

WHEN DEALING WITH SOLDIER-SPOUSES HOME FOR R&R, PATIENCE ISN'T JUST A VIRTUE – IT'S A NECESSITY

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KATTERBACH, Germany – It's finally here.

He's coming home for his much earned rest and recuperation leave. I'm filled with trepidation and excitement. What will he look like? What will he be like? Is he different?

Then the moment comes and I see him for the first time and the emotion is overwhelming.

My husband recently returned from his second consecutive tour in Iraq to attend a two-week Army course. At the end of it he would return to Iraq, so it was not R&R in the truest sense. But I certainly wasn't complaining.

He returned to our home here and off we all (myself and 2 of our 3 children) went to Fort Rucker, Ala. My hopes for "alone time" were dashed, but all in all, it was a great time.

With so many friends in the area, we were busy every night. Even our dear friends came from Fort Campbell and Wisconsin to spend the weekend with us. We were just having a blast -- on the surface, anyway.

There was an underlying difference in my husband. He was distracted, distant. I knew he was happy to be with us, but he seemed disconnected. When I talked with

him about it, in our brief moments alone, he agreed he felt different. He missed his unit, he felt somehow like he was letting them down by being home and having normal civilian fun. It really bothered him, and in turn, it bothered me to see him like that.

At one point, I listened to him talking about his unit to a friend. He said, "I need to get back. They need me. I miss them and worry about who's filling in for me and if it's going okay." My first reaction was thinking, "I wonder if he says the same about his family when he's in Iraq?" I have to admit at first I was insulted. Here he was, with the people who love him more than anyone in the world, and he's longing to be back in Iraq? What is he thinking?

I didn't say anything then, but the next day we were walking into the local Wal-Mart, and he said he was disappointed that the people there were so unaffected by this war. "It's like there's not a thing more important than being in here," he said.

I pulled him aside and let it rip.

I told him that he was the reason they were able to live like this. That his dedication and service to his nation allowed the American people to go on as they always have, and that he can't hold that against them. He needs to take that as a compliment -- that he and his unit are doing a fantastic job. It was at that moment he realized he had been having a hard time adjusting to the world he misses so much when he's gone.

It was an incredible moment; definitely a moment that is frozen in time for me.

I guess I'm trying to tell other spouses that when their Soldiers come home for a much-needed break, we need to give them one. I spent the first week irritated that he didn't seem as happy as he should to be home, and the second week I spent just giving him the space he needed and trying to understand what he was feeling.

He knew he needed a break, but he also knew he had to go back. The Soldiers' our Soldiers serve with are family to them, and the stakes are so much higher in Iraq than they seem to be while at home.

When the kids argued about where to eat, he would say, "You know, it's so much easier in Iraq. (There are) no choices -- you eat what they got." We'd laugh at him, but we knew it was time to just make a decision.

All his behavior was normal according to the experts. I read a lot, and I read everything I can on deployment stress and reintegration. I think that was the key for me. I could have easily spent our time together pouting and being mad at him. But to what end? With both of us feeling bad as soon as he went back? I couldn't do that. My husband is a wonderful man and an incredible Soldier. His focus right now is this war and making sure the men and women he works with come home. It doesn't mean he doesn't love his family, but that's hard to reconcile for a spouse.

We spend so much of our time in the support mode for our Soldiers, sending packages, e-mails, and letters. It's natural to want that kind of support in return. I think -- for me anyway -- the only way to get through this is to look at it like a chapter in a book that's hard to get through, but you have to do it to get to the good part at the end. I know my husband loves us, even when he isn't able to show it like he used to.

I hope that every spouse whose husband comes home on R&R will take a few breaths and spend time talking to her spouse about her feelings before rushing to rash judgments. R&R is a wonderful thing if you keep everything in perspective.

This deployment isn't about us; it's something much bigger. So we have to swallow our need to be the center of the universe in our Soldier's life. It's as hard for them to readjust as it is for their families. About the time I liked my husband again, he was redeploying back to Iraq.

I've done reintegration once already (if you don't count his Korea tour), and it was tough. It helps if spouses educate themselves and know the signs of stress in their Soldiers. And get help if you need it – asking for help is not looked down upon any more. It could help your spouse and maybe even save your marriage.

And in the meantime, you can hope that when he redeployes, the next chapter of the book will be the sappy one that culminates in the two lovers walking off hand-in-hand into the sunset.

