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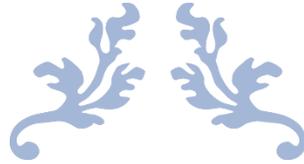


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FROM MISERABLE TO MANAGEABLE

The Assimilation Story of One Army Wife



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From Miserable to Manageable: the assimilation story of one Army wife
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Tiffany Elise is an army wife located on Fort Bragg in North Carolina. She has been a part of this lifestyle for over five years. She is an exemplary woman and mother. She and her soldier, Steve, have been together for two deployments. Each deployment with its own specific set of challenges. Tiffany and Steve's daughter was born just weeks before the beginning of Steve's first deployment. This caused hardship as Tiffany experienced the early days of parenthood without her daughter's father to witness the small joys like the day their daughter lost her umbilical cord and the day she gained her first tooth. She managed the first deployment with difficulty but the second was in many ways more straight forward for her. Tiffany is an exemplary military spouse and is especially inspirational to me and other military spouses in that she handled even her most difficult days with grace and dignity. She took the difficult transition into the military lifestyle without complaint and she continues to encourage others in sharing her story and cultivating friendships within her community.

Assumptions:

Some of my assumptions going into this research were that that most spouses entering their first deployment would have prior knowledge of what difficulties to expect and the systems in place to help them during the time the spouse is gone. I also assumed that a military spouse would have already experienced the four stages of acculturation before their spouse deployed.



Figure 1: Map of the road from AZ to NC, a 32 hour road-trip or an expensive flight would be required to see family.

Background:

According to Princeton University's Office of International Programs, there are four stages of acculturation that typically apply to someone who has chosen to live abroad. However, the stages seem to also suit the transition from the civilian lifestyle to the military lifestyle very well. The stages are thus:

1. The Honeymoon Stage (superficial involvement in the culture, intrigue at the differences from home culture, very motivated to learn about the culture and belong in it)
2. The "Culture Shock" stage (homesickness sets in, subject seeks out friends from prior culture, stereotypes arise, subject only sees differences in the new culture)
3. Gradual Adjustment with Humor (the subject becomes more familiar with the culture, can laugh at themselves and with others, begins to believe they can manage in their new culture)
4. Feeling at Home (the subject begins to feel as comfortable in their new culture as they did in their initial culture). (OIP)

By this it seems likely that a military spouse might go through similar stages while acculturating into the military lifestyle. However, these stages seem to occur later for some spouses like Tiffany.

Purpose:

The purpose of this study was to determine whether military spouses encounter more personal difficulties during their first deployment experience as compared to later deployments. Also to discover whether these spouses experienced the four stages of acculturation into the military lifestyle.

Research Methods:

My method for this research was to interview Tiffany personally. I asked her a series of questions regarding her experience with the first and the second deployments. I did not ask her to point out if one was better in her view. I was careful to ask the questions in such a way that she could respond openly without bias towards my own assumptions. On April 9, 2017 we communicated via Facebook Messenger to both expedite the process and because we have totally separate schedules. We spoke back and forth for over two hours about her deployment experiences on that day.

I have known Tiffany for a very short amount of time as compared to other military spouse friends. We met through a Fort Bragg Wives Facebook group where we connected over daughters, deployments, and the difficulty of being far from family. I liked her immediately and found that she is an exemplary woman in the world of military spouses. Though the lifestyle is difficult, Tiffany always rolls with the punches and seems to come out smiling. To me she was an inspiration and that's why I felt compelled to interview her about her deployment experiences.

From there I took to academic research on the patterns in military spouses as they cope with deployments. There is surprisingly minimal research in this area, and I found less information than I anticipated. Therefore, I sent the original questionnaire to five other military spouses in order to attain a more well-rounded view of coping mechanisms during first deployments and consecutive deployments. The women who responded have weathered between two and eight deployments.

Presentation of Data:

Originally from Arizona, Tiffany stayed home for her first deployment to be surrounded by family and loved ones. She says that she found the first deployment to be very scary, she was always worried that something bad would happen. Her solace was in the short phone calls she received and in knowing that he was safe for a moment. She coped through this deployment by writing everything down and sending long letters to Steve about their growing daughter.

