

To Whoever Reads This,

You have no idea what I have gone through. Being a veteran is hard. Joining the army changed my life forever. The scars from being in combat are real. The pain I've gone through is real.

I loved being in the army and wouldn't change a thing. But had I known I would serve 5 combat tours I would have thought twice about joining.

Nobody told me I would have to go to war.

*Most do people not understand? Probably the regrets but also the things I will never forget.*

*I do regret not making myself more of a priority to me - finishing college or starting that dream job. Of not putting my dreams from and center, of having to just settle.*

*I do regret not giving my children more family (blood relations) to be near. The chance to hang out with their cousins more than every couple of years.*

*Though probably my biggest regret is not being more supportive of my husband when he made his big promotion to Sgt Major and Command Sgt. Major. I was incredibly proud, but it came at a time where I was frustrated with the military, not wanting to move, wanting to provide more stability to my family.*

*What I will never forget is the opportunity this life has provided. The friendships that have lasted through the years. The sense of pride watching soldiers march across the parade field. The sense of pride singing the All American song.*

*But mostly pride in how I have stepped out of my comfort zone.*

*Dear Reader,*

*You have no idea of the challenge and pain I've experienced or witnessed. Today my pain makes me isolate, angry, and lose close relationships.*

*I lack the ability to trust, love, and experience God's gifts in my life.*

*But I know if I am still, God will save me from myself!*

*To My New Sister-in-Arms,*

*You have no idea of the life that is ahead.*

*Always remember to pray!*

*Always remember who you are!*

*Always remember that others love you!*

*But most of all through all the pain always remember to love yourself!*

Dear You,

You have no idea. Your life will change. You will grow but never give up. You will press past the days of questioning whether you're good enough.

Some people will never understand how serving your country not only changes you, but it creates character.

Fight the good fight. Don't lose sight of who you are.

Lastly, WHAT HAPPENED IN THE DESERT DOESN'T DEFINE YOU.

Dear XXXXXXX,

You have no idea what happened on my way into theater. I never thought it would be a problem, but we got stopped & had to land in another country on the way over because we had females on board going into the Gulf.

My unit is almost  $\frac{1}{2}$  female & I am the commander & I'm a female. They stopped us for an hour while my commander, the pilot, & I discussed the issue.

They relented when we told them we would be in desert & gone from any town, setting up tents & being on our own.

When do you ever see that kind of thing happening?  
In the States?

They didn't believe we could possibly want to have that many women in the organization & especially in a military function.

Dear New Soldier,

You have no idea what you will experience in this journey.

Do not let anyone disrespect you.

Stand up for what's right.

Be a model soldier to yourself and help your battle buddy through this journey.

When things get difficult seek the help you need and don't let anyone tell you "NO"!

Thank you for your commitment to represent this great nation.

*Dear America,*

*You have no idea what I have experienced since joining the Air Force.*

*They told me I would be different.*

*Because I've joined a different gang.*

*My name is no longer my identity.*

*I've become an airman*

*My identity belongs to the government*

*Now I belong to my country*

*I am no longer the same.*

*Different I may be as I try to engage*

*a new me with a new future.*

*The new woman that I am*



*Dear Whomever,*

*You have no idea the hardship and mental anguish and struggle that happens after serving in a combat zone.*

*The loneliness, feeling like you don't know who you are anymore. Sometimes where you are. What to do with yourself. How to feel with yourself.*

*Struggling not to commit suicide.*

*How can I reach myself?*

Dear XXXXXX,

You have no idea of what you are about to hear. I hope that when you do, you will understand what I have been through and you can now respect me for the person I am. Pray for me; I'm not what I used to be, but I'm getting better and better.

Love the person always.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

THE HARDEST PART ABOUT BEING MILITARY IS THAT PEOPLE HAVE NO IDEA WHAT YOU'VE GONE THROUGH AND YOU KEEP SO MANY COMMENTS AND ISSUES BOTTLED UP BECAUSE YOU DON'T NECESSARILY FEEL ASHAMED, BUT THEY ARE NOT EASY TOPICS TO BRING UP.

NO ONE ELSE BRINGS THEM UP, SO WHY SHOULD I?

AS MEDICAL I DEPLOYED, SEEN THINGS THAT 99% OF THE POPULATION WOULD NOT UNDERSTAND. BUT THEY EXPECT US TO RETURN FROM DEPLOYMENTS WITHOUT ANY ISSUES.

THE ONES THAT DO RETURN WITHOUT ISSUES ARE THE REAL PEOPLE YOU SHOULD WORRY ABOUT.

*To the man who is torn between war and family:*

*You have no idea what I've been through.*

*You have no idea what I can do.*

*You think you know cause you watch the news.*

*Sights, smells, sounds. Burning corpse and rotting flesh,*

*Police call his body parts, what a mess.*

*You have no idea what I've been through,*

*memories are stuck like glue.*

*Put it in a movie or a show,*

*Show the public what they think they know.*

*You have no idea what I've been through,*

*and don't expect me to explain it to you.*

*From,*

*The man who is searching to find balance and save his life and family*

You have no idea what it's like to live with someone who has PTSD.

The war did that to my husband. He came back a different man.

Isolated. Alone. Angry. Sad. Depressed.

You have no idea.

You have no idea about his mood swings and how he can get so angry at the drop of a pin. No idea. So out of control.

He says he feels disrespected. That he fought a war for our country and he came home and people don't understand what service members have done for them. The things they have done. And seen. To fight for their freedom. Our freedom. Your freedom.

He has changed. You have no idea how it is to love your husband, send him to war, and then not really know him when he returns. No idea.

You have no idea about the deployments. You just can't understand what they're like.

I was probably one of the first people in Afghanistan. Right after the attacks. I didn't take a shower for like four weeks because we didn't have any water to take showers with. We had no running water for a month and a half. It was showers with water bottles. Or not even water bottles, just baby wipes. Even when we got cold showers, by the time you walk back to your tent, you're dirty again. Living out there, no electronics, no housing. We just sat in the desert for two days near some trucks.

Electricity, A/C, Americans take so many things for granted. You have no idea.

You have no idea the level of commitment that it takes in order to do even just the daily job of being in the military much less the actual deployment which is why we even exist. The military -- our sole purpose is to deploy and do whatever the President and Congress may direct.

Not just deployment, pre-deployment. Orders come down and the workups start, and the hours get really crazy and you start disappearing for long stretches at a time. Leaving the other spouse to take over all responsibilities while you disappear. 6 months, a year. They don't know. You don't know.

It's just different. And especially when you do it over and over and especially when you're deployed to a combat zone where you could potentially not come back.

It's not something you can understand unless you've done it.

You have no idea what it's like being married and having to leave my wife to go on deployment. And then you worry about what is going on back here, knowing that she was worried about what we were doing being forward, deployed.

And then they start talking about, we may extend the deployment. And you have to try and get in touch with your wife via writing a letter and sticking it in an envelope. There's no email, no phone calls, none of that. By the time she gets the letter maybe the situation's changed again. So, then she's worried till she gets the next letter.

The whole lag time, it just drives you both crazy. You never get used to it. But it's just what it is. It's the job.



*Dear Civilian,*

*You don't realize that once we've finished serving, the things that we experienced or were impacted with, you have no idea that those things stay with us as long as we do.*

*You think if we served for one year, two years, three years, four years, or whatever it was, that afterward everything goes away.*

*But a lot of those experiences are lifelong experiences and never go away. They never go away.*

*To Whoever Reads This--*

*You have no idea what can go wrong. How it creeps up to a point of no return.*

*No one starts like that, but stuff happens.*

*People getting blown up.*

*People getting killed. Not getting support from higher up. Not the right leadership.*

*You start to dehumanize. Like, those others we're fighting are not even real people.*

*Not to justify it. But it happens. You can see how it happens.*

*Not suddenly but over time.*

*To anyone who wasn't deployed:*

*There's this expectation that when you come home that everything will return to normal, just like that - BING!*

*Because that's the way you want it to be and that's what you expect to happen.*

*But people change, no matter when you go in, or how long you go in, it changes you. You don't understand just how much that changes you and how much that affects how you deal with people and your interrelationships.*

*It's different now, and people around you don't get that. We change. We aren't the same person that left.*

People don't understand how long women have been in combat. Women have been in combat for years. They were in combat back in WWII, in Vietnam, before then even they were dressed up as soldiers, as men.

