own fears.

As I watched my husband prepare for war, I wanted to help. I wanted Verner to remember how much he was loved when he was so far away. I pictured old war movies where you saw a soldier in a foxhole looking at a picture of his sweetheart or his kids. Then the soldier placed the photo in his helmet. He seemed to get strength from the home

front through the photo because he knew he must return. I had to send photos with Verner. I decided to make a deployment album, something Verner could take with him. It would be something small enough that he could put in his rucksack, but it would be more than just one or two pictures that he had stuck in his helmet. A friend sent me a poem via the Internet that I decided to use called "I Got Your Back." I think it expressed our feelings well, most importantly how proud we were of Verner. The poem read:

*I am a small and precious child, my dad's been sent to fight.*

*The only place I'll see his face, is in my dreams at night.*

*He will be gone too many days for my young mind to keep track.*

*I may be sad, but I am proud. My daddy's got your back.*

*I am a caring mother. My son has gone to war.*

*My mind is filled with worries that I have never known before.*

*Every day I try to keep my thoughts from turning black.*

*I may be scared, but I am proud. My son has got your back.*

*I am a strong and loving wife, with a husband soon to go.*

*There are times I'm terrified in a way most never know.*

*I bite my lip, and force a smile as I watch my husband pack.*

*My heart may break, but I am proud. My husband's got your back.*

*I am a soldier. Serving Proudly, standing tall.*

*I fight for freedom, yours and mine by answering this call.*

*I do my job while knowing, the thanks it sometimes lacks.*

*Say a prayer that I'll come home. It's me who's got your back.*

*Author Unknown*

Verner's mom and stepmother died several years before so I decided to take out the second paragraph, about the soldier's mom, but I also wanted to write a paragraph for my older kids so I replaced the second paragraph with the following:

I am an older and wiser child and my dad is going away.

He will miss my games, my dates and trials of everyday.

I hear the news and understand only some of the facts

It makes it hard, but I am proud. My dad has got your back

I used two pages for each paragraph of the poem and tried to find a picture that matched to accompany the words. I picked a couple of extra pictures for the other pages, and then let the kids make a page for their Dad each with their own note of love. The album was a hit! The kids were excited to make something that Daddy would take with him and Verner loved the finished product. It was such a good feeling.

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Every unit has a motto. Some, like first Brigade— “Bastogne Brigade,” carry names that are straight from the history books. Others are motivating like “First to

Strike.” Then there are the mottos, which refer to the 101st mascot, the Screaming Eagle. There was “Eyes of the Eagle” which was an intelligence unit, “Ears of the Eagle” which was a communications unit, “the Pulse of the Eagle” the combat hospital... Verner’s unit, an artillery Battalion was “Balls of the Eagle.” The soldiers loved it! When they were in formation and are called to attention they responded with a loud “BALLS.” There are other times when soldiers responded with a thunderous “BALLS,” especially if someone was talking about the unit. It was a motto that I was not particularly fond of, but it was a well-known name on post. Officially the unit was 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 320<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Regiment, but because everyone on post knew them as the “Balls of the Eagle,” if someone asked me what unit my husband was in, I just said Balls Battalion. Of course when someone questioned the offensive name, the explanation was that the Battalion was artillery, synonymous with cannon balls, and that the motto dated back to the unit’s distinguished service in Vietnam.

Balls Battalion was the artillery in direct support of 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, so it fell under COL Hodges Brigade Combat Team. Verner was assigned to Balls, and his job, as Fire Support Officer, was to act as the liaison officer between COL Hodges and the artillery, thus he lived with the infantry as the artillery representative.

The artillery family was close. Our Battalion FRG leader, Laurie Batule, was hilarious. The first time I meet Laurie was at a reception for the new general’s wife. Although not formal, the social event was stuffy and had everyone on her best behavior. The leaders of the different committees in the Officer’s Wives Club introduced themselves, all with just a simple name and committee or event they were responsible for. Laurie was the leader for V.I.C.E. night (Very Important Charity Event). When it was her



turn she told us “Hi, I’m Laurie, I’m the VICE chief ‘cause everyone knows I’ll take charge of anything that involves booze and gambling.” The whole room roared with laughter, and she’d successfully broken the ice.

Laurie’s stories were hysterical, so I rarely went home from an artillery coffee without a side ache from laughing. It was the little things too that made me laugh. Instead of calling the unit “Balls,” Laurie always responded with “Ovaries.” She had a huge laugh and my kids absolutely adored her.

Laurie was a strong person. She and her husband Kevin met at West Point just like my husband and I. Their firstborn son JP was now 22, had Cerebral Palsy and was confined to a wheelchair, with very little control over his movement. Laurie spent much of her day attending to JP, lifting him in and out of his wheelchair, changing his clothes and making sure he was able to keep his mind busy. Laurie and Kevin also had two other children, both teenagers. Katie was a sophomore and Andrew would graduate in the spring.

