Staying Connected when a Loved One is Deployed

About

Consistent efforts to communicate with your friends and family who have been deployed can do wonders to raise their morale and strengthen them for the challenges that they face. In fact, some incredibly moving and courageous compositions have been written between soldiers and their friends and loved ones (if you are interested, do a Google search for the 1861 letter written by Sullivan Ballou to his wife Sarah during the American Civil War).

Tips

However, communicating with deployed military personnel can be complicated, especially during times of war, so a couple things you should consider are:

- The frequency is probably more important than the length of the communications.
- The military services will not provide you with contact information for your friends. Your friends’ parents and/or spouses should have the required information.
- While all service members will have email accounts, it is unlikely that electronic communications will be "instant." Due to variables such as mission activity and the availability of computers, a soldier's response may be delayed for a week or more. Technological advancements have led some to speculate that, similar to the old practice of waiting in long lines at a phone booth to call home, soldiers will now be standing in long lines waiting to use computers for e-mail.
- Snail-mail letters and cards are still one of the least expensive and most satisfactory ways to stay in touch with military personnel. Their advantage is that they can be reread during lonely moments or at times when other forms of communication are not available. Military postal systems will be set up near units, and estimates are that delivery times will average about ten days. Letters composed on a computer can be saved and collected in a book to be presented upon your friend's return.
- If you are sending a package, check out the United States Postal Service website for information about what can and cannot be shipped to various locations. Be creative with your packages. Send photos, silly toys, newly released CDs, and interesting home newspaper articles. Make sure any food items are not perishable. Because of the high cost of calling home, phone cards are an especially welcomed and valued gift to include in letters and packages. Be sure to research the rules and restrictions of phone cards before your purchase.
- Your friends and family may not be able to share much information about their location or mission. At the same time, they may talk passionately about their unit and their desire to serve their country. This enthusiasm is essential to their success and safety in combat, and it is important for you to recognize and honor this part of their experience.
- Even if you have feelings to the contrary (e.g., "The French are right; you shouldn't be there anyway"), it is important to keep your communications positive, upbeat, and supportive. Humorous stories about family and/or shared friends can transcend geographical distances and help service members feel close and connected to the important people in their lives.
- If you decide you would like to extend your good will efforts beyond your friend or family member, you can inquire if there is anyone in his or her unit who is not getting mail and request contact information for that person. The National Military Family Association can provide additional information about more general efforts to support our service men and women.

In closing, while it may seem premature at this point, you should begin to contemplate and prepare for your loved one’s return to the States. Friends and family of military service members frequently have fantasies of what the reunion will be like, often harboring a strong desire to return to "the way we were." However, the passage time and the experience of being deployed, not to mention the potentially life-altering impact of armed combat, can result in dramatic changes both within and between people. It is important to be willing to spend the time necessary to slowly reacquaint with one another and to reestablish the relationship on both old and new terms.

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