But we don't get that respect. We don't get the respect that we have served in environments that were dangerous. Especially if we still have our arms and legs.

People don't understand that we have a lot of invisible wounds. There are other traumas that you go through that they don't get. It's two-fold. We already don't get the respect because we are women and then if you are a woman that does have your arms and legs and was not physically wounded THAT THEY CAN SEE, you don't get that same respect.

You come back home and it's like a lot of people don't understand that as a woman who served, you have to fight for your position on all fronts.

*Dear Female Service Member,*

*Being a woman in the military when I went in was difficult because they didn't respect women who served. Even the men that you served aside didn't respect you.*

*There was a guy told me point blank "You do not belong in the military." And sexual harassment WAS a big thing. All women go through sexual harassment, probably on a daily basis, but when you're in the military and a rare commodity and there's more men, then there's a lot of pressure. And I don't think people understand you deal with it big time in the military, and especially in combat zone.*

*Not only having to deal with being in a combat area, but having the pressure on top of everything else of also being sexually harassed.*

*I wanted to literally shoot my platoon sergeant. And if they had not removed him from my sight, I probably would have killed him.*

*Because you're not respecting me to stand beside you as a soldier. You see me as something else.*

People don't understand how it's swept under the rug. You could be sexually harassed or sexually assaulted, like in my case, and it's swept under the rug and you're supposed to just deal with it, because if you show anything, now you're an "emotional woman." Now you've validated why I don't respect you. Now you've proven why women don't belong in the service.

The sexual harassment starts as early as bootcamp. And you're conditioned to accept it and deal with it.

Female Navy women back then were called "waves," so automatically from the start you're sitting in different areas, and you've got a man who's in a leadership position and he's literally talking about "riding the waves."

That's directed towards us. Women. And if you say anything you're a troublemaker.

*You have no idea.*

*My captain was a female.*

*My lieutenant was a female. She actually came to me - I guess she had seen the harassment.*

*Nothing happened. ALL that happened was he got moved.*

*And he got to retire when he got back to the US, with nothing.*

*My first sergeant raped somebody and . . . nothing.*

People, men, the men you serve with, don't understand that just because I'm a soldier or in the military doesn't mean I'm not a woman.

Just because we put on a uniform and our hair's pulled back doesn't mean we don't still want to be feminine. If I want to wear makeup or lipstick you don't need to wonder why.

I'm not asking for something.

We are not requesting men to come on to us.

It's like we're damned if we do and damned if we don't.

They don't respect us as soldiers and they don't respect us as women.



Dear Female Service Member,

I hope that we have paved the way for you, because a lot has changed over the last twenty years.

Back then, it was not like this. Trust me, they formed an alliance against you.

But when I took command, and my first sergeant was harassing the women – of course it took forever for a woman to finally come to me and admit it, but once she did, once they did, they felt like I would do something. They were right.

He went under investigation; he got charged, everything. I pushed it to the limit, because I'm female, I understand. If this is going on, I'm gonna put a stop to it.

So things have changed, and it has changed because of a lot of men being arrested. Commanders, officers, you name it. Things have changed over the last twenty years, and I'm thankful that it's not going on on that level anymore.

We did our best to pave a better way for you.

Dear Civilian Woman,

You understand harassment. It goes on every day. But in civilian life, I can say what I feel. In the military because you outrank me, if I say something, I'm either going to be reprimanded or I'm going to lose my rank.

My first sergeant harassed me so much, he had me behind closed doors and I just told him, one day, "Fuck you, first sergeant."

Nobody else heard me, so what're you gonna do? So now it's me and you.

But that's why you can't say nothing, because you're silenced because of your rank. That's what kills a woman's spirit, that's why so many women suppress it, because nothing is ever going to be done.

So it's harassment just like in civilian life, just harder to do anything about.

You have no idea. We have women in the war zone now, but we're not protected by our brothers. It's not the enemy, that's not who we're fighting. They're not the ones that's raping us.

You have no idea. Why do so many of the women's care packages come with diapers? Why? Because you don't want to take the risk of going to the latrine. A woman can't go to the latrine without the fear of being raped. So, what happens? Dehydration, death. That's the reality of it.

If you speak up to try to protect one of your sisters, then you're shunned, then you're the black sheep, and it reflects in your evaluation, it reflects in your promotions. You can forget it! There are no promotions.

The people that are committing the crimes against us are the ones that should be protecting us, our brothers. The ones who are acting the roles of our fathers, our command sergeant majors, our commanders. It's not so much the junior people, they're committing the crimes, too, but the reason the junior people are raping other people is because of the leadership.

What does the leadership call it? Military sexual trauma.  
Listen, Rape is Rape.

Dear Veteran Administration,

When a military woman serves in a combatant zone, and she makes it out of that zone, it should be 100% all her benefits come without question. She shouldn't have to fight for them.

Counseling should be the first thing that comes. Physicals and everything. A lot of us are so broken down, twenty years in the military, you don't realize you're broke down until you finally get out and go to a civilian doctor, and you find out you have all of this stuff that you never recognized.

When you go to counseling in the military, they say "Well which is worse? The sexual trauma or being in a combat zone?"

Why can't I talk about both? Why do I have to pick? It was a combination of things but, of course being in a combat zone was probably more traumatic, overall. But why do I have to choose? Why do I have to relive it all over again?

You have no idea. With police officers your first kill, immediately they take you out of the arena of your duties, and you're assigned a psychiatrist or a psychologist.

We kill or we be killed, but there's no type of therapy that's issued to us. It's like we have no respect, so we condition ourselves to not respect life. We condition ourselves to treat you as the enemy.

So, when we come from overseas and we see somebody that looks like you, we're conditioned, you're the enemy. It's isn't a choice. It's conditioning.

You have no idea.

We had to literally go out, pull our pants down, and urinate in plain sight.

As far as anything to urinate out of, as far as the military even supplying a tampon or a maxi pad, that didn't happen for us. We was over there without anything. Nothing. We barely could get toilet tissue. They did not even sell toilet tissue in the stores.

We was hoping for a pad to come in case we had our monthly cycle. Hoping for some toilet paper so we that we didn't have to figure out how we were going to keep our underwear from being soiled from everything.

Someone wrote a letter to Dear Ann 'Hey we are over here in the desert and we don't have maxi pads, tampons . . . We're trying to find something to layer our underwear with so we won't be soiled, bleeding everywhere.' She put that in the New York Times or something and it spread all over. When I came home, I came home with six months of tampons and pads!

People were sending care packages of tampons, pads it was a big football field of tampons and pads over there. We had to go through that, cause the military didn't supply. My mother mailed me toilet paper!

These are things that we had to go through. All of those guys probably seen our (excuse me) our vaginas, buttholes, everything. Because whatever you had to do, you had to do it in plain sight! Or, I was in transportation and I'd have to hop out of my truck and crawl underneath it to pee.

You have NO idea!

YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT'S REQUIRED OF A WOMAN IF YOU WANT A CAREER. WHEN YOU SEE A FEMALE O6 AND ABOVE, I GUARANTEE YOU, FOR THE MOST PART, SHE DOES NOT HAVE ANY CHILDREN, MAYBE NEVER BEEN MARRIED. BECAUSE YOU'RE CONDITIONED IN ORDER TO BE SUCCESSFUL THAT THOSE ARE THE THINGS YOU HAVE TO LAY TO THE SIDE.

