



By Joe Byerly

After recently reading Michelle Zook's [article](#) in Task and Purpose on the effect of war on families, I spent a few days reflecting on my own experiences. As a young captain, I saw firsthand the effects of war on marriage. After multiple deployments, intense training cycles, and an uncertain outlook on the future, divorce became more common among both the officer and NCO ranks in the units in which I served. During one assignment, I witnessed the rapid and painful dissolution of several Iron Majors' families.

I know that every relationship is different and multiple factors are at play when two adults decide to split, but the impact of military service on this union cannot be ignored. Marriage in the military can be tough at times and the polarity between work and family life can make it easy for those of us in uniform to lose sight of what really matters. The military gives us tangible feedback on our performance; we get awards, promotions, recognition, and evaluation reports. Family life is much different. We don't get Father of the Year trophies, marriage OERs, or challenge coins from our in-laws. As a result, sometimes climbing the professional pyramid seems more appealing than nurturing the homestead.

I'm not writing this post as someone with all the answers. I have felt and struggled with the tension between uniform and family multiple times throughout my career. Thankfully, my wife and I sat down a few years ago and agreed upon some family principles that guide

every professional decision I make. As I enter another season of my life where this tension will once again increase, I wanted to share some of these principles with the hopes of reaching young officers and NCOs who are just beginning their military journey.

*The guidon will have multiple commanders; my family will only have one husband/father.* I think it is a natural tendency for leaders to think that the military will fall apart if we leave the Service. Obviously, this is not the case. Every position I have served in has had a string of leaders come before me and a string of leaders come after me. Once I realized this, I made it a point to never sacrifice my family for the sake of getting ahead in my career. Even while commanding two companies, I strived to eat dinner with my family, attend key school functions, and honor family commitments.

*Every career decision is a family decision.* As hard as putting family first is at times, I've never regretted making a family decision on a career move. My wife and I discuss everything from the quality of local schools to the impact of a move on her career. We personally don't see any good coming from a career move that isn't compatible with our family.

*Be intentional at work and at home.* Many of us are very intentional when it comes to planning training exercises or unit functions, but we leave everything that happens at home up to chance. To overcome uncertainty at home, my wife and I plan date nights, we take advantage of our temporary location with family day trips, and we avoid becoming complacent by taking vacations. If we didn't do these things, I think that by the end of the duty week I would be perfectly happy sitting on the couch all weekend recovering and not creating family experiences. At times, we've even gone as far as planning for personal alone time so that we were each able to disengage from our responsibilities and recharge.

*There will always be a mountain on the other side of the mountain.* Time and time again, I've heard leaders say "You're only going to be in the position for a short period of time...so

make it count!” This mantra is often translated into, “Row really hard, work late nights, and get an ACOM at the end of your tour.” While I’m not saying don’t work hard, it has been my experience that every professional sprint was followed by another sprint. I have seen many officers either burn themselves and/or their families out because they continued to climb professional mountain after mountain without taking a break. A mentor with thirty-four years experience in the military once told me, that the military is a marathon — if you run too fast for too long, you won’t make the finish line. I have also heard many people lament at the end of their careers that they wish they would have paced themselves, because their families and personal lives suffered. As a result, I have tried to pace myself in every assignment and turn down those follow-on assignments that wouldn’t allow me the mental white space for reflection and family time after particularly grueling tours of duty.

*The uniform is removable.* This final point is very important to me. While I love the U.S. Army, and I’m extremely passionate about the military profession, it doesn’t define me. The uniform is removable. I do not have to sacrifice my well-being or my family for continued service. I can walk away at any time. This final principle helps me be a better officer (because I’m not merely career-oriented), and it helps me be a better husband and father.

Managing the tension between our families and the military can be tough at times, but I believe that if we sit down early-on in our careers and develop principles with our families, we will be in a position to better manage that tension. It’s very easy for us to lose sight of what is important in our lives and chase the next evaluation report, assignment, or rank. Overtime, this can have a negative impact on our well-being and our marriages. Never sacrifice your family on the altar of your career.

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