



# Finally, The Homecoming

Anticipating and experiencing the long-awaited reunion.

by Karen Pavlicin

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**A**s you approach the close of a long deployment, you dream of a movie-like homecoming and the happily-ever-after life. The two of you discuss the big day—who will be there and what you’ll have for dinner. You involve your kids in the preparations, assigning them to make banners and decorate the house’s exterior. You wait. And you worry.

“The days leading up to Dan’s homecoming were days of very mixed emotions,” says Lana Schmidtke, whose husband, Dan, returned home after fifteen months in Iraq. “I wanted my best friend and husband back in my life, but I wondered what having him home would mean. We all had changed. Would that queen-size bed I had been sleeping in on my own be big enough for the two of us again?”

Picture-perfect homecoming aside, your first days together likely will be filled with both excitement and anxiety as you again face the future together. Preparing for reunion is more than cleaning the house, hanging flags and choosing a stunning homecoming outfit. It’s important to emotionally brace yourself.

#### Reflect on Your Experience

How has your family changed? Do you have different priorities now? What

made your relationship special before the deployment? How has your relationship changed? Look through your journal or letters from the deployment. What milestones have you passed during this time? What are you most looking forward to when the two of you are together again? Does your spouse know what’s important to you about your reunion? By taking the time to reflect on the changes you, your family and your service member experienced, you help prepare yourself for being together again.

“We had made a lot of changes in our lives, from downsizing the farm, to changing our hairstyles, to major changes in the house while Dan was away,” Lana says. “I had grown more independent and was no longer the wallflower Dan left behind. I wondered how we would all fit together again.”

Trish Eckert talked with her daughters, ages 13 and 19, about some of the changes that would occur when her husband, Steve, returned from Iraq. “The girls and I discussed how their father would be different when he came home,” Trish says. “I was open and honest with them and answered all their questions to the best of my knowledge. ... We talked about what we could and could not discuss with him when he returned home.” >>> **Cont. on page 30**



[ "DADDY'S HOME" ]

### Home is a Different World

"Steve ... had no real privacy," says Trish of her husband's living conditions during deployment. "For him, a typical trip to the bathroom was to put on all of his protective gear and walk 100 yards to a port-a-potty. He worked erratic hours and this carried over when he came home. He found it hard to sleep through the night, as he was used to getting little sleep while he was on deployment. When he did sleep, the slightest sounds would startle him awake and he thought he was still in Iraq. Certain sounds, especially those similar to warning sirens, would put him in a different mind frame. Eating was a whole new ball game. Steve would only eat with his left hand and he'd be finished before the rest of us. In Iraq, he used his right hand for his pistol and at home he would keep his hand clean and under the table throughout dinner. He only had ten to fifteen minutes to eat in Iraq. It took some time for him to adjust and get back on a regular eating schedule again at home."

Most daily challenges will center around the intricacies of living together again. The service member will also need to readjust to home life and American

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culture. Be patient with the annoying habits you forgot about. Understand that soft toilet paper and privacy may be more appealing than mowing the lawn for a while. You'll again be sharing decisions, talking face-to-face, making career choices and living with new life perspectives. You may also find yourself dealing with post-deployment challenges such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

### Give it Time

Many adjustments redeployed service members must make stem from the survival skills they've honed during de-

ployment, says Dr. Michelle D. Sherman, director of the Family Mental Health Program at the Oklahoma City Veterans Affairs Medical Center and coauthor of "Finding My Way: A Teen's Guide to Living with a Parent Who Has Experienced Trauma." Family members shouldn't confuse this with a lack of desire for intimacy and regular family life. Service members often bring home battlefield baggage—emotional numbness, mission focus, hypervigilance and distrust, she says. "These work in war, but not at home. But you can't just turn them off over night. You need to give it time."

How much time? Many chaplains suggest one day of reintegration for each day of deployment. "You expect each person to change," Lana says. "We're taught to expect it. But then when you're together again, you think you'll go back to your old selves or adjust quickly. But really, it took us fifteen months to make these changes. What makes us think it won't take that long to get used to them or to make new changes together? Going slow and adjusting to the "new us" is something we build on each day."



[ "DECORATING THE BARRACKS FOR A HOMECOMING" ]

### Expect to Grieve

Considering the many changes you've experienced, you may experience grief during your reintegration. You may grieve lost time with each other, missing out on what the other experienced, the loss of your former life together or the death of a friend or comrade. "One of the most challenging situations when Steve returned from Iraq was that he felt guilty for coming home alive and in one piece when others did not," Trish says. "He needed to know that what he did was good enough. It took time for him to realize that he can only go forward from here."

#### Get support for the tough challenges

Sherman notes that while most adjustments are typical and gradual, there are some red flags, including:

- A high level of substance abuse that inhibits daily life
- Thoughts of suicide or homicide
- Reckless behavior
- Spousal or child abuse
- Severe or prolonged changes in sleep and appetite

Service members and their families have several options to address serious issues in a positive, healthy manner. You can talk confidentially with a chaplain or a therapist at a local VA clinic, or call MilitaryOneSource for a referral to a private specialist in your community. If you think someone in your family needs help, don't hesitate. "This is a huge transition," Sherman says. "Many people seek support."

"Reunion is hard and a very long process," Lana says. "Many people do not want to share that they are having problems during this time. Their friends and family think they should be happy and move on with life. Talk to someone who's been through it. Even with a great relationship, Dan and I have to vent and talk outside of our marriage, or we would have thrown in the towel shortly after he came home."

### Remember What's Important

"One of the greatest needs for families is to make meaning out of this experience," Sherman says. "If the service member can share something positive about the mission it helps everyone in the family to feel like the experience was

worthwhile."

Be proud of all you have been through together. Take what you've learned and use it to build your future together.

"We've grown in ways most couples never experience in their daily lives together," Lana says. "Our deployment story had a happy ending. And we're learning what we need to know for the next round of deployment and reunion."

Communication is key to maintaining intimacy, just as it was before and during deployment. Trish and Steve have regular date nights. "Enjoy your time together," Sherman says. "War or not, we don't know when our time will come."

"Life is precious," Trish says. "I'm grateful for having Steve in my life and I tell him that often—not just when he returns from a deployment in a war zone." MSM

*Karen Pavlicin is the author of "Surviving Deployment: A Guide for Military Families" and "Life After Deployment: Military Families Share Reunion Stories and Advice," both available from [MilitaryFamilyBooks.com](http://MilitaryFamilyBooks.com)*