DEPO PROVERA. THAT WAS THE SHOT WE TOOK. I DIDN'T HAVE MY PERIOD FOR ABOUT FOUR YEARS, LITERALLY. I WAS GOING ON DEPLOYMENTS BACK TO BACK TO BACK TO BACK, FIVE TOURS, AND AT THE TIME I JUST THOUGHT "THANK GOD I DON'T HAVE MY PERIOD," AND THEN YOU COME BACK AND YOU FIND OUT THAT'S NOT GOOD.

I WAS FOCUSED ON CAREER. SO I DON'T HAVE ANY KIDS. I'VE NEVER BEEN MARRIED. I MOVED SO MUCH TO DIFFERENT LOCATIONS - A MAN'S NOT GOING TO PACK UP AND FOLLOW YOU.

I'VE BEEN OUT OF THE SERVICE FOR TWO YEARS, AND I LOOK BACK ON THAT AND I THINK ABOUT WHEN I WAS TAKING THE DEPO SHOT, EVERYTHING WAS MISSION FOCUSED. I MEAN COMPLETELY, AND NOW I'M LIKE YOU'RE GONNA GET OLD BY YOURSELF, WITH NO KIDS.

I got TDRL in '86. Temporary Disability Retirement List. You have no idea how it feels to get out, go to the vet center, and have the veterans say, "You don't belong here."

That still hurts. They said that I was not a veteran. Women weren't considered veterans. I just left that place and didn't seek care for like three years.

But I had some friends in the service that said, "You need to go."

Even when I was in, I remember watching and feeling like I didn't belong. I was in charge of part of my unit. And one of my workers did not follow my orders, so my superior cussed me out and said I was going to get demoted. Simply because the person did not want to listen to me. A lot of men didn't feel that they had to respond to women.

I was working on a jet. And one of my workers said "Sit in the cockpit, so I can let you go up. Hold the ejection seat." And I had just seen one of my fellow airmen do the same thing—commit suicide. You're trying to do the same thing to me in a hangar?

And you tell me I'm not a veteran.



*I don't think people understand how you're not really looked at as a normal female. At least back then.*

*When you get back, people don't recognize the silent pain that you go through. It's hard when you have people in your own family that don't recognize that you did service for the country. And they call you out of your name.*

*I'm okay, I'm kinda even-keeled, but when you think about you don't get recognition from your own folk, and then they call you a bitch because you've done something in a men's war?*

*It's painful.*

*It takes years to prove to family members that you're not a guy in a female body and that you're a woman. Especially if you're single and you don't have kids, because you're labeled as something else.*

*In my earlier years we females - we were 18, 19 years old—we could outdo the men anytime, anywhere. Outshoot them, outrun `em, we were the best!*

*We looked good, too. We looked better in our uniforms. We were that fighting machine. We would just pick a fight with the men just to show them we could beat `em down. We were physical!*

*But when it came to a promotion that same male would get a higher rank than we would even if we held a supervisory role over that male. Because they would say "You're a female, you're going to rank anyway."*

*You may be the "G.I. Jane," the hardest worker, the go-to person, but a male comes along that's not as good, everybody knows he's not as great, not as technically astute as we are, but they'll give him a higher rank to help him promote because you're a female, "you're going to promote anyway."*

*No one considering we're going to a lot of environments where we may be one of only two females there. We have to be subjected to a lot of profanity and all that. It's just another thing the military programs you to accept—someone, some man in front of you talking that way, men groping themselves, all that garbage that we just hate. You learn to accept it because now it becomes your world.*

*But after all that, you're not worth putting forward over one of those men.  
Really?*

What do people not understand? Plenty.

When I joined the military and went to basic training, the first time we went into the cafeteria we had to be at parade rest to stand in line, and it was somebody that I knew from high school and he said "Hey!" and called me by my first name. I was standing at parade rest and I grinned at him. Because we were just shocked! We were both eighteen.

I will never forget that drill sergeant said to me "You fucking bitch, you a damn ho, and you gonna come in here tryin' to fuck somebody already?"

And he cussed me out in front of the whole cafeteria. Maybe that doesn't sound like much but at 18 and there's probably about 1,000 soldiers in that room. And my superior cussing me out. I was a whore, I was a bitch, I wanted to fuck, all that.

I never got over that. From that day forward I was a different woman. 18 years old. Where's my mother at? Where's my father at? Where's somebody to say "Hey, you don't talk to my child like this."

Because he wasn't joking.

That was just so major for me.

I'll never ever forget.

*To anyone reading this,*

*You have no idea how fast it changes you. About two weeks in, we were getting up one morning and we noticed that this girl was missing. We had been getting extensive PT, intensive PT, because she couldn't keep up. She kept saying "I can't do it, I can't do it." Breaking down, crying, because they cussed her out so much. She couldn't get her bed correct, she couldn't fold her clothes correctly, she couldn't get any of it right.*

*And we found out she was missing cause she tried to kill herself.*

*We all were just - how did we not see it? How did we miss it? But you can't show any emotion. We had to act like it didn't matter. If you show emotion then you're weak too.*

*She did survive. Another girl didn't, later. But that was the first time I was that close to someone that broke. That whole veteran suicide, I remember how many people attempted.*

*You can go to boot camp and your entire life has changed, even if you go back home. don't regret joining, in any capacity. I don't regret it at all, even though a lot of crap happened. But I grew up real fast. Real fast.*

*People don't understand that sometimes it's easier to be at war than to be home.*

*I was so career focused, trying to do what I was supposed to do. One deployment I came back and went to the doctor and said, "Hey look, I can't sleep, I have to drink a couple of beers just to go to sleep." He was like, "Oh, just drink two or three, you're good!"*

*I could just feel myself slowly diminishing, going downhill. I wasn't performing. And I couldn't snap out of it.*

*So I went back, because I functioned better in the combat zone. I guess cause it's a controlled environment there, things are pretty much straight. It was hard to function here, in this world, but I could function over there. So my last two years I was over in Iraq and Kuwait, going back and forth. Then ISIS started up and I was about to go back again and I said Okay, I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this. It's time for me to go.*

*But the thing was, for me, to function in this world. It took me probably a year after I retired to feel like I was actually functioning right.*

Dear Civilians,

People don't understand what they can't see. It's very difficult. If you're not wounded that they can see, they don't think that you're wounded.

I stayed on the road constantly, like 5 different FOBs I was supporting. I was in a helicopter, on the road. So now, getting on the road is very difficult.

But people were like "Ain't nothing wrong with her!"

We were in the car one day, and I was coming through mountains and something just triggered. I went from okay to I had to pull over, someone else had to drive. I couldn't.

It's so true, the anxiety, depression, the PTSD. I have a disabled veteran tag on my car. When I parked someone was like "Ain't nothing wrong with you! What are you doing with a disabled veteran tag?"

You know what? If you don't see what's wrong with me then you probably need to be worried because it means there's something else wrong!

One day I may be okay, you might see me "Oh hey!" And then something on the side of the road, something can trigger it and then - watch out.

You have no idea what it's like to go out to eat and find yourself back up against the wall and constantly looking to see if anybody's coming to your table, and you're sitting there on your guard.

My daughters would say "Mama, you're different." I'd say "No I'm not."

"Mama, what is wrong with you?"

And I'm like "Nothing is wrong with me."

And they're "Something is wrong with you!"

Finally, I was working at this company and we didn't get paid like we were supposed to. And I asked where the person was who's in charge of the money. And then out of the blue, I just started shaking, shaking hard all over. And they're asking "Are you okay" and I'm like "I don't know but get me out of here and to the hospital!"

I really did not know that something was actually wrong. At the emergency room they gave me something to calm my nerves, and this nurse came in asking was I in Desert Shield, Desert Storm? And I said "Yes, ma'am." And she said "You may have PTSD." And she got me to the veteran center.

