

# Married to the military

## Veteran Army couples address the pros and cons

By Sgt. Jimmy Norris

Being a senior Personnel NCO married to a Ranger, Sgt. Maj. Jennifer Pearson knows a thing or two about deployments and separations. She spent a year in Bosnia. Her husband, Sgt. Maj. James Pearson, was in Afghanistan at the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom.

“We’ve probably been separated more than we’ve been together,” she said.

Despite that, Pearson, now a student in the Sergeants Major Course Class 54 at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy (USASMA), Fort Bliss, Texas, swears being a member of a dual-military couple is a great experience.

“I believe it’s been very positive. The deployments are small stuff,” she said. “Sure we’re away from each other a lot, but we have a good relationship and our strengths complement each other’s weaknesses.”

Being a member of a dual-military couple presents a unique set of challenges, still, many choose to endure the hardships, finding a balance between their marriages and their careers. More than 20,000 dual-military couples currently serve in the U.S. Army. The majority of these couples – 79 percent – enjoy joint domicile assignments, but that doesn’t mean they won’t endure long separations and domestic difficulties.

For Soldiers contemplating trying to marry up matrimony and the military, veteran dual-military couples stationed throughout the Army have plenty of advice to share on the subject.

“Being in the military has strengthened our relationship because every day is a test,” said Pearson whose husband she added, also a Class 54 student, has been a valuable resource for training and motivation. Being a Ranger, he’s been able to help keep her tactical skills up to speed. She, in-turn, has been able to provide him with personnel and finance information.

“We’re a team,” she said. “He’ll use me in a heartbeat, just like I’ll use him. We’re both professional Soldiers and we believe the Army is where we should be,” she said.

“You don’t have to make a choice whether you want to stay in the military or stay together with your family,” said Master Sgt. Yolanda Choates, Public Affairs chief for the U.S. Army Maneuver Support Center, Fort Leonard Wood, Mo. Her husband, Sgt. 1st Class Meco Choates, is the Protective Services Training Branch course manager for Company A, 701st Military Police Battalion.

“It’s possible to do both; it’s challenging. It’s not easy, but anything worth striving for is never easy.”

Doing both, keeping a family together while accomplishing the missions set forth by the Army, is something many dual-military couples face.

One way to meet the challenge is by enrolling in the Married Army Couples Program (MACP).



Established in August 1983, the MACP is a program designed to help ensure Soldiers married to other Soldiers are considered for joint domicile assignments.

“The hardships associated with maintaining a family while being a Soldier are compounded in a married Army couple,” said Lt. Col. Patrick Sedlack, chief of Plans, Procedures and Operations Branch, Army Human Resources Command. “The MACP was established to help alleviate some of the problems by trying, when possible, to assign married couples at the same location. The goal of the program is to ensure that MACP Soldiers are considered for assignment together as often as possible.”

To enroll in the MACP, married couples need to submit a Department of the Army Form 4187, *Request for Personnel Action*, to their local military personnel office. The personnel office will then process the information and enroll the Soldiers. If the Soldiers are assigned to separate duty stations, each

Soldier must submit a DA Form 4187 to his or her personnel office.

“The Married Army Couples Program works, but it doesn’t guarantee you will be assigned together,” said Staff Sgt. William Herold, a paralegal assigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade, Vicenza, Italy. His wife, Sgt. Antoinette Herold, is a paralegal assigned to Headquarters Support Company, Southern European Task Force, Vicenza, Italy.

There are a number of things which can make it difficult for the MACP to station a couple together, said Sedlak.

If two Soldiers have the same low-density MOS, they may be more difficult to station together, he explained. Or if a Soldier has an MOS in which most available assignments are outside the continental United States (CONUS), for example, a Soldier who’s a Korean linguist is married to a Soldier with an MOS in which most available assignments are in CONUS, it may be difficult to station them together.