In her first deployment, Tiffany displayed signs of already being in the second stage of acculturation. Instead of moving onto a base where she would be surrounded by other women who had experienced deployments before, she chose to live with family in an attempt to find

normalcy amidst the massive change her life was undertaking. Furthermore, she says she never once heard from the family readiness advisor who is tasked with assisting spouses make the transitions in deployment. This caused some bitterness because she felt that she had been left in the dark as an outsider. These are clear signs of being in the “Culture Shock” stage of acculturation which can be a desperately lonely time.



Figure 2. While Steve does his duties overseas, Tiffany must navigate the difficult path on the home-front

The second deployment Tiffany and Steve experienced was almost five years later. She had officially moved to North Carolina where they had gotten their first home and the chance to finally live as a family. When it came time for Steve to deploy again, Tiffany took the opportunity to go back to Arizona and spend the time with her family. Some things were easier for this second deployment. Her daughter

was older and it was easier to care for her. Tiffany had made military spouse friends so she didn't feel as isolated. Steve was able to video-chat with them which made communication more simple than it had been with letters. She says that she had learned some of the ropes by the second deployment and felt a little more secure that way. However, this deployment was still difficult emotionally. She says it's never easy to say farewell to a person you love, no matter how long or short that time period may be.

For the second deployment, Tiffany seemed to be deep in the “Gradual Adjustment” phase of acculturation. Her story reflects this in that she felt somewhat more capable of surviving the deployment as she understood the pattern of deployments. She had also spent time making friends with other Army spouses, so even when she was removed from them and in Arizona, she did not feel as isolated as she had during the first deployment. Furthermore, she was more capable of navigating difficult days because her prior knowledge of deployments.

Still, it is clear that Tiffany was not yet to the final stage of acculturation for her second deployment. While she did have a more positive outlook on her capability to navigate the deployment, she still did not feel totally at home in the military lifestyle. Therefore, when Steve's time came for the second deployment, Tiffany still returned home to spend the nine months with her family instead of staying in North Carolina to be surrounded by military family and friends.

Tiffany says that Steve is slotted to deploy for a third time within this year. However, instead of going home to Arizona, she intends to stay on base and remain around the military families. She says that she will feel the most



Figure 3. Steve and Tiffany's daughter must also stay strong while her daddy is away

comfortable keeping her daughter in one place and being surrounded by the community she knows with the amenities she needs.

From this it seems that Tiffany has come to the fourth and final stage of acculturation “Feeling at Home”. Tiffany has come to a place where she is as comfortable on base and in the military community as she is in her hometown. She trusts that the people will be there for her if she needs them and that her daughter will be better off staying around families that are in similar situations. She knows that the army provides all of the tools she needs for success during deployments and therefore feels that staying where they are stationed is the best option to feel at home.

Tiffany is a prime example of the difficulties military spouses face, as well as the resilience that they have. She shows that while every deployment is difficult, knowing the ropes and having some experience with prior deployments does make it a little more navigable and manageable for the wife who is willing to see it as such. Now she is an exemplary Army wife and an inspiration to me as a woman of good character and resilience.

Conclusions:

It seems obvious from Tiffany’s case that military spouses must endure the four stages of acculturation upon entering the military lifestyle. Tiffany’s honeymoon stage was not covered in the interviews but was presumably experienced, as it seems impossible that any person would embark on the second phase without having first experienced the honeymoon period to coerce them into committing. The hypothesis that the first deployment would be the hardest to navigate for military spouses seems accurate. This mostly due to the reality that many military spouses have not had the opportunity to acculturate into the military lifestyle before their soldier leaves for the first time. The reality of this expels the assumption that military spouses are prepared for the military lifestyle upon agreeing to a union with a military member. Further, the assumption that each spouse would have time to acculturate prior to the first deployment is also disproved.

What does seem clear is that each military spouse must become acculturated to the military lifestyle in the same manner that one who has moved to a foreign nation must acculturate themselves. This is surprising as most military families do not spend ample time outside of the states, however, the variance of culture between the military lifestyle and the typical civilian lifestyle is so great that spouses must spend a startling amount of time acculturating themselves to the new lifestyle.

Tiffany is a perfect example of a military spouse walking through the steps of acculturation into the military lifestyle. However, where many cope with the second phase of acculturation through less wholesome means like heavy alcohol intake or unhealthy foods, Tiffany navigated the second phase with letter writing and family. From there she has only continued to be an exemplary military spouse and by her strength others are encouraged and strengthened. She is an inspiration to all who become acquainted with her.

Works Cited

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