If they'd of tested me when I got discharged then maybe it could've been caught a whole lot earlier. But they didn't test the women, not psychologically. They just tested the men for trauma and such. The women they just gave us a 10 minute physical and passed us along.

*To Whoever Reads This,*

*People don't understand you can do therapy for years but that may not be the answer. The answer is getting out and like they say "Do what you're afraid of."*

*I withdrew for several years. I still have issues with, because I have withdrawn so much - my safety thing is at home. I find myself wanting to go directly home instead of enjoying myself out. Sometimes I don't even realize I'm doing it. But I want to go home because I feel safe there.*

*I've had a really hard life so I had to understand things on my own. I have to introvert myself and kind of listen and pay attention to what I'm doing and why I'm doing it.*

*It's not that I'm afraid, but I feel like I'm different. Like nobody understands what I'm going through. A lot of negative stuff.*

*My mother says "You're the one that chose to go." Well, just because I chose to go doesn't mean that what I'm dealing with is any less hurtful or hard to deal with. That's not the answer, to just blow it off like it was somehow my fault because I decided to serve.*



Dear Civilian,

You have no idea how broken the system is.

I signed up to serve my country, I didn't sign up to be treated like crap when I got out, or not being able to get the healthcare we need. It's like it trickles down to us. Somewhere up high they must teach each other how to cheat the system or cheat the soldier.

I have a broken neck. You can't see the wounds, you can't see my PTSD, you can't see my broken neck. I've had three surgeries and about to have another because they messed my neck up to begin with, using a plate that was too big and it ruptured everything else.

So it's a lot that you deal with and it's a silent dealing with because civilian people don't understand it, which I didn't either before I went in. So okay, I'll give you the benefit of the doubt but give me the benefit of the doubt, too. Don't shut me down so quick, listen to what I have to say.

Because you might be able to help me. We don't want to ask for help. But we all need somebody. We all have struggles and defeats in life.

Dear Civilian,

Your struggle may not be my struggle, but it's all to get you to get you to the same place. It's all directed towards the same ending result.

Say I lost my leg, but maybe your mother went through a cancer or you got raped or something. It's all to get everybody to the same place in life. The same focus, the same result.

To say that because we haven't experienced exactly the same things then there's no point in learning from each other is not true. Disaster is disaster for a reason. It's so we can all grow, because we're all really a part of each other. We're all one.

But how we get there and how long it takes us to get there is different.

*To a civilian,*

*You have no idea. Or maybe you do. But I don't think I'm a hero. Everybody has different jobs. I don't feel good anymore when you thank me for serving.*

*Basically what I did, I was in combat, truly in combat, life or death situations. I almost had to shoot kids. Had it come right down to it, we would have had to shoot these children. Thank God that did not happen but you think about those things.*

*So much hits you when you come back. You don't know what you're really thinking. You just feel all these emotions. Anger mostly. I was just straight up angry. I don't even know who I was mad at. I was just mad.*

*I almost beat this guy up. He cut me off and I cut him off and I jumped out of the car and thank God I stopped and said to myself "What are you doing?"*

*So I quit leaving the house. I didn't feel sane, because I'm not that kind of crazy person. I was just forced to be.*

People don't understand that the biggest thing is just talking.

Talk to people in the military. Most people are very open to having those conversations and not being hostile. Because I recognize there's lots of people that don't like the military and that's okay. That's your inherent right as a US citizen. So if you don't like the military, and you want to speak out against? Then by all means, go ahead, voice that opinion.

Just give some thought behind it, don't jump the gun and just hear one thing. Learn enough to speak your opinion. Otherwise you end up saying something you don't necessarily believe or isn't necessarily true or you came to a belief because of fake facts.

Just give people a chance to talk and listen. You might learn something.

*Dear Civilian,*

*Don't thank me for my service. Don't call me a hero and think that gets you off the hook. You don't know me. I could've gone in there and mowed down a bunch of innocent people for all you know.*

*Don't call me a hero and you don't know what I've done.*

Dear Reader,

I don't think people understand that It's the family that really steps up. Without that, I couldn't have done it as a married Marine. It's not like I could put them on hold while I did the Marine thing and then try to make a family in my spare time or whatever.

You really need that whole family to be onboard, to have that same level of commitment. The family's level of commitment is so important, I think probably a lot of people don't see that aspect of it, that if the family isn't supportive and doesn't rally behind you, it's going to be very very difficult to serve.

**What a lot of people don't understand is PTSD isn't like the equivalent of road rage. You don't just flip out like RAWR!!!**

**Mine isn't like that. It's subtle. I was in Ranger Regiment then 82nd. I've seen a lot, a lot of people get killed. I've done my fair share of the whole combat thing. But my PTSD isn't debilitating. Mine is more like a heightened sense of awareness.**

**When I go into like a restaurant or somewhere, I never sit with my back to the door. I never used to care but now I want to be able to see the door. I like guns, I've got firearms at the house, and I never used to worry about like locking the doors because, who cares, I've got a pistol. But ever since this has started happening, I'll wake up in the middle of the night and – Oh man, did I lock the doors? And I'll walk back down.**

**A lot of times I don't tell people I have PTSD. I don't want them to jump to that – Aw man, he's crazy. He's going to flip out and want to shoot everybody. That's such a small percent. A lot of people have what I have, just a really heightened sense of awareness.**

**And maybe a little isolation. I'm happy just not being around anybody. But that's the only side effect.**

You have no idea what military families go through. It's much harder on the spouse than me.

When I deploy I know what's going on. We're out fighting people. If I'm gone for a couple of days and can't call, I know where I'm at, but she doesn't. She's in constant fear.

Same with my parents, my mom worries about everything. It's much easier for me because I know what I'm doing. I miss my wife, I miss my kids but I've got my Army family over there. My company commander joked about me being his army wife. So it's just harder on the ones you leave behind.

I've missed – been deployed – for 4 of my son's birthdays. Same with my daughter. It sucks. But maybe it makes you appreciate the time when you are home even more.



I don't think people understand why we serve. For me, part of me likes to believe that as long as we're in Afghanistan and Iraq, they're going to keep fighting us there because they just want us gone. And so would you rather them fight us over there or would you rather they have time and space and money and training to plan another September eleventh or something like that here?

They've done interviews with a lot of people we've captured and they don't want us there. The Taliban is going to keep fighting us until we're gone. So, in my mind, I would rather us be over there and them wasting their time and money and resources fighting us who are trained to fight than fighting civilians in the US.

Because it's a lot easier for them to attack us over there - they don't have to go anywhere. It's better than an attack here.

I don't know what to say when you thank me for my service. Just to get a laugh I used to say, "well, thanks for paying taxes." Cause that's how I get paid.

Most of the people I've come in contact with have been very supportive. They thank you for your service. Even the ones who don't agree with what the US military is doing, they still thank you for serving. That's about the best you can ask for. There's no way for them to know what I've done. How could they? Only something like .01% of the people in this country serve.

As long as they understand, I joined the military because I wanted to serve because it was a family thing, but I stayed because I wanted to have some sort of say in protecting this country.

*People don't understand that this idea that you join the Army because you have nothing else to do is total bullshit. I could have gone to college but I wanted to serve. I was going to stay in 4 years, get some money for college, get out.*

*I was an airborne ranger. I got some college money then September eleventh happened and we started deploying so I stayed in. I'd been training for 3 years. But it wasn't like I was some deadbeat that barely passed high school and didn't have anything else to do.*

*We were out at a bar one night, we'd already deployed twice, had a buddy get killed. And this drunk guy asks what we do and I just say we're in the Army cause I don't want to brag about the Ranger thing. And he's like, Oh, so you took the easy way out? I say, Excuse me? And he goes Yeah, you didn't want to do anything real with your life. So you joined the Army.*

*I almost lost it because he had no idea how hard I worked to get where I'm at. People like that don't have a clue.*

DEAR CIVILIAN,

I GET QUESTIONS ALL THE TIME, LIKE IF I LIKE TRUMP. IT DOESN'T MATTER. THAT'S WHAT I TELL EVERYBODY. I'VE GOT MY PERSONAL OPINIONS THAT I'LL SHARE WITH MY FAMILY BUT THAT'S IT. WHENEVER YOU DO SOMETHING, YOU'RE REPRESENTING THE MILITARY, GOOD OR BAD.