The entire Batule family was strong-willed and high energy. They are the type of family that everyone knew, and when they entered a room, everyone took notice. Many times Laurie told us stories of her teenagers or of JP that, although funny, would probably make those without children think twice about having kids. Once, during a coffee at Laurie’s house on post, the MPs (Military Police) showed up. We all thought that they were going to write a ticket for one of our illegally parked vehicles. Instead, they had Andrew in custody. It turned out that Laurie had taken away Andrew’s military dependent ID card and driver’s license as part of a restriction she was imposing. Andrew, probably the strongest willed child of their three, decided he would drive off post

anyway. When the gate guards would not let him back on post, he decided to run the gate. The MPs caught him and brought him, red faced, back home right in the middle of our coffee. Laurie wasn't embarrassed at all. She laughed harder than any of us as she shot her son a, *you know you screwed up* look, and sent him to his room.

The artillery coffee group, like the infantry, was made up of the officer and senior NCO wives and the normal attendance was between ten and fifteen. Although Laurie had teenagers, most of the ladies in the artillery coffee group had younger children. This was mainly because many of the women were young themselves and had just started their families. Several of the women, like Kim Arne, had only one child who was a preschooler, but they wanted more children. And there were others, like Tresa Stader, who had been trying for years to have their first child. There was only a month for them to "get lucky" and many tried. Everyone assumed their husbands would be back before the baby was born since deployments usually only lasted for six months.

Afghanistan was only a six-month deployment for 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, and the last war with Iraq was only one hundred days. For some, though, the idea of being pregnant while your husband was away was the worst thing that could happen, even if he did make it home for the birth. There was only one member of the coffee, Christina Kane, who announced her pregnancy in the month before the deployment. Her excitement could be heard in her joyful giggles as she told us how she and her husband had almost given up hope of having any more kids.

There were two other wives in the artillery battalion whose husband carried the same rank (MAJ) as my husband, and they both had large families too. Donna Burwell had five children and Ann Dunleavy had four. It was a running joke that the three MAJ's

in Balls battalion had fifteen kids between them. During one of our coffees, where we often talked about kids, Tresa Stader jumped up and sat between Donna and me. She said she hoped some kind of “kid magic” would rub off.

In our artillery family we also had the Heidi twins. Heidi Schott and Heidi O’Connor were both tall and blonde and they always sat next to each other. At our February coffee, which was held after the deployment announcement, we said good-bye to Heidi O’Connor. Tim O’Connor was a CPT who put in his resignation papers months ago. Heidi was expecting their second child at the end of March, and Tim was also scheduled to leave the service in March. They had already sold their house in Clarksville, bought a home in Michigan, and Tim even had a job lined up. A week after the Coffee, the Army instituted a Stop-Loss. The Stop-Loss meant soldiers could not leave the service until the Stop-Loss was lifted. It meant that Tim couldn’t get out of the Army at this time. He had to go with the 101st to Iraq. Tim got a buzz haircut to show the soldiers that he was ready and willing to go with them to war. Heidi now knew she would have to go through childbirth without Tim.

I sat next to Heidi O’Connor at the artillery pre-deployment briefing. Although she was normally always smiling, that day her face was solemn, and she cried through most of the briefing. I felt so awful for her. Not only was her husband being deployed to a war zone, and she was expecting in a month, they only had about a week to tie all the ends together. They’d already bought their house so she was also going to be left moving by herself with a newborn and a two year old. I wanted to put my arms around her and cry, too, but since I didn’t feel comfortable trying to comfort her, I just tried to ignore the

fact that she was upset. My mind wandered during the briefing so I missed most of what was said.

At the artillery pre-deployment briefing I began to realize that not only did I have to be strong for my family, I had to be strong for others. There were so many wives that would be in need. The Balls battalion had 450 soldiers and half of them were married. Many of the wives had small children, others would be alone. Some wives didn't know how to pay the bills, other wives did not even drive. At the briefing I look around the room and I saw so many young faces. A few looked barely old enough to be out on their own. Some looked scared, others angry, and many were tending to babies. But there were so many, and we were just one Battalion. All total there were about 19,000 soldiers deploying from the 101<sup>st</sup>. Although half of those were probably single, it still left a lot of soldiers, both men and women, who would be leaving families behind. Each family had their own issues and their own problems.

My heart also went out to women like Kim and Tresa who were trying to grow their family. They would have to put those plans on hold. *What happens if the guys are exposed to chemicals that make them sterile? What happens if they don't make it home?* There was a large lump in my throat as I tried not to cry. The *what ifs* continued to run through my head. I knew worry would eat me up so I tried to shake it off. Heidi began to cry again sitting next to me. *I need to be positive! Be strong! I am an officer's wife so I must be a pillar of strength. Where will I get my strength?* The answer came immediately, and I closed my eyes and began to pray.