

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 8

MY CHILDHOOD 10

MOVING TO AMERICA 16

LOVE AND THE MILITARY 24

HOW OTHERS SEE YOU 32

BECOME YOUR OWN ADVOCATE 38

BE YOUR CHILD'S ADVOCATE 48

ORGANIZING YOUR HOME 54

ORGANIZING YOUR FINANCES 64

GET MOVING 74

CREATING A LIFE YOU LOVE 80

ABOUT THE AUTHOR 90

CHAPTER 3

LOVE AND THE MILITARY

My experience in the Army was life-changing for many reasons. My service helped shape me into the person who I have become today. It taught me just how strong and resilient I am as a person and as a woman. My service taught me that I am intelligent and that I have a unique set of skills that the world needs. But, one of the biggest reasons why the Army changed my life was introducing me to the man who I would spend the rest of my life with.

I met my husband on the first day of training. I had shipped out to Basic Training in Ft. Jackson, South Carolina on June 20th, 2000 and he came into my life on the 21st. I was sitting with four of my new friends in the cafeteria on base, talking about what training was going to be like and how we had traveled to get there. A handsome man walked up to our table with several of his friends and asked if he could sit with us. Eager to make new friends and find my place in my new environment, I accepted enthusiastically.

It's funny how much you can learn from someone by exchanging letters.

The handsome man, Shon, sat down to my left and we started to talk. We weren't allowed to fraternize with the opposite sex, so even though he was sitting to my left, I was still able to speak to him by looking at my friend across the table

from me. But, that didn't really matter, because our conversation connected us instantly. He had arrived the week before me, so he was able to fill me in on what to expect. He was kind and funny, and I found myself smiling the entire time as we talked.

When it was time for us to get up and leave, I knew I wanted to stay in touch with Shon. Having left all of my belongings behind before heading to training, I scrambled to find a piece of paper so we could exchange information. I grabbed the training manual I had been given and ripped out the back page. We exchanged addresses so we could continue our conversation. Since I didn't know where I was going to be, he actually wrote to my home address. Then, that letter was forwarded to me where I was doing my training.

It's funny how much you can learn from someone by exchanging letters. It gave us a chance to really get to know each other in spite of not being able to get together face-to-face. I would write to him and tell him how nervous I was about the next week's training. Having just completed the same training, he would help diffuse my fears, telling me what to expect and how to get through it. I was just so grateful to have found a friend who was there to support me through the difficult parts of Basic Training, someone who could give me pointers and help me excel at my new job in the Army. I was so excited for daily roll call. Back in those days mail and phone cards were more valuable than money. Everyone couldn't wait to open their letters and find out what was going on in the outside world. We shared pictures, laughs, tears and joy with the rest of the unit.

Shon and I were also able to spend time together by going to church services every Sunday. We'd listen to the sermon together, and afterward we would meet up and talk, even if it was just for a minute or two right after the sermon had finished. At church, we could feed our souls and renew our faith, and nurture our budding relationship at the same time.

It turned out that we had the same job in the Army, and we wound up

heading to Advanced Individual Training (AIT) at the same time at Ft. Lee in Virginia. At AIT, Shon and I had more time to get to know each other in person. We discovered that we had feelings for each other and we started dating. Shon and I dated for three months while we were at AIT. During those three months, we realized how deeply in love we were with each other, and we decided we wanted to spend the rest of our lives together. Then, we received our orders. Shon's orders were sending him to Ft. Sill in Oklahoma, and mine were sending me to Germany.

So, I did what any logical woman would do if she was about to be living on the opposite side of the world from the man she loved: I started to think about marriage.

I asked him, "What are we going to do?" He asked me what I thought about having a long distance relationship. I didn't love the idea—we'd only been dating for a few months, and I didn't know that our relationship would survive us being half a world away. So, I did what any logical woman would do if she was about to be living on the opposite side of the world from the man she loved: I started to think about marriage. Lucky for me, Shon was on the same page. We started to talk about the idea of getting married because we felt so strongly that we were right for each other. After that discussion, we knew that marriage was the right choice for us.

We went to our commander for approval to get married, and he would only approve our marriage if we went to the chaplain for counseling. The chaplain approved our marriage and we got married that November. The ceremony was over the Veteran's Day three-day weekend. My parents were able to come into town and we had a small, intimate ceremony with just 13 in attendance, including Shon and I. Afterward, my mother took us all to Old Country Buffet to celebrate with a big meal. I know some women dream of having huge, elaborate weddings, and I know that's perfect for them. But our close, private wedding

was absolutely amazing and I can't imagine having anything else. I wouldn't change it for the world. It was the perfect way to start out our lives together as a married couple.

We were broke, but our love and determination to keep our marriage together really kept us going. Dual military marriages are very difficult to maintain. Many people don't fight for their marriages and put in the hard work it takes to have a happy marriage when both spouses are in the military. But, we're one of the success stories because we've always made our marriage a priority. We don't take our relationship for granted. We had help from our church, and we always took what we learned from marriage counseling and conferences we attended through our church and we applied it to our lives. The success of our marriage is a testament to how hard we're willing to work for the love that we share.