IT DOESN'T MATTER WHO THE PRESIDENT IS AND WHETHER I LIKE HIM OR NOT. AS A SOLDIER, YOU DON'T REALLY GET THAT OPTION. YOU FOLLOW THEIR ORDERS ANYWAY. A LOT OF PEOPLE JUST ASSUME YOU WERE IN THE MILITARY, SO YOU MUST LOVE THE PRESIDENT OR YOU MUST LOVE THE WAR.

I'VE SPENT OVER 3 YEARS IN AFGHANISTAN, I'M SICK OF THAT PLACE. HOPEFULLY I'LL NEVER HAVE TO GO BACK AGAIN. JUST BECAUSE PEOPLE ARE IN THE MILITARY DOESN'T NECESSARILY MEAN THEY AGREE WITH THE WAR. I'M SURE PEOPLE IN CIVILIAN JOBS HAVE SOMETHING THEY DON'T LIKE TO DO, BUT THEY HAVE TO DO IT BECAUSE IT'S THEIR JOB.

SO JUST THINK ABOUT THAT NEXT TIME.

Dear Service Member,

You have no idea about the sacrifices your family makes. My daughter said something to me recently because we've just recently moved to being in better relationship. We were talking about my absence in her life and I was saying, "Well, why is it that you're closer to your father?" She said, "Because you traveled so much; you were gone."

She said, YOU WERE GONE. Yeah, you did send money; you did take care of things but you were gone. And I had to take that on because I was. I had to own that. There was a lot of time that he was the one that did her hair, took her to school, provided the care, and I was gone. I called, but it's not the same. It's just not the same.

I was a good parent but I was an absentee parent. The military owned my life. I was gone. First thing in the morning, 5 AM, PT. When she got home at night, doing homework, I wasn't there. That's a part of the reality. You have to own that.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

I HEARD YOU WERE ABOUT TO MAKE THE JUMP INTO MARRIAGE AND TO A MILITARY MAN. WELL, ALL I CAN TELL YOU IS RUN!

BEING A SPOUSE IS HARD WORK WITH THE COMPROMISE AND THE SHARING BUT THE MILITARY? WOW. NOW YOU LOOKING AT DEPLOYMENTS, "VOLUNTEER" MEETINGS, AND THE CALL FROM A DRUNKEN SOLDIER AT 1:00 IN THE MORNING.

THE TIME WHEN THEY ARE GONE AND ALL YOU HAVE IS HIS PICTURE TO LOOK AT AND MEMORY OF HIS VOICE. THE TIME WHEN YOU SEE HIM AFTER AN EXTENDED PERIOD AWAY IS LIKE SEEING HIM FOR THE FIRST TIME. HOLDING HIS HAND WHEN HE IS HURT KNOWING NOTHING WILL WEAKEN THE LOVE YOU FEEL. HAVING HIM AS YOUR BEST FRIEND IS REALLY NO CHOICE, BECAUSE YOU WILL BE MOVING EVERY 2 YEARS. BUT HE IS ALSO THE BEST FRIEND ONE WHO KNOWS HOW SCARED OF SPIDERS YOU ARE SO HE DOUBLE CHECKS TO MAKE SURE THE ROOM IS SECURE.

BEING A MILITARY SPOUSE IS NOT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART, THE LONELINESS WILL FILL THE HOUSE AND THE MOMENTS OF MISSED OPPORTUNITIES WILL FILL BOOKS. BUT THE LOVE AND BOND IS LIKE NO OTHER.

SO LIKE I SAID RUN! RUN TO YOUR LOVE AND ENJOY EVERY MOMENT CAUSE YOU MAY NOT HAVE TOMORROW.

*To A New Military Spouse:*

*Here's what you probably don't understand:*

- *You will need to be very independent and strong. Because you will have to make decisions by yourself that most wives make with their spouse.*
- *The people that you meet are what make this lifestyle worth it. Friendships are forged in steel!*
- *Moving: They don't have Army posts in desirable locations but there are positives and negatives at every one. Be the person who finds the good!*
- *Get involved: This is where you meet those phenomenal people and hear about the fun things to do.*
- *Deployment suck, EMBRACE THE SUCK! You are stronger than you imagine.*
- *Take advantage of everything the military has to offer. Educate yourself in benefits and entitlements.*
- *Your career will take a backseat to that of your spouse.*
- *This is a sisterhood you CANNOT understand unless you've lived it.*

*ENJOY THE RIDE!*

*Dear New Military Spouse:*

*You are stronger than what you think. You will make it through whatever is thrown at you. Have your breakdown and pick yourself up.*

*Being a military wife isn't easy. But it is so worth it.*



*Dear Self,*

*Remember to reach out to those around you. They are there to fill you with hope, help, and a shoulder if and when (and yes you will) you need it. Your family is miles away but your new family is just a door away. Just waiting for you to introduce yourself.*

*Remember to be kind to everyone that you meet, someday you may (chances are quite good that you will) run into them again and need their help.*

*The struggles are real but by keeping an open mind, they will become easier. Remember to always stand behind your spouse and know that while he wants to be there for you, his work won't allow it. Not his fault. That of the job.*

*Cheering you on!*

Dear Young Unsuspecting Girl,

This lifestyle is so complex, with every emotion woven into each day. The joys you will feel far outweigh the sadness.

You will feel pride for yourself as you conquer more and greater challenges than you ever thought you were capable of.

You will feel joy in the friends you will make. "Friends" isn't even a strong enough word and "family" doesn't really cut it either. These women will be your battle buddies, next to you as you celebrate life's milestones and mourn life's losses. They will be the splint on your soul as you wait.

Because you will wait.

Waiting will become like second nature to you. Wait for orders. Wait for HIM. Wait for promotion, for HIM, for deployments to begin and to end and always, for HIM.

Dear Younger Self,

You are about to enter a totally different world, that only you and other military spouses will understand. Everything that you have done up to this point has had its purpose and everything has happened as it should.

Remember:

- Be kind and let the small things go.
- Get closer with your own family. Get to know them better.
- Any past trust issues, drop them. There is no room.
- Love him with all your heart.
- Be prepared for things to go differently than planned.
- Hope for the best but prepare for the worst.
- Pick and choose your battles. Not everything is worth a fight.
- It's possible he would have gotten sick whether he went to Iraq or not.
- Document your lives together. Those memories will be all you have left.
- **DO NOT BE AFRAID.** It is all God's plan.

Honey,

How much do you truly love this man? Do you have ANY idea of what you're really in for?

Trust me, you don't.

1. Your ability to pack things quickly and neatly will be a constant challenge.
2. Your freedom of speech is no longer valid once you said the words "I do." Sorry, too late.
3. If you're lucky – very, very lucky – someone who has "been there, done that" will recognize the look of horror on your face when you (and you alone – hubby cannot help you; he married the military first REMEMBER THAT) are faced with your 1<sup>st</sup> true crisis.

(I'll throw in this letter a little memory of my own – called hubby at the office to tell him the moving van had arrived. 30 minutes later called him again and said the same thing. He said "You already told me our furniture from Germany was here." I said, "yes, but now I'm talking about all our furniture that's been in storage for 3 years is now here, too." Who is going to help me?!?!)

