They Also Serve:

A Thank You To Aggie Military Families

By Rebecca Noah Poynter ’85

For six years the United States military has been at war. Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan began in October of 2001. Then in March of 2003, Operation Iraqi Freedom substantially escalated our military involvement. Most military families have now experienced the “new normal” of deployment, as husband or wife, son or daughter, brother or sister, father or mother, are sent to the Middle East. Second and third deployments are now routine. While the deployed family member must focus on his tactical mission, the family must focus on their mission; everyday life. Parents, friends and extended family provide encouragement and support. In a recent speech at Texas A&M University, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates recognized our military families with these words: “We should not forget the contributions and sacrifices of the families of those who serve.”

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Deployed Aggies do not leave home without the maroon and white flag. The Association’s Support Our Troops pages at AggieNetwork.com/TroopSupport show photographs of flags proudly displayed by Aggies in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the posted messages, there are the faces of Army officers, former Corps of Cadets members and Aggies who have “found” each other on remote bases. Some of the photos are not so predictable: a husband and wife stand together in combat gear; a father and son smile, deployed to the same location. Some of the photos are not so predictable: a husband and wife stand together in combat gear; a father and son smile, deployed to the same location. For all deployed Aggies, it is “good bull” to post your photo and message.

From the hundreds of Aggies who have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, these are just a few stories from the home front to tell how important the Aggie connection and a heartfelt “thank you” in words or in kindness can be to the lives of military families.

**MILITARY FAMILY**

“Aggies have the closeness of their network and an appreciation for the military,” recognizes Lynn, wife of Maj. John Heye ’89, USMC Reserve. “While living in Virginia, when Aggies noticed my Texas A&M license plate and the Marines sticker on our van and put two and two together, they’d approach me to say thank you.”

Lynn recalls, “One time in Target, my son was in an Aggie T-shirt, and an older couple noticed him and introduced themselves as Aggies. As we talked, they found out John was deployed and thanked me for all the sacrifices. They were acknowledging that it was hard for me and there were tears in theirs eyes and in mine.” Lynn has managed everyday life through two deployments.

In 2005, John returned from his first deployment to a reserve facility in Houston. At 1 a.m., John, as company commander, called his 200 Marines in formation to attention, then released them to their families. “As I looked at the families, I was in awe thinking that John had been responsible for those men,” Lynn remembers. John was thrilled to see his son, Jacob, who had been born during his deployment.

During his second deployment, John was the intelligence officer for a Marine infantry battalion that saw heavy fighting in Fallujah. He returned with his unit first to California. Two weeks later he would make the rest of the way home by himself. This time, coming home from deployment would be much more personal.

On April 28, 2007, he passed through DFW Airport on his way home to Virginia. He found, to his surprise, about 20 long-time friends waiting for him. A welcome party had been arranged by his father’s Texas A&M roommate, John Lister ’60, and his wife, Diane. There to greet John on his layover were friends from his childhood home of Richardson, two Corps buddies, Richard Breese ’89 and Jeff Mentzer ’89 and friend, Jim Sackett ’90.

The next stop was home. As the American Airlines plane taxied to the gate, the pilot announced that John was returning from Iraq and asked the passengers to wait and let him be first off the plane. As Marine Maj. John Heye walked off the plane, the seated passengers began to applaud.

“At I reached the concourse,” he said, “I had thought so long and so
hard about coming home that I just started running.” Waiting at the end were about 30 people: family, friends and neighbors. Children from his son’s preschool class, women from Lynn’s moms’ club and men from the local American Legion chapter stood in the background. As John approached, his 5-year-old son, Grant, stepped out and saluted his father, and John returned the salute. His wife, Lynn, and three sons greeted him first. Then his parents, Joan and Bill Heye ’60 and his brothers, Bill Heye ’84 and Pat Heye ’85, embraced him. “When I saw John I was so proud ... and so thankful,” Pat said.

As John, Lynn, Hunter, Grant, and Jacob walked into the baggage claim area, John got another surprise. As Lynn says, “Because politically things have changed between the first deployment and this one, you just don’t know what the reaction might be.” What happened next astounded them.

Every single person in the baggage claim area stood and clapped. For John, the whole day was better than he ever imagined.