MACP also applies to Soldiers married to members of other services or to Army Reserve or National Guard Soldiers, but it is more difficult for assignments managers to station them together, Sedlack said.

In addition to the difficulties inherent in stationing Soldiers from different career fields together, there are also problems stationing Soldiers together when they volunteer for special duty.



Courtesy photo

**Master Sgt. Yolanda Choates and her husband, Sgt. 1<sup>st</sup> Class Meco Choates, coordinate their schedules and talk about how they can assist one another with family responsibilities.**

“There are no specific restrictions on the MACP, but some programs and situations are much more difficult to accommodate a [joint domicile] assignment,” said Sedlack.

For assignments such as Drill Sergeant and Recruiter, selectees enrolled in MACP are required to provide a written statement saying he or she understands a joint-domicile assignment may not be possible due to restrictions pertaining to the duty.

“The assignments managers will still consider [joint domicile] for those couples, but want to make sure the Soldiers understand that it is very difficult to provide [it] due to the demands and locations of those assignments,” said Sedlack.

“If it meant being separated for a long period of time, I don’t think either one of us could [provide] such a [written statement],” said Herold. “Our branch manager has worked very hard to ensure we stay together and I think signing a [written statement] wouldn’t stop our branch from working just as hard to keep our family together.”

While some, like Herold, place a lot of faith in their branch managers, others recommend that couples take a more proactive hand in their careers.

“You have to plan properly and manage your own career,” said Sgt. Maj. Henry Garrett. Garrett is the Human Resources sergeant major for Fort Bliss, Texas. His wife, Sgt. Maj. Shirley Garrett is a student in Sergeants Major Course Class 54 at USASMA.

For example, Garrett said when he knew he was due for an assignment outside CONUS, he volunteered for duty in Korea with the hope that his wife would be able to follow. When Shirley became the tactical



Courtesy photo

**Staff Sgt. Alison Kempke, Company A, 94<sup>th</sup> Engineer Battalion, Hohenfels, Germany, displays a picture of her husband Kenneth Kempke, a Cavalry scout assigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Company, Combat Maneuver Training Center, Hohenfels, Germany. Kempke is currently deployed in Iraq as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom.**

NCO at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y. Henry called his branch manager to find out what was available for him at the same location. The Choates's have made similar sacrifices.

"When we moved here from the [Washington] D.C. area, [Yolanda] had only one position available here," said Sgt. 1<sup>st</sup> Class Choates. "If she had to choose a position, this probably wouldn't be it, but she made that choice for the family."

"I would rather have been a first sergeant in Korea, but that's not what was best for my family," said Master Sgt. Choates. "We do these things because, being in the Army, you don't always have a choice."

Unfortunately, this strategy also has some drawbacks.

"We had to decline appointments to command sergeant major for the last five years because as command sergeants major it would be harder to station us together," Garrett said.

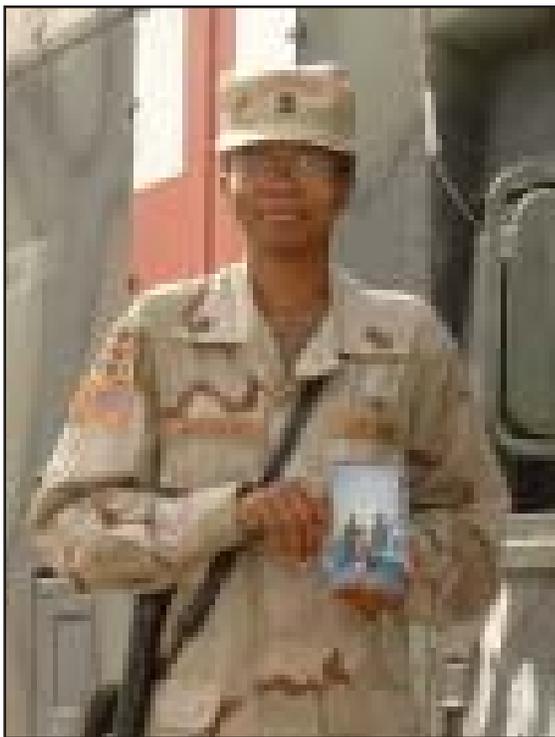
He added, the key to a successful dual-military marriage is consideration for each other's career goals.

