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Deployment

Celebrating special occasions during deployment

posted on January 03, 2008 14:09
 By Pamela M. McBride

No military family gets excited about deployment; instead, we kick it into high gear with planning for such things as financial and legal readiness, child-care arrangements and emotional stability. What often gets overlooked, however, is a plan for celebrating special occasions.

Don't wait for your loved one to ship out in order to shape up ideas for staying connected. Army Maj. Gen. Rick Lynch, commanding general of Fort Stewart's 3rd Infantry Division, has repeatedly said to his soldiers and families, "It's all about making memories. You have to create special moments to cherish while you are away."

So what are you waiting for? Grab the kids, and brainstorm a list of all the special occasions that will occur over a year's time. Identify major and minor holidays, as well as every memorable event you can think of, such as birthdays, anniversaries, first and last days of school, your first family vacation, etc. Your goal is to find as many reasons as possible to jointly commemorate, despite the distance between you.

If you can identify at least one item each month, you automatically have created a way to be connected and have divided up 365 days into 12 months that might seem to go by a little more quickly. Furthermore, in the case of an unexpected extension on the deployment, there already will be something in place to help manage that time, too.

Once the occasions have been set, begin collecting things that can be shipped to the service member to help mark these special occasions. Inexpensive, colorful items make the best decorations and mementos. Think red, pink and white for Valentine's Day, red and green for Christmas. Anything red, white and blue works for Independence Day and Memorial Day. Send streamers, balloons and noise makers for New Year's Eve and teddy bears with cubs for Mother's Day and Father's Day. And, don't underestimate the power of videos, books, journals, letters and photos, especially those that are from or refer to previous holidays when you were together.

Likewise, the deploying service member can schedule online greeting cards, purchase greeting cards, order flowers and pick out gifts for their loved ones far in advance and make the arrangements to ensure delivery. They also can leave taped messages or record themselves reading books their children will love to hear at bedtime and audio letters for significant others.

"The preparation eliminates the stress of continuously trying to beat the clock when the occasions are nearing," said Chaplain Mack Griffith, the program manager for the Army Reserve's Strong Bonds program, which provides marriage and single Soldier retreats. "Preparing the care packages on a regular basis provides quality family time. The whole project creates a wonderful sense of anticipation and excitement for the family and for the service member."

Maintaining traditions at home

If your service member is already deployed, don't worry; it's not too late to start celebrating special occasions.

"It could even infuse new energy and joy into the family while they are 'surviving deployment,'" said Rachel Robertson, Marine wife and author of *Deployment Journal for Kids*. "It is really good for children, and spouses, to enjoy their time during the deployment and not just get through it."

Griffith also suggests that the home parent maintain traditions.

"If a certain movie or book is shared by the family during holidays, for example, continuing that tradition will provide extra security for the children," he said.

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"And, while children need the adults in their lives to honor celebrations just as exuberantly as they would have with the deployed parent home, be aware that the at-home parent may also feel an intense sense of loneliness," Robertson said.

Keepsakes that remind your loved ones of special events can help stave off the loneliness. Also, at-home parents must prioritize time to care for themselves and not be isolated from friends and family. Ask for help or support if needed.

Tenessa Gemelke's book "Stay Close: 40 Clever Ways to Connect with Kids When You're Apart," acknowledges that living apart presents a number of unique challenges, but it also can demonstrate how we all have the capacity to give loved ones a valuable gift: ourselves!

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