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Sgt. Shala Gatson, who is stationed in Germany, sent her sons, Cori (left) and Dashon, to stay with her ex-husband, Elton, in Louisiana



Ethan Hill for Newsweek

Home Alone

Single parents in the armed forces face some special problems as they ship out for the Gulf

By Adam Piore
NEWSWEEK

March 17 issue — Master Sgt. Sue Harper stands in her kitchen clutching a drawer so tightly her knuckles turn white. Oblivious to the dinner chatter in her dining room, the rail-thin blonde with the ponytail and glasses presses a telephone to her ear. “Master Sergeant Harper, sir. I was told to check in every couple hours,” she says.

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AFTER A MOMENT, she hears what she was hoping for. “Well, good! Thank you, sir.” Harper hangs up, relieved. There will be no deployment to Turkey tonight. Instead, she can sleep at home in the same bed with her 12-year-old daughter, Maria, on the Kaiserslautern military base in Germany. From her smile, you’d think she won the lottery. But this simple reprieve is better than money. Harper is a single mom, and living alone with Maria has forged an unusually strong bond between mother and daughter. Saying goodbye is never easy; saying goodbye as she heads off to war is almost more than Harper can bear. “Every parent feels they are the only person who understands their kid and can do things for them,” says Harper, 39, a public-affairs officer with the 21st Theater Support Command, a logistics unit. “I worry that other people just won’t get her like I do.” Then she asks the question that haunts her most: “What if I don’t come back?”

These are lonely times for parents like Harper. Those familiar media images of husbands and wives bidding each other tearful farewells on docks and airfields tell only part of the story. According to the Pentagon, the number of single moms and dads in the military has nearly doubled since the last gulf war from 47,685 in 1992 to almost 90,000 today. Despite the dramatic increase, however, the Pentagon has no special programs in place for them. Military officials aren’t even sure why the numbers are up. “That’s not something we could speculate on,” says Lt. Col. Cynthia Colin, a Pentagon spokeswoman. “We recruit people, and the people in the military reflect society.”

While there are no hard data to explain the jump, it’s clear that jobs in today’s much smaller forces are more demanding than in the past. Between 1992 and 2002, the military shrank from about 1.8 million to 1.4 million active-service members; those who remain have seen their burdens increase. “Certainly, frequent deployments and long separations are challenging for marriages,” says Shelley MacDermid, a professor and co-director of the Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University. “One hypothesis is that as the tempo has gone up, it’s been harder to stay married.”

Raising a child in the military—moving from base to base, surviving on a paltry government salary—has never been easy. But life as a single military parent these days poses special challenges. The prospect of war brings agonizing choices: How to explain to your child the need to leave? How much to reveal about the danger ahead? Perhaps most difficult of all: What to do with your kids while you're gone?

For Sgt. Shala Gatson, 24, also stationed in Germany, the solution lay about 5,000 miles away. In January, Gatson delivered her two young sons, Cori, 7, and Dashon, 5, to her ex-husband (and Dashon's father), Elton, in Alexandria, La. Because the Army doesn't pay the cost of flying children back to the United States, Gatson, a supply specialist also with the 21st who makes roughly \$2,000 a month, had to borrow from friends to come up with the \$800 airfare. During the all-too-brief time with his mother in Louisiana, Dashon one day nonchalantly asked, "Mama, are you going to die?" "No," she told him. "I'm going to do my best to come back. Mommy has to go and protect the other people from the bad guys. Mommy is going to go work on computers." After she left, the boys struggled to adjust. They were happy to be spending time with Elton, but their mother was ever in their thoughts. "My mama is fighting a war," Cori told his teacher one day, "and after the war we're all going back to Germany."



Today show

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Marines leave Camp LeJeune

March 5, 2003 — Marines are saying goodbye to their families, and shipping out from Camp LeJeune. NBC's Ashleigh Banfield reports.

Harper chose to bring a friend from Arkansas to Germany to care for Maria. Theresa Snuffer, or "Ms. Theresa," is a silver-haired former stay-at-home mom whose husband served five tours in Vietnam. She understands the needs of children like Maria. "I don't think a kid should be uprooted," says Snuffer, who arrived in Europe last month. "It's OK for summer vacation. But during the school year, they should be around their own things." In addition to a tight-knit group of military neighbors to help Snuffer look after Maria, there is a school staff experienced in handling deployments. In recent weeks counselors at Kaiserslautern Middle School have been gathering the names of students whose parents are deploying. They will be watching for several telltale signs. "Some children start acting out," says counselor Harriet Scofield. "We often see grades falling, uncompleted homework. Other children will start having problems with peers, picking arguments."

Ironically, the increase in the number of single parents in the military may be in part the result of recent Pentagon successes. In 1989, Congress created a new network of mostly five-day-a-week child-care centers for parents in the military, and offered subsidies based on family income. The moves made the military a more viable career option for all parents, singles and couples alike. Still,

there are gaps. Child care is usually available only weekdays from 9 to 5 and soldiers are fined if they are late picking up their kids. More broadly, no consideration is given to the special needs of single parents. “We have a lot of different people in different situations,” says the Pentagon’s Colin. Providing more assistance for single parents being sent to the Gulf is “really not feasible,” Colin says. “It would just be way too much work. Each situation is different, depending on where you are stationed and what your situation is. Some people might live near a grandparent. Others may live in another country.”

While they were still together in Germany, Sue and Maria made the best of it. Maintaining the ordinariness of life, the little daily rituals, seemed to bring the most comfort. There were dinners at their favorite restaurant, Alt Landstuhl, where waitresses still wear traditional German costumes, and where Maria and her mother like to order “the grossest things” on the menu. “That’s how I fell in love with snails,” says Maria. In those precious final days, special events took on new meaning. In an auditorium festooned with balloons, men and women in camouflage sat among students for an awards ceremony that was likely to be the last school event many of the parents would attend for a long time. Maria was called to the stage three times: for good citizenship, for making the honor roll and, most important, for winning the school competition in the National Geographic Geography Bee. She received a medal on a ribbon and placed it squarely over her mother’s shoulders. Sue won’t be able to attend the regional finals, to be held this month. But for a little while, at least, things were as they should be. Mother and daughter shared a moment of celebration together, and Iraq and the looming thunder of war seemed far, far away.

Gatson and Harper finally shipped out to Turkey the last week of February. It was easier for Gatson—by the time she left, she could barely stand the sight of her sons’ rooms. “The house is so empty,” she said. “Nobody fussing, nobody coming in and saying, ‘How you doing?’ ” Harper found it difficult. Every morning before school, she said a tearful goodbye, never knowing if she would be there when Maria came home. Finally early one morning a little past 4 a.m., Harper kissed her sleepy daughter and slipped away.

With Arian Campo-Flores

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