4. Honey, the best thing about being a spouse – we are all a family. We help one another.
5. Welcome to the family!

*Dear New Spouse,*

*You have no idea what you've gotten yourself into! You are in for the ride of your life.*

*First, don't take military life personally. It is a culture all its own. You will be happier if you realize the military owns your spouse and the military will come first. That doesn't mean he doesn't care about your well-being.*

*There will be challenges you have to cope with on your own. Deployments will be difficult, long, and lonely. Remember there are others facing the same challenges as you. Become part of the support group.*

*Voice your complaints to your spouse so he understands how you feel, but don't whine. Some things can't be changed by you or him.*

*Remember the two of you are a team and do things that are supportive of his career. You should be working toward the same goal.*

*Just enjoy the ride.*

*Dear New Military Spouse:*

*You have no idea what a great life you have married into! There will be so much to see and learn.*

*I hope you and your spouse love each other with every fiber of your heart. Sometimes you are going to need that to sustain.*

*Embrace every challenge. Unpleasant times may occur—remember they always end. ALWAYS.*

*There are fine people everywhere. There are also jackasses everywhere. CHOOSE the positive, decent, loving folks to become allies. Shun the negative, dishonest, or constantly depressed folks. They will try to bring you with them.*

*You are not your spouse's rank! You are YOU. The best way to support your milspouse is to work on keeping a strong marriage and family and seeking your own happiness!*

*Wherever you are stationed, see all the sights. Eat all the different foods. Make friends. Someday your spouse will retire. If you do this, you will have the best memories and stories to share.*

Dear Younger Self,

You have no idea – there are some things you need to know about this amazing journey.

First, don't ever let your husband control the checkbook! He was not trained for that!! 😊

Make sure you take care of yourself and your emotional well-being. Things are going to get tough and if you aren't secure in who you are, you will not make it through.

Your husband is going to come back from the war changed. He is going to say and do harsh things. Set your limits and explain what you need early so this can be a firm foundation. Before deployments happen.

When he does come home, try and find as many resources as you can to understand what he is going through. It really isn't all his fault. In the end everything will work out.

Things are going to be very different than you imagine they will be. But it's o.k. Maintain your own identity in combination with being a military spouse and mother. Trust me, you are going to be fine!

Remember to just take each day one at a time.

Dear Husband Who Always Sees the Silver Lining,

Here we are in a new town, new command center, new friends (if we find them), scared kids, unpacking boxes again (each move I bring less and less) and then here's me . . . trying to hold it together.

I love you and I am so proud of your career, but why am I feeling left behind and covered by your shadow? To the outside we look so perfect. But inside we are lonely, drowning with fear of when you, the glue that keeps us strong and always find the silver lining, will leave again.

Love,

The wife below the silver lining just trying to hold it together



Dear Husband,

You have no idea what it's like on this end. That we get used to your being away. That it's actually harder to adjust to your being back. And, no, you can't just come in and take over.

That we can't plan anything. How we have to drop everything around us to accommodate you and your career.

The anger the children feel toward you for leaving them and then how they feel guilty for that anger.

How you must feel when your child doesn't even know who you are.

People say "You knew what you were getting into." But, no, how could we?

Dear Military Spouse,

If bitterness sets in, don't let it. Redirect your hurt, your disappointment. Missed anniversaries, missed birthdays, missed births.

Your service member has feelings, too. They go through just as much.

Don't be afraid to ask for help. Just say

**PLEASE HELP!**

Your work as a military spouse is a job, too.

To Whoever Reads This Letter,

I will never forget when my husband got shot in his last deployment. Tough times! But he recovered and the military took great care of us.

I will never ever forget that while he was recovering at the hospital I met other soldiers in a very bad condition and I felt so relieved it was not my husband in that condition.

And that made me feel extremely selfish.

To the public:

You have no idea the problems we have as soldiers.

The things we go thru and try to over come. All the difficulties you normally wouldn't experience. The loneliness. The stress. All the overwhelming emotions. Not knowing what's next, who's going to be gone next, what we are going to do with the baby.

Most of you will never understand and think it's easy or that we will "get over it" but it's more than that. It's hard to keep a strong marriage when it's one thing after another and you have no idea.

From,

The soldier who loves a soldier

Dear Civilian,

You have no idea how to miss your wife & kids for months on end. Day after day, keeping a watchful eye on yourself, your crew, and those around you . . . a constant nagging feeling – “ARE YOU SAFE? ARE WE SAFE?”

That feeling doesn't go away at night when you think about your family. Try as you might to stay on the bright side, focus on the good times, a dark cloud passes over. Nightmares plague your sleep. You have no idea how many times I've vividly watched as my daughters drowned, burned, or walked into traffic. How many times my wife has been attacked or driven headlong into oncoming traffic.

Now it's 0400. Time to get up and take care of the crew again.

Are we safe?

You have no idea  
that you never get used to the goodbyes.  
They just get harder.

To a younger self,

You have no idea what you're getting into or how crazy it will be. Like having a mission at 9 so you form up at 0300. What the???

You'll never understand where all the trash comes from or yet why you'll still pick it up.

Why you're in the field for three days with a month of supplies in your truck.

You'll never understand because it can't be understood.

*To the new military couple,*

*You have no idea of all the advantages you have as a new military couple. Try not to be discouraged. You may not know anybody at first but over time you will establish friendships that will last for your life. Your kids will grow up well-rounded with many life experiences under their belt.*

*Not to mention your entire family will have full healthcare, which come sat a huge cost in the civilian world!*

*While you will inevitably spend time apart from each other, if you take the time to make your relationships a priority being apart won't be as hard as you think*

*Keep your own identity apart from being a spouse. That will allow you to grow as a person and a significant other. Use this time to seek out new opportunities because this adventure will be over before you know it.*

*And don't take it too seriously.*



To a non-military spouse,

You have no idea the things that go through my head when it's time to be on our own again for a long period of time. Like, what if while he's gone and I'm alone with the kids, something happens to me and no one knows? We don't have family here, we just moved here, we don't have friends.

What happens if I fall down the stairs and become unresponsive? What will the kids do? They're too little to call 911. Nobody would come check on me. Who takes care of the kids?

Or what do I do when someone tries to break into the house? Can I protect the kids by myself? The hardest part of being alone is that you have sole responsibility of the kids and you ask yourself, Am I able to protect them?

To anyone on the outside looking in:

I am a military spouse. As a wife with a husband in the military, I am judged. Not only am I judged, all military spouses are.

People on the outside of military life, as well as on the inside, don't understand. They don't understand unless they are in our shoes. Military wives are belittled, called awful names, and usually just looked down on and disrespected.

People think military families have it made. I'm here to tell you – THEY DON'T. The army isn't your typical 9 – 5, Monday – Friday job. My husband is home 1 or 2 hours a day, and that's if we are lucky. Most times we don't eat together because someone messed up so all the soldiers are kept late. I watch my children starve for attention from their dad because they never get to see him. Our 4 & 3 year-old get tucked in at night by him and don't see him till 24 hours later. As a mother it hurts me to witness.

We have to go where the Army tells him to, when they tell us to. There is no such thing as settling down when you're a military family. I promise you, the grass is far from green for military families.

From,

A wife who wishes people understood

*Dear Civilian friends:*

*You have no idea what it's like to be married to someone in the military. While you beg for a little girl time away from your husband, I beg for just one more moment beside my man.*

*You brag about your amazing sex life, knowing my husband is away and I will have my mechanical boyfriend for the next 30 days, 6 months, or year.*

*You gripe and moan about what your husband doesn't do right, when I long to just have my husband around to help with anything.*

*Being married to someone in the military means endless goodbyes, time alone, sleepless nights, pulling every ounce of strength you have to make it through till he walks back through the door.*

*It's not a life for the weak and not a life I'd ever trade. My husband is my best friend, a brave soldier, and the absolute love of my life.*

*From,*

*A soldier's wife*

Dear You,

I say often that others have no idea what it's like to be a military spouse - to balance your own life and your service member's world.