"I really didn't want to go to West Point, but I knew Shirley needed something that would help her stand apart from her peers," he said. "If a couple is not in the same career management field, I recommend they learn as much as they can so they know what it takes to advance each other's careers."

Communication, said the Choates, is another important factor in maintaining a successful dual-military marriage.

"You have to communicate," said Sgt. 1<sup>st</sup> Class Choates. "If you don't let each other know what's going on or how you feel, you're not going to succeed."

"You have to talk about schedule requirements and needs," added Master Sgt. Choates. She said it's important to coordinate things like picking up



Courtesy Photo

***Sgt. 1<sup>st</sup> Class Regina Jamerson, a medic deployed in Iraq, shows a photo of her husband, Sgt. 1<sup>st</sup> Class Gregory Jamerson, who is stationed in Germany. Her current deployment is the first time in her eight-year marriage that she's been separated from her husband.***

involves a lot of sacrifice. Some, however, find the sacrifice to be too much.

Being a Soldier is something Staff Sgt. Alison Kempke enjoys. A technical engineer assigned to Company A, 94<sup>th</sup> Engineer Battalion, Hohenfels, Germany, she is currently deployed in Iraq. And though she's a dedicated Soldier in the War on Terrorism, her husband and two children waiting for her in Germany are never far from her thoughts. Kempke said she finds her job both rewarding and challenging, but she'll be ending her military career after only eight years.

"I love the military and I'd love to stay in, but the separations are hard, especially this one because you don't know when you're coming back," she said. "I'd also like to be around to raise my kids."

Her current deployment is one of many separations she and her husband, Kenneth, a Cavalry scout assigned to the Combat Maneuver Training Center, Hohenfels, Germany, have been forced to endure.

Still other dual-military couples said while there are difficulties, there are also a number of benefits.

"When things happen that are beyond my control, [my husband] understands because he knows how things are in the military," said Sgt. 1<sup>st</sup> Class Regina Jamerson, a medic assigned to Headquarters Support Company, 94<sup>th</sup> Engineer Battalion, currently deployed in Iraq. She's been deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom since May. This is the first time in her eight-year marriage that she's been separated from her husband, Sgt. 1<sup>st</sup> Class Gregory Jamerson, a medic assigned to 7<sup>th</sup> Army Training Command, Grafenwoehr, Germany.

"We can relate to each other because we understand how things happen in the Army," she said. "Also, my husband can pack my duffle bag when I have [a field training exercise]. How many civilian spouses can do that?"

children from school, parent/teacher conferences and medical and dental appointments.

Another challenge dual-military couples must tackle are family care plans – written instructions for the care of family members in the event of deployments, temporary duty or field exercises. Dual-military couples have 30 days after arriving at a new unit to produce a valid family care plan, which includes naming both a short-term and long-term care provider. In some cases, finding a short-term care provider at a new duty station can be difficult.

"[Early in our careers], we didn't really know anybody at our next duty stations. We had 30 days to find someone we'd trust enough to take care of our kids, who was willing to do it," said Master Sgt. Choates. "Now that we're older and we've been in a while, we know people at most of our duty stations when we get there."

Master Sgt. Choates added that those who haven't been in the Army long enough to know someone at every duty station should look amongst their coworkers for short-term care providers, because the people a Soldier works with on a daily basis are the ones they get to know first.

"Family [readiness groups] (FRG) are another good source of information," said Sgt. 1<sup>st</sup> Class Choates. "But you have to go to the FRG meetings. They won't come to you."

Many Soldiers married to other Soldiers agree that being a member of a dual-military couple