**MILITARY CHILD**

The father of freshman Jennifer Wheeler ’11 is “downrange” in Afghanistan, where he works for the Corps of Engineers to replace water systems that supply American military installations. “The only way I have been able to talk to him is by e-mail and I write once a week,” Jennifer explains. She says, “It is not the first time he has been away from us.” Last year when she graduated from high school, he could not be there.

She heard about Texas A&M University from an enthusiastic friend while her military family was stationed in Germany. Last April on Parents Weekend, her family visited the campus and while buying Aggie T-shirts, met Mike Caudle ’69. “My dad let it slip that I played the flute, and then Mike suggested we go see the review at Kyle Field happening that afternoon. As we watched the band playing, even my dad, a West Point grad, was impressed.” For the Wheeler family, Jennifer’s college choice was made.

Back in Germany, those new Aggie T-shirts got lots of attention. “It was fun to have people come up to us to talk about Texas A&M,” says Jennifer. She and Mike kept in touch by e-mail and he answered her family’s questions about Texas A&M University.

This fall Jennifer entered Texas A&M University on an ROTC scholarship and became a member of the Texas Aggie band. She laughs when she says, “After living in Europe, sometimes College Station can be a little dull because, of course, you can’t just go to France for the weekend.” With her family still in Germany, she appreciates when her fish buddies include her on weekend outings when their parents visit.

The chance encounter with friendly Mike Caudle has turned into a special relationship. Mike is a retired Army lieutenant colonel and serves as a Corps of Cadets training officer. He says, >>
“Having been in the military, we understand what separations can do and we were happy to take Jennifer under our wing.” Mike and his wife, Pat, have “adopted” Jennifer. “After all,” Mike adds, “I sort of got her into this.” She spent Thanksgiving in College Station at the home of the Caudle family.

Mike says, “As an Aggie military family, looking after Jennifer is a privilege more than anything else.” Meanwhile, Jennifer is finding out just how much pride, camaraderie and support come with those Aggie T-shirts.

**MILITARY SPOUSE**

Shelly Worthington Grimes ’85 always makes it a point to smile and acknowledge soldiers and veterans with a “Thank you for your service.” Shelly’s appreciation comes from her 19 years as a military spouse and a lifetime understanding of the sacrifices military families make.

Her active-duty military family lives in Killeen. Shelly no longer counts the number of places they have been assigned. Instead she keeps a photo of each home, some laughably out-of-style government quarters but others, like their historic house at Schofield Barracks in Hawaii, charming. She laughs as she recalls, “Over the years our military friends have been able to locate us on every post by our Aggie flag flying at the front door.”

Last year, while she tackled being a first-year teacher, her husband, Army Lt. Col. Bill Grimes ’85 prepared for deployment to Iraq as commander of a medical battalion. In her new fifth-grade class of 21, almost every student had a mother or father in Iraq. In his assignment, 14 units were under his command. While he was deployed, it was his regular movement around Iraq by helicopter and convoy that worried her the most. She credits her class at Saegert Elementary with keeping her going during a challenging year for all of them.

Bill completed his yearlong deployment, making it home in time for Shelly’s dad’s funeral. At the service, her favorite aunt thanked her with a big hug and a sincere, “Thank you for your service.” For Shelly, that gesture and those words momentarily absorbed the stress of the past year. Her father, retired Army Lt. Col. Gerald Worthington, was buried with full military honors at Fort Sam Houston.

Shelly says, “It’s good to have Bill home and be a family.” This fall, they visited College Station for a football game weekend with their teenage daughters, Katie and Sydney. The camaraderie with longtime Aggie friends (Corps buddies for him and Kappa sorority sisters for her) made life feel normal again.

**SMALL SQUARE:** Maj. John Heye ’89 greets his sons, Jacob (left) and Grant, after returning from his second tour of duty in Iraq.

**ABOVE:** Jennifer Wheeler ’11 and her “sponsor,” Mike Caudle ’69. Caudle encouraged Wheeler to attend Texas A&M, answered her family’s questions about the school, and even took the freshman in for Thanksgiving in College Station. “As an Aggie military family, looking after Jennifer is a privilege more than anything else,” Caudle says.

Rebecca Noah Poynter ’85 is an Army spouse and writer. Her essays on military families have been published in *The Washington Post* and *The Military Times*.