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March 27, 2006

Armor & angels: Sustaining the mother of a soldier in wartime

Cindy Butler

Last night I cried. Gut-wrenching, grateful, soul-cleansing tears. The tears only a mother knows, the mother of an Army man. A cathartic release from a very desolate place in my heart, the chamber that contains every mother's worst fear: that of danger to her child, danger to *my* child.

But now, having served his country, my son was coming home! Returning safely from half a world away, at war.

Years earlier, my marriage to a soldier required leaving my beloved family and moving to Germany. It didn't take long after my arrival in that faraway country to discover I was pregnant. I had never felt so alone as during those six weeks my husband was sent out on maneuvers. It was during these weeks that I found out my son was on the way.

I never felt alone again. Through the grace of God, this baby was sent to me, and from that moment on, I've never known I could feel such love. Not only in the receiving of this gift, but in *giving* my love to the very gift himself, Paul Joshua. I carried him for nine months, brought him into the world, loved him, worried and prayed for him, and gave him wings.

As a teenager, Paul was fun-loving, yet calm; nothing much stirred him. But on Sept. 11, I saw him fully enter manhood. I saw a purpose of will, a passion. Paul would not stand idly by. He enlisted; my only child was going to war.

Proud? You bet. Terrified? Beyond words.

Paul became a "Devil in Baggy Pants" with the 82nd Airborne Division's 2nd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment. His first deployment was to Iraq for four months in early 2004. I had so *many* fears, and often told friends

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and family that I never took a normal breath until the day I heard Paul say on the phone, “I’m home, Mom,” meaning he was back on U.S. soil.

Now, with another deployment, this time to Afghanistan, I was emotionally stronger. I’ve had many people ask, “How do you do it?”

Me? My body was here in America, but my very heart was in Afghanistan.

I am the mother of a soldier in wartime ...

And when I hear, “How do you?” my answer is: supportive family, friends and, most certainly, my faith.

Another source of my strength came, surprisingly, from strangers — those with whom I shared Paul’s patriotism and valor. They unfailingly thanked me for raising such a man and asked me to thank him for his service to humanity. Those sentiments always sustained me, and I wished Paul could have heard them firsthand.

I also became immersed in the support of our military through *www.anysoldier.com*.

The people I came to know during my volunteer work for this band of patriots have touched my life in ways they will never know. All of these people were angels sent to carry me.

“War on terror” is what a mother wages in her own heart every day her child is at war.

In the early morning hours of June 13, I ran to answer the ringing phone, hoping it was Paul, and it was — but not with the regular news. The first thing he said was, “Mom, I’m going to be all right, but I was caught in an ambush.”

I immediately dropped into a chair, and to the best of my recollection this was what he told me: He was driving an Army truck in a convoy while out on a mission when insurgents opened fire on him and his buddies.

One of these rounds would have entered my son’s neck had it not been for his body armor. This vest was cumbersome, but it stood sentry between life or death for Paul. Paul’s vest had a removable, stand-up collar that deflected a round meant to kill him.

During my visit to his stateside base a month prior to his 2005 deployment, he had shown me this very vest and collar, and said he was concerned over the inability to move his head without restriction. My fiery, instantaneous, maternal edict was to tell him *never to remove it*. Prophetic words — I just didn’t know it then.

Life is so precious, fragile, tenuous. And no life is more precious to me than my son’s.

The writer is a former Army spouse who lives in Shaftsbury, Vt., works as a caretaker at a bed and breakfast and enjoys writing.

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