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Keeping the home fires burning

by Judy Gross



Staff Sgt. Clinton Bitzer and his wife, Cinnamon, with four of their children at a deployment ceremony at the National Guard Armory in Tallahassee, Fla., last January (Photos by Judy Gross)

They wait. Wives and husbands, children, siblings, parents. They wait, hoping, praying, the knock on the door never comes -- the knock that means their loved ones are coming home for the final time in a flag-draped casket. So many families have seen the men and women they love go off to war over and over, in the longest wars the United States has ever fought.

Iraq and Afghanistan: nine years and counting of seemingly endless and brutal wars. Stories of casualties in faraway countries are broadcast almost daily in the media. Unless one hits close to home, news of the war dead or wounded is digested with other routine news of the day. Less frequently featured are the families of the deployed. Many quietly endure, making the best of a difficult and painful situation without their family member. The military has recognized that supporting families of the deployed is essential in keeping troops focused on their mission.

So has the church.

The length of the conflicts has given rise to a number of organizations that undergird military families with spiritual, practical and emotional support. Most are seldom in the spotlight, their good works known only to members and grateful families. Many of these organizations are Catholic-sponsored, or have Catholic members. Catholic organizations have a long history of supporting members of the military in various ways. Opinions of whether the conflict falls under the just-war social teachings are put aside as they strive to serve those in battle and those left behind.

Judy Gross also wrote a story on military chaplains for our Sept. 3 issue: Spiritual leaders in the battle zones

The Military Council of Catholic Women Worldwide operates chapels on military bases for spouses of those serving, either in this country or overseas. The council is sponsored by the U.S. Army Chief of Chaplains within the Department of the Army, but serves all branches of active duty military: Army, Navy, Coast Guard, Marines and Air Force. It began on Army posts in Germany, found its way to the United States in the 1970s and united in 2006 as a worldwide organization serving U.S. military personnel.

The council's mission is primarily to be "the visible presence of Christ to the military," through fostering and nourishing women in spirituality, leadership and service to those serving and their families. The council also helps women transition as they move from base to base, through their program Seeds Scattered and Sown. "We take their information (new location, family information, specific needs requests, arrival and departure dates, and the like) and we forward the information to their gaining post or base. This way we ensure that someone is waiting for them when they arrive," Lisa Miklos, past president of the council, told *NCR*.

Miklos, now residing at Fort Hamilton, N.Y., has been a military wife since 1978 and says, "I have found a home within MCCW in each of our duty stations. My family has been and remains active in our chapel community." Her husband, currently stationed in Iraq, has made the Army a career. He began as an enlisted private and worked his way up to colonel, so she understands firsthand the concerns of military wives. The Miklos family has moved at least 20 times in the 32 years her husband has been in the Army.

As the numbers of those engaged in the wars have expanded, more than half of all of the currently deployed troops are married, presenting quality-of-life issues the military has had to face head-on. A goal of the military machine in this country is to recruit and retain as many personnel as possible. As a result, more programs and help have evolved to support families during deployment, as a way of keeping warriors focused and in the military.

The National Military Family Association was formed in 1969 by a handful of military wives who wanted to make sure their widowed friends had what they needed. Small but effective, in two years they lobbied and succeeded in having the Survivor Benefit Plan become law. Now the association offers programs to children and spouses with resources and information.

A 2009 study commissioned by the group revealed children are profoundly affected by a parent's deployment. The Rand Corporation study showed older youths are especially prone to behavioral and emotional difficulties, symptoms of anxiety and problems in school. The conclusion was that children of mentally healthy caregivers are "better able to cope with the deployment experience," as are children living on base before and during deployment.

Each branch of the service has some type of Family Readiness Group to help keep families intact, though far apart. Mother of five Cinnamon Bitzer is a volunteer Family Readiness Group coordinator for the

National Guard in Tallahassee, Fla. Her husband, Staff Sgt. Clinton Bitzer, deployed with C Troop to Iraq, is career military. Because National Guard units are not typically situated near military bases, families don't have access to the services those bases usually provide. The Family Readiness Group coordinator steps in to find resources for those needing help, from financial services to emotional support, even practical help like finding a handyman or child care. Cinnamon Bitzer works to keep those at home connected to other military families with Friday night gatherings, or special events for children to give moms and dads a break from being single parents.

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Bitzer is a conduit between what the community offers and what families need. Her involvement resulted in a local community college offering free classes for military spouses and children, and local businesses sponsoring special events.



Care for the Troops is an ecumenical program located in and around

Atlanta. Currently seven Catholic and five Episcopal parishes are participating. Each congregation figures out the individual commitment to the program and how they will serve the families involved. The goal is to help parishes to become "veteran-friendly congregations," meaning parishioners are aware not only of the needs of the immediate families, but also the extended family members who have loved ones serving in war zones.

The Atlanta archdiocese has endorsed the organization's efforts to support families of the deployed and returning veterans, and Catholic Charities CEO Joe Krygiel is a Care for the Troops board member. Executive director Peter McCall says the newly organized group is focusing on churches in Georgia "to figure out our model," before expanding into other states. Part of the group's mission is to recruit volunteer mental health therapists willing to work with immediate and extended families to improve their capability to work within a military culture. Programs also include families of civilian contractors who experience the same stresses.

Although they have been around for more than a hundred years, the Catholic Daughters of the Americas and its 95,000 members are the "church's best kept secret," according to executive director Peggy O'Brien. The oldest lay Catholic women's organization in the United States, Catholic Daughters have been involved with serving military families as part of their Circle of Love programs. During the Second World War, Catholic Daughters volunteered in the war effort as nurses, doing clerical work and at USO canteens. Currently members volunteer with the USO at major airports, welcoming incoming soldiers, sending cards and care packages overseas, and helping families of the deployed within their parishes.

The importance of what these organizations do to help waiting families cannot be over-emphasized. As Miklos says, "I have served the women from the position of waiting spouse and temporarily single mother. In this I share the experience with many of my sisters in Christ."

For the 2010 Catechetical Sunday in September, Archbishop Timothy Broglio of the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services wrote a paper, "Married Couples and the Challenge of Extended Tours, Financial Pressures and the Reentry into the Family After Military Service."

"The active-duty chaplains who serve our men and women in uniform and those who minister in the hospitals of the Veterans Health Administration will confirm that one of the most serious byproducts of the wars in the Middle East are the burdens placed on families," wrote Broglio.

Visiting Iraq during Holy Week, he said, he experienced the patriotism of those deployed there, "but the weight of the separation from loved ones and the uncertainty of the future cannot fail to increase their burden." He reported that the situation in Afghanistan is worse, "yet back home, life must go on."

[Judy Gross is a freelance writer from Tallahassee, Fla.]

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