But more often, I think it's that I have no idea how to maintain that balance without being DETACHED.

Without distancing myself because he's leaving again-

It hurts so much everytime he leaves

No matter how short or long the trip.

And being detached keeps the pain at bay. Keeps it bearable, manageable.

But is being detached depriving me of special and precious moments with my husband?  
Is it keeping me from appreciating him and enjoying our time together?

How hard do I have to work to maintain my independence and be strong enough detached enough to handle whatever difficulty may come ... while still being in the moment -enjoying every precious second?

My life can't go on hold while he's busy or gone. I have to be able to be happy in both situations, right?

So maybe I actually do have SOME idea of how to achieve that balance ...  
But actually achieving it and maintaining it feels like such a steep task ... that it's easier to say I have no idea.

Sometimes it's easier to be alone.

I feel less torn.

*You have no idea.*

*I married a man who later became a Marine.*

*And the Marine Corps crumpled him up like a piece of paper*

*And threw him in the trash.*

Dear Mom,

You were proud of my joining the Army but that was before I got married and moved away. Now I'm too far for regular visits. I grew up being the son at every celebration and birthday party. Now I send you pictures of my children's birthdays.

Please understand . . . I'll love you as I can. Tell them I'm brave and proud to serve for freedom and beyond.

Love,

A Soldier and a veteran

You have no idea – coming from a broken home, your dad lives 5 minutes away, but yet you have only seen him a number of times throughout your life. Watching your mother get beat by her new husband your stepfather and him beating you too.

You have no idea of how growing up with no role model in your life to tell you that drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes are bad. You have no idea growing up a child addicted to all three.

You have no idea finally standing up and deciding that enough is enough and joining the military. You have no idea finally finding the love you have always needed and wanted. You have no idea the pain of getting married and finding the love you searched for all your life and then the next day leaving her behind to move all the way across the country alone. You have no idea all the thoughts that came into my mind wondering if I was going to lose her as well.

You have no idea finally having her in my arms again but struggling at work with horrible leaders and trying to hide my frustrations from my wife.

You have no idea how afraid I was when I found out I was getting deployed with this unit of toxic leaders and leaving my love and new child behind.

To Whom It May Concern:

You have no idea what it's like to raise children being a single but married mom. What it's like to go through a miscarriage with no one there to help you. To give birth without your spouse being by your side.

You don't know the number of nights I stayed awake praying my soldier was still alive, whether he was deployed or at live fire training.

Through everything I still find joy in the moments my soldier is home with me and my kids. I dig as deep as I can to find my relationship in its simplest form and love a man that has been changed by the things he has seen and experienced.

PLEASE DON'T JUDGE before you know their story.

Thank you,

An Army wife just trying to figure out this life



Dear Newbie,

Thank God for Youtube! Cause you are sure gonna need it! You have no idea nothing ever goes the way you planned and nothing can prepare you fully for when they are gone. You have to learn resources, decision making, and problem solving on your own. Because **EVERYTHING HAPPENS WHEN THEY'RE AWAY.**

Youtube and Lowes become your best friend. When you get a hole in your wall, Youtube is there to coach you on repairs. It's true, when it rains, it pours. Everything is bound to break all at once and shortly after the loved one leaves. You don't want to burden him with what is going on at home when he should be focused on the job at hand and staying safe. So, what can wait and what can't?

Do one thing at a time and ask for the help you need. You'll become an expert in no time at things you never would have thought. So, yes, everything bad will happen when the spouse leaves, but remember you are strong, independent, and capable!

Dear Civilian,

Army spouse is the toughest job in the military.  
Just saying.

From,

Someone who knows firsthand

Just some advice to a service member:

The majority of us have busy lives and responsibilities. And for those of us with kids, it would be safe to say we love our children dearly as many parents would.

However, due to our busy schedules we may sometime prioritize incorrectly as to what is really important. Sure . . . our jobs and careers are important, but what of our family, our significant other, our children?

We tend to focus more on our careers so that we miss the "now" moment with our family. And sadly we don't realize until it's too late. Until we're older and time that we can never get back has passed.

This is what I know - I must make a change. It's not too late.

To my service member husband,

You have no idea

How lonely it is even though I am surrounded by people all the time

How much I work to keep the house running even though it still looks like a disaster

How much I want a better life for our kids, yet I'm the one that yells at them

How much I want to make you happy, yet I turn away and make both of us sad.

Dear Younger Self,

You have no idea what you're getting into! First you'll deal with the disappointment of 9 weeks of basic training turning into 26 with AIT. It's gonna suck. And you'll cry a lot but you'll get to see at Thanksgiving break how much the military has changed him.

At 23 you'll marry that soldier and after being given A CAT (Yes, a cat!), he's gonna leave for a year. This too is going to suck, but you are going to make some of the greatest friends you'll ever have. They'll be what gets you through deployment, not family. Oh, them and the cat.

You'll get used to the constant disappointments, canceled leave, and moves. And as much as you'll fight, you'll also always have those friends you made during deployment. Because no matter what, you'll always come second. This is what's going to tear your marriage apart, especially when you have a child.

Don't give up. Fight. You matter too and your life is important. Daddy will barely be around. Fight because of all else, your baby needs you. You matter too.

**Don't give up.**

*You have no idea . . . how much you're going to go through and the things you'll have to deal with. At dinner you are going to feel like you're sinking but you'll survive and be constantly gaining inner courage and strength.*

*You are so much braver than you could have ever imagined. You are going to have such a vast knowledge of all your emotions and the emotions of those around you.*

*Keep leading with your heart even though it gets crushed a lot. In the end you will be better for it!*

Dear Civilian,

Boot camp is the first time in America that I felt like I belonged somewhere. To be with people who come from working class backgrounds. And also there's just a large number of people from Guam, PR, American Samoa, tropical islands, like me. I felt like I had a lot in common with them. And it was hard work. The kind of person who joins the military is not averse to hard work and I value that very highly, being tough and working hard.

I respected the people who were there and I felt like I belonged. Then, coming out of boot camp, especially on a rainy windy spring in Chicago, slushy and gross, and coming to Monterrey - to wake up in a barracks room, an E3 making like 500 dollars a month, to wake up and see that view?! I can't even describe it. And having my own room?!!! Which I never had before.

And the clothes - military uniforms are made out of really nice material. Me and my sister, we came up rough, so it was great just to have nice clothes. And a name tag. And ribbons. And rank. It was so great. And all the food! And the library. I can't even describe it. Just having a library with English books was amazing.

And used bookstores! And used clothing stores! These are things that don't exist in my homeland. We keep things until we can't use them anymore. There's no USED store for anything.

It was a mind-blowing introduction to American culture. People are wealthy here but it's not just that. It's that they're wealthy and don't know it. So even though they've had the privilege of not having to move around their entire lives or not having to worry about food on the table or taking care of their parents or anything like that—even though they always had a net under them, they don't see it! It's totally invisible to them.

But almost every veteran I know, with exceptions I can count on the fingers of one hand, come from working class backgrounds. So, even though we had nothing in common, not where we were born or ethnicity or anything, I still felt comfortable and like I belonged. Because we understood what it means to work, to do something tough.

For me, even when we have nothing in common, it's just a relief to be around veterans.

