



By Maggie Kurtts

455 days deployed in Iraq. Single parenting for months while my spouse was deployed. 8 weeks of Beast Barracks wondering why I signed-up for this while all my friends spent their summers partying.

My military experiences were not very difficult nor really all that unique. We all went through a basic training, attended a few hard schools, went on really long deployments, and then I even got to experience deployment again as a spouse. There were always times when the stress seemed like it would never end. I often thought I would never get through it. The

time to the end seemed overwhelmingly big and far away.

*A big world is a terrifying world.*

COVID makes my world big again. Fear, uncertainty, and non-stop changes to my daily routine threaten to unseat me each day. Taking a walk, getting groceries, or chatting with a neighbor from a distance, now bring about thoughts of fear or even shame. School, work, fitness – every part of daily life has moved online. My world feels like it is moving further away from everything I knew and the people I depended on when times got tough.

*“Make it to chow.”*

That is what I used to say to myself during Beast Barracks or at a really hard school. I knew that the cadre had to feed me. If I could just make it to chow, then I wouldn't quit. During deployment, hot chow was something to look forward to during the endless days. Midnight chow is still the greatest meal of all time. When life was busy with my spouse deployed, meals became a time to for my family put down our hectic day — catch our breath — and listen to each other.

*Meals kept my world small when it felt too big.*

The world is getting pretty big again. Any illusion of planning for future events seems futile. Those things we use to mark our days such as school, work, sports, and parties are all gone. The support I didn't know I needed from parents, teachers, and coworkers has evaporated. I cannot even travel to see my family or dearest of friends.

*If we can make it to chow, we will be alright.*

Each day, my family needs to eat. My kids are probably not going to always like what we

cook. We will certainly spill some milk. But multiple times a day, we now get the chance to sit, stop, and listen over a shared meal. In these few minutes together, we share our joy and our fears. And the world gets a little bit smaller.

***With meals, we can use love to close the gap between social distance and fear.***

I have no idea when this will end. But that is okay because today, I will just focus on making it to chow.

*Maggie graduated from the United States Military Academy in 2004 and served in Iraq and Afghanistan as an aviation officer. She has a PhD in nuclear engineering and is a military spouse. Today, Maggie continues to serve as a parent, a writer on Veteran issues, and a researcher.*

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