Our marriage even persevered through deployment. First I was deployed to Iraq in 2003, then Shon was deployed to Bosnia shortly thereafter. We didn't see each other for almost a year. It was a really tough time for us, only being married for three years. We didn't have a direct line to call each other on, the internet connection was really poor, and we were working long hours. We missed each other's phone calls on a regular basis—one of us would call when the other had just gone on duty or had stepped away. I remembered getting up at 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning just to get on the company computer in the hopes that the internet connection was stable enough to check and send an email. Pictures would take forever to load, but they were always worth the wait.

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When we did get to talk, it was for just a few minutes at a time. It's difficult to tell your loved one everything you want to say in just five minutes, especially when you're risking your life in a country far away. But, we fell back to our old way of communicating: writing letters. We found a way to make it work.

Being deployed wasn't easy, but I learned so many important lessons. One of those lessons that has continued to be so important throughout the rest of my life was self-advocacy. I had learned to speak up for myself when I was a little girl surrounded by a big family. But, I hadn't yet learned how to speak up to authority figures. Luckily, that's a lesson I learned just in time.

My deployment to Iraq put me in a completely new environment. Living in the desert was harsh. It gets incredibly hot during the day and frigidly cold at night. In addition to our regular jobs with the unit, we had to do extra duty guarding the perimeter of the base we were on. I was in one of the many towers doing guard duty, which meant that I was out in the elements for 12 hours at a time. It wasn't a cushy desk job where I sat back in an air-conditioned building. As a guard, I experienced the full brunt of the weather around me.

The morning shifts in the sun weren't too bad. Yes, it got *incredibly* hot in the sun, especially when you were in uniform. My feet used to get incredibly warm. But, at the end of my shift I could head back to my tent, take my boots and socks off, and recover. The heat wasn't anything that I couldn't handle.

The night shifts, however, were another story. In Iraq, the air temperature plummets at night. I remember hearing soldiers on our walkie talkies begging for a cup of coffee to help them warm up. When you're on guard duty, you're out in that cold. You do your best to stay warm, but it doesn't always work.

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One particularly cold night, I just couldn't seem to get warm. As I sat on watch, I started to have less and less feeling in my hands and feet as I got colder and colder. My partner in the tower kept telling me that I should call the sergeant and let him know that my hands and feet were going numb. But, I didn't want the sergeant to think I was weak or to just have him tell me to suck it up.

I tried walking around in our tiny tower, but each step was painful. I tried curling my hands into a fist, but my hands were so cold they wouldn't move. I did everything I could to warm myself back up, but every movement sent a throbbing pain through my body. I remember asking for the time repeatedly to see if time was speeding up. Every time I asked, only 10 or 15 minutes had passed, but it felt like hours.

The medic told me that if I would have stayed out on duty for 20 more minutes, I would have had frostbite in my hands and feet.

After painful numbness in my hands and feet, I finally got the courage to speak up for what I (and my body) needed badly. I called the sergeant and told him that I couldn't feel my hands and feet and that they were painful, cold, and numb. He finally came and replaced me with someone else. It was so painful to walk that I needed help getting down the tower steps. That's when they decided to put me into the cabin of the truck with the heat blasting and take me to get medical attention. Thank goodness they didn't put me into the back of the truck in the open elements driving 30-40 miles per hour!

Once I got to the medic tent, the medic told me that if I would have stayed out on duty for 20 more minutes, I would have had frostbite in my hands and feet. He was able to take my gloves off and allow my hands to warm up. But, he told me that he couldn't take my boots off because my feet were so swollen. All he was able to do was loosen the laces on my boot to help ease the pain caused by the pressure of the boot against my foot.

After about three hours, he was finally able to take my boots off. He said he couldn't take my socks off, though, because if he did, the skin would peel off with my socks. My feet were gray, cold, swollen, and numb. It took me a full six hours in the medic tent to recover enough that I could head back to my unit and end my shift.

That experience taught me such a valuable life lesson. I could have lost fingers,

toes, or both if I had stayed out in the cold, ignoring what my body told me it needed. If I had spoken up earlier, I could have saved myself a lot of pain. Because I didn't want to disappoint my sergeant, I put myself and my body in danger.

But, I overcame my fear. I understood that my safety and health were important, and that my body was telling me it had enough. I needed to advocate for myself and for what my body was telling me—that I needed to get out of the cold because my extremities were painfully sore. I stood up and let the people around me know that something wasn't right and that I needed help.

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To this day, it's painful to relive the memories of that experience. It's forever ingrained in my brain. I'm terrified of getting stuck somewhere cold without heat, like being stuck on the side of the road in the winter with a car that won't turn on. I'm always planning ways to get out of the cold so I can warm up if I need to. But all of this fear and anxiety I experience could have been prevented if I had just spoken up earlier and let people know what I and my body needed.

TAKE ACTION!

What do you need, physically and emotionally? Are you ignoring those needs because you're afraid you might disappoint or inconvenience someone?

Brainstorm ways that you can advocate for yourself if your needs aren't being met. How can you speak up and ask for what you need?

Take a look at the relationships in your life. Are you putting in the work that's needed to support those relationships and help them grow? Do you need to ask for help getting any relationships back on track?