*To Whom It May Concern (and that probably means you)*

*Civilians and veterans both like to make kind of a snide joke about the US military being merely a giant welfare organization, but there's nothing MERE about taking the poor off the streets and giving them either a military career or a monetary/educational springboard from which to build a civilian career, in exchange for doing menial or slightly dangerous work for 4-6 years.*

*So, hey, if the advertising copy has to co-opt hollow statements about patriotism, heroic destinies, and selfless service in order to entice people to join, so be it. I don't just think that's fine and acceptable, but actively constructive for society as a whole.*

*People, myself included, need both structure and heroism. I can know in my brain that America is not the greatest country on earth, that it built its wealth off the backs off slaves and the British Empire before that, and that I owe nothing to "it" because there's no actual concrete "it" to owe anything to, and that I am not a hero, nor do I belong to an organization that is intrinsically heroic—AND YET I am still deeply moved by the US national anthem, I am moved to tears by the poem inscribed on the statue of liberty, I feel that I belong to something (what?) pure, righteous, and noble when I read "I lift my lamp beside the golden door."*



*Dear Civilians,*

*I hear a lot from veterans how much they hate being thanked for their service. Except the Vietnam vets. But the majority of veterans I know, the younger ones, don't like it. They're just – "it doesn't mean anything."*

*It's almost become a cliché now, this "don't thank me for my service." But I don't mind being thanked. It's a way for a disconnected populace to feel more connected and, you know, whatever makes you sleep at night.*

*We all do dumb shit every day and say stupid shit to people – I mean, we thank our bus drivers, which is cool, and we thank our veterans because we want to feel good and we want to feel connected to other people. And that's okay and I'm fine with that and I just say "it's an honor to serve" and that's as unconsidered a response as the thank you might be and that's okay. The same way people say, "How are you?" when they're not really looking for an answer. They're just reaching out to connect with someone verbally.*

*I understand why veterans have this thing now, like "I'm not a hero, don't thank me for my service" but I'm like, dude, we're all just trying to connect with each other. If that's how you gotta do it, that's how you gotta do it.*

*It's just words.*

*Most people don't understand that part of military service is realizing that no one is that important. It's just a part of growing up. No one can really do anything great for the world. And the thing about the military is it gives you this coping mechanism and that's the realization you don't have the power to change anything and that's totally okay.*

*The people who don't do well in the military are people who care too much about doing the right thing, doing the good thing - by their own lights - making a difference. If you have that mindset in the military you're not going to survive, because the military will grind it out of you.*

*This isn't a negative mark against the military. I am very pro-military. The structure of the military was greatly rewarding for me and I'll always be grateful for it. When I say it grinds that out of you, I mean it in a good way. It confronts you in a very direct way with how small you are and makes you perceive of how little importance you are, in a way that is healthy.*

*Cause most people have a real inflated sense of themselves and how much they matter in the world.*

Dear Civilian,

What do people not understand? How about everything?

There are so many engrained ideas about the kind of person who's in the military—that they're religious or jingoistic or all kinds of stereotypes. Which is fine—I don't mind people thinking incorrect things about me. It's not really the misperception that bugs me, it's the tedious conversations afterward that I will have to have about serving in the military. Tedious because I know there will be no point at which they will understand what I've done. And I don't expect there to be. Why should there be? I wouldn't be able to understand their experience growing up wherever. They have a very specific set of experiences that I will never understand. Ever.

I don't expect understanding. I think it would be presumptuous to ask them to know more about being in the military. Even the goals of a Veterans Resource Center—how can we help civilians understand the military better—I don't think that's a realistic goal or maybe even a desirable goal because the illusion of understanding is more dangerous than just acknowledging that we're never going to understand each other.

Your taxes pay for the wars we fight and that's okay—civilians are so disconnected from the military experience that it's laughable, but that's okay. Probably the majority of service members who feel not understood experience it as a detrimental thing. And I understand why. It just feels like this whole part of you, it's just absent in other people's minds. But even if you totally remove the military from someone's identity, you have all these other completely different things in anyone's background. To be understood on any level, any part of your identity, seems like a fool's errand.

People are poorly understood by the people they marry. Their own children. Their own parents. How can you expect someone you barely know to understand any part of you? That seems arrogant. Arrogant in a way I feel sympathy for but still arrogant.

Our capacity to empathize is so limited. I believe people try to be good and people try to be kind for the most part and people try to understand each other but our capacity for empathy is much more limited than we tell ourselves.

*To anyone that hasn't deployed,*

*You have no idea how different life is, how different you are. I was always, always always always always anxious. Cause you never know. You never know until it happens.*

*I'll be the first to say that all those people over there are not bad. But the small part of them that are bad kinda makes it suck for the rest. You pretty much trust them as far as you can throw them. So not very far at all.*

*You can't really trust them because you don't know them. They could be really glad that you're there and supporting you but, guess what, they have this guy that lives right over here that's making them do something or else he's gonna kill them and their family. So they have to do what he says whether they want to or not.*

*It's hard to connect or trust anyone because you just don't know. You can't tell, they all look the same, unless they have money and I didn't really see any parts that actually had money. Everything's dirty, everything's trashy, so you could have some really nice people, but it could also turn around and be bad. You can't really connect with anybody.*

*It's not like here where you can kinda sense if you can trust someone. So coming back from that it's still hard to trust people here. To know they're genuinely being okay. I kinda struggle with that 'cause you just don't know. You don't know.*

*Dear Civilian,*

*You have no idea what you can get used to. Enemies yelling at each other, shooting right at the outside gate, rocket flying over, a company out on mission and they get hit, you hear it blow up. It's just an everyday, type of thing. You get used to it.*

*The biggest thing—I lost a battle buddy out there. It's something I will never forget. Ever. He was a great guy and it was just normal, a normal routine mission, you wouldn't think anything'd happen and it's like seconds, he's gone.*

*You got people wounded, all this sand everywhere, and smoke and the smell of a dead person. It's something I will never ever ever ever forget. To see people climbing out of the truck and they're all bloody and burned up and discombobulated and just walking around, trying to feel. Cause I was the gunner that day. I was in the turret. So what did I miss? What could I have done different? It happened right in front of me so could I have done something to fix it? Could I have made them stop?*

*All these could've's. But at the end of the day I can't bring him back. I can't fix it. That is something I will always live with.*

*Especially when it's like you're not even sure what you're really fighting for anymore. You're just kinda there. And then you lose somebody. I mean people get injured. Seriously injured. It's like, for what? These people clearly don't want us over there so why are we still there?*

*They give you a day or two to breathe. And then you go right back to the same thing. All over again, so you just kinda get numb.*

*I'm pretty much still numb. I mean I have feelings, but most of my emotions are just anger. I don't really have anything else. But other than that, most things I just numb them out. Just kinda numb.*

*People don't understand how hard it is to transition. I can't tell anybody how to transition well or what makes you stop doing some of the things that you do. I think certain things I'll probably do for the rest of my life. Like being able to walk into a place and know where every exit door is. How many tables are in the room, how many people are in there, what kind of people are in there, what do they look like, how are they dressed? How are they acting? I can do that in seconds.*

*Even driving, I analyze everything. Going under underpasses, what's on the side of the road, is there some trash on the side of the road? Is there a car on the side of the road? What does that car look like? And I know that it's not necessary here and I'm working to calm that down, but it's a work in process. It's extremely hard to take the adrenaline down. Cause you're pumped up on adrenaline the whole time you're there. Bringing it down is hard.*

*When I first got back home it was hard to deal with a lot of things. I'd probably drink every day. No probably, I did. That was my coping. I was just kinda tryin' to forget about everything, but that doesn't make you forget about anything. So there's kinda no point, really, to be drunk all the time. You can't really do a whole lot when you're drunk. So, man, you can't live like that either. I would be the brokest person ever, drunk all the time!*

*But transitioning is hard. It's real hard. Some days I feel like it would be a lot easier just to go back. Instead of being here. But that's not really logical either. You can't do that for the rest of your life. I would kill myself probably in the first couple years. Not me killing myself, but the adrenaline. And the stress that comes with it. That'll kill you.*

*Going to the Vet Center definitely helps. Having a support system helps. Cause, we as veterans, or maybe it's just me but I've always done everything on my own, so it's extremely hard to have somebody to support me. Very hard to believe that.*

*But good. Very good.*