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Sacrifices of War

With mom at war, dad tough out home duty

Whitehall graduate deployed 18 months ago, and family tries to cope with separation

By Kathleen Parrish
Of The Morning Call

ANDERSON, S.C. | Army Sgt. 1st Class Ben Fryar crawled through jungles, was stabbed in the leg and ran countless missions he refuses to discuss during his years as a Marine sniper.

But none of that prepared him for what he does now.

"I'm on dad duty," said Fryar, 38, an Army recruiter who lives in Anderson, S.C., with his children, ages 7 and 5. "It's exhausting."

His wife, Kimberly Stettler Fryar, is a 1994 graduate of Whitehall High School, where she was a standout athlete.

She joined the Army Reserve after high school and is a member of one of the military's two chemical and biological detection units. She was deployed one month after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and has been in Kuwait since August.

She holds a highly specialized job, sampling the air for biological agents. The tests are performed at night when there's less heat and humidity, but her mind often wanders to her children, whom she hasn't seen in almost nine months.

"I miss them so much," said Kim Fryar, 26, during a telephone interview from her tent in the Kuwait desert. "It drives me crazy."

An Army recruiter who spent 10 years in the Marines, Ben Fryar begged military officials to send him instead of his wife to war, but they needed a scientist, not a soldier.

It used to be men went to war and women held down the fort at home. Now more women are enlisting, and the 212,000 women on active duty represent 15 percent of the force, compared to 11 percent in the Gulf War, said Lory

Manning, a retired Navy captain who directs the Women in the Military Project at the Women's Research and Education Institute in Washington, D.C.

Women join the military for the same reasons as men, Manning said. They're looking for money for college, job training and adventure. They also have more opportunities since Congress lifted the ban on women serving on combat ships and planes in 1991.

About 90 percent of military jobs are open to women, although you won't see them driving tanks, joining special forces or firing short-range artillery.

"They can't be in units whose main mission is ