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Dad's away on his special day

Dealing with distance

Families stay tough amid fathers' Iraq deployments

By Joyce McCartney | The Journal Gazette

When Dylan Roby's dad left for Iraq, the 3-month-old boy could do little more than lie in

Help a soldier



a baby carrier or swing, and maybe occasionally coo.

Today, the 10-month-old can say "Da-Da" and can pull himself up on the furniture.

Dad is Spc. John Roby, separated from his wife of less than two years, Jenna, by nearly 7,000 miles while he serves in Iraq with the Indiana National Guard. Jenna cries at the most random moments over the most random things, and she says she can't fathom ever going through another deployment.

John Roby is one of approximately 680 members of the Fort Wayne-based 1st Battalion, 293rd Infantry deployed to Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom for nearly a year. In five years of war, this isn't the battalion's first deployment, but it is the first for John and Jenna.

Also experiencing her first deployment is Kelly Allcock. The 31-year-old mother of two girls – Victoria, 6 months, and Elisabeth, 16 months – knows this won't be her last deployment. Husband Andreas, 25, a non-commissioned officer with the 1-293rd, plans to make a career out of his Guard service.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the Cox family. Tracy Cox and sons Cody, Colten and Carson are experiencing the third deployment in five years of Command Sgt. Major Charlie

In addition to improved communication during this deployment of the 1st Battalion, 293rd Infantry, soldiers are in different conditions than the 2003 deployment. Previously, they were in the middle of the desert, building a camp. This time, they are based at a camp that is like a city complete with a PX as big as a big box store. That means their needs this time around are different. If you have a soldier deployed and wonder what to send in a care package, here are some suggestions:

- Eye drops
- Powdered drink mixes – especially individual servings
- Bar soap
- Toothpaste
- Individual serving snacks
- Phone cards

If you do not have a soldier deployed but would like to help, the military does not allow "any soldier" mailings. Packages must be sent to a specific soldier. There are a number of Web sites you can visit to find a soldier to send to. Try www.anysoldier.com or www.asoldierswishlist.org.

For more information on the 76th Brigade visit www.76bct.org.

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Messages to Dads

With their dads away, several families of the 1-

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Cox.

293rd wanted to acknowledge them on Father's Day. To see their messages, click on the slideshow attached to this story at www.journalgazette.net.

While the families' stories are different, one common thread runs through them: Dad is 7,000 miles away. A difficult situation every day, but magnified today, Father's Day.

"I have crying spells whenever I think about stuff," Kelly Allcock said. "It's Father's Day and we're going to be separated ... We're not doing significant things together and it hurts. But, I understand what he's doing and at the same time, I'm proud of him."

The deployment presents challenges for families; and for each family, the challenges are different but heartbreakingly similar.

Jenna and John Roby are young. She's 19. He's 23. They've had some rocky times already but Jenna can't wait to have her husband, Dylan's dad, home – even if it means he's just sitting around playing video games.

The couple married in August 2006. For a variety of reasons, they lived separately for a good deal of time until settling into a home in October 2007, months after Dylan's birth and months before John would leave for training before the deployment.

Jenna is experiencing plenty of firsts of her own. So is Dylan. And Daddy? Well, he's missing them all.

When Dylan sat up by himself for the first time, all the new mother could do was take photos – plenty of them – to show her husband. When he cut his first tooth, held his own bottle, began feeding himself, stood up, all those memories were shared with Daddy in photos.

Andreas and Kelly Allcock met when she moved to Fort Wayne for a job in 2005. They had a short courtship and married Oct. 28, 2006.

"We hit it off, and after we met we were inseparable," she said. "We had each been engaged before but we knew we had found our soulmates ... We got married and the babies started coming."

First came Elisabeth. Dad was around for some of his oldest daughter's infancy. He was there when she transitioned from baby food to what Kelly calls "regular people food." Andreas, however, missed Elisabeth's first steps.

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With baby Victoria, it's been a different story. Kelly was pregnant and due to deliver in mid-January, two weeks after the unit left for training in Fort Stewart, Ga. A sympathetic doctor agreed to induce labor at 37 weeks and Andreas Allcock was present for the Dec. 28, 2007, birth of his youngest daughter. But he had to leave for Georgia with the rest of the battalion on Jan. 2. A hospitalization of the newborn, for a respiratory virus, brought him home again on emergency leave.

When they were dating, Andreas warned his then-girlfriend of his love for and commitment to the Guard and asked her to think about whether she could handle it.

"We had a lot of conversations ... I knew what I was getting into," she said. "Having that decision to make, I chose being without him was going to be more painful than having him deployed."

In the Cox household, deployments are old hat – familiar as regular dental checkups even. Charlie Cox, the battalion's command sergeant major, going on 20 years of service, has done this before and so have Tracy, Cody, Colten and Carson. That doesn't mean it gets easier: Dad's still missing out, and they're still missing Dad.

First there's Cody, 15, who is totally into football. He just finished IU football camp and will be going to Notre Dame football camp this month. He's at that age when Dad's important. When it comes to talking about girls and football, Mom just won't do.

For youngest son Carson, 9, Dad's absence isn't unusual. In the last five years, Charlie Cox hasn't spent much time at home. First, there was the 2003 deployment to Iraq. Then, about a year after returning home, the battalion was deployed to Mississippi for Hurricane Katrina relief efforts. When he returned from that deployment, Cox was called to work out of the Guard's Indianapolis offices. So during the week he was in Indy and he spent weekends at home.

Carson handles it OK, his mom says, but he has his moments.

"He has these outbursts," Tracy Cox said. "He's usually a mild, gentle, funny kind of kid, and all of a sudden he has an outburst."

For each family, coping with the deployment is different and the military helps with some of that. There is a Web site that provides updates on the unit, military grants to allow children of deployed soldiers to participate in activities, and counseling services.

Jenna Roby's tears come easily when talking about her husband's absence. And she admits, almost embarrassed, that she cries at what she calls "the littlest things."

Trying to find something to keep herself occupied about a month ago, she sat down at the computer and began to play World of Warcraft – something she had watched John do, and occasionally she'd join in when he was home.

"The first time I started playing it made me cry," she said. "Some of the littlest things just make me bawl."

Another tear inducer: the cardboard heart he cut out of the box a frozen pizza came in.

To make sure Dylan knows his daddy when he returns, she has pictures of her husband all over their home. One in particular is situated so when they go to bed and wake up, Dylan can say good night and good morning.

And she's sending her husband as many pictures of Dylan's "firsts" as she can, she said.

From his end, John calls home when he can: about once every couple of weeks, Jenna Roby said.

Early last week, she and John were able to talk for more than two hours because dust storms in Iraq kept him from going out on a mission. John Roby was able to use a fellow soldier's room and Internet access to talk online with his wife.

She can't wait until the pictures and phone calls are replaced by the presence of John so her son will have his father in his life.

It's the experience of the more seasoned military wives that also helps Jenna cope. She calls a fellow wife every so often to have someone to talk to and she tries to take advantage of the Family Readiness Group the Guard offers. The FRG, as it's called, provides tactical and emotional support for families of deployed soldiers.

To Jenna, women like Tracy Cox and some others she knows deserve credit, but she can't imagine doing what Tracy Cox has done for as long as she's done it.

"There's no way," Jenna Roby said. "I give them all the credit in the world. I really do."

Kelly Allcock found the best way for her to cope was by moving home to her parents' home in a small town north of Dayton.

Being a fairly new resident to Fort Wayne, she said she doesn't have a lot of women friends to lean on and it's easier knowing Granny and Granddad are there to help.

"For me, it was hard being in that house," she said of her Fort Wayne home. "I loved being in ... our home (with its memories), but at the same time it was hard knowing that he's not going to be home until, hopefully, sometime later this year. It was bittersweet being in the house."

Like other military wives, she talks to her husband by telephone. During the initial stages of the deployment – training at Fort Stewart and when the battalion arrived in Kuwait – the calls were infrequent, but treasured.

"I was lucky if I got a phone call once every two weeks and they were really short saying 'I'm OK.' 'I love you.' 'I'll talk to you when I can,'" Kelly Allcock said.

But, since late April or early May, the couple have been able to talk more often: Once a week. And there's e-mail, Internet access and regular old snail mail to keep them up-to-date with each other.

"He's doing good keeping in touch with us," she said.

And when she sends a care package, it always contains updated pictures of Elisabeth and Victoria. Since he's missing some of their milestones, he at least has a record of them in pictures.

"I know it's not as good as him being here, but at least it's something," she said.

And she appreciates the efforts of the FRG and unit commanders, who keep the families updated on the battalion's activities.

The family group provides access to a Web site that has a schedule of events, meeting dates and messages from Sgt. Major Cox and Lt. Col. Gerald E. Hadley, the unit's commander. There are also often photos of the day: Random pictures of various soldiers doing various things.

"We get to see pictures and it may not be your husband, but at least you're seeing

some of the soldiers and knowing they're OK," she said. "It helps me because I know Andy is somewhere in that mix."

She's grateful for the communication, because she had heard rumors it wasn't that great during the last Iraq deployment.

Tracy Cox is a battalion adviser for Family Readiness and she's all too familiar with how communication was during the 2003 deployment.

"It's night and day," she said of contact now.

During the 2003 deployment, she was an FRG adviser at the company level and she would come home from teaching for Southwest Allen County Schools to messages from families starving for information.

She only heard from then-1st Sgt. Charlie Cox, her high school sweetheart, once every two weeks. And, at that time, she and her late mother-in-law would compete for who got to talk to him and for how long during the 20-minute calls.

Tracy Cox acknowledges the more frequent calls are easier because of her husband's position within the unit, but said that even the specialists and lower-ranking NCOs get to talk to their wives and have access to e-mail at the very least.

Despite the improved communication, there are still rough patches.

Before he left, Charlie Cox told his oldest son to be the man of the house – a mission the 15-year-old has taken seriously by trying to discipline his younger brothers, thereby causing conflict.

So Charlie and Tracy Cox are left raising teenagers while being half a world away from each other.

To help the boys cope, Tracy keeps them "horrendously busy." For Cody it's football camp. For middle son Colten, 14, a military grant for children of deployed soldiers has allowed him to go on a camping trip to Boundary Waters, Minn. He's her outdoors boy.

The grant is also what is allowing Cody to attend football camps at two universities.

"I wouldn't have been able to afford both," Tracy Cox said. "I wrote them the biggest thank you. This is what the kids of deployed soldiers do need to get their minds off

what's going on in their lives."

The unit's deployment marked six months on June 10. That means six months, just six months, until their dads will be home.

"We are exactly halfway done, now we're on the downside," she said. "It (was) like a silent little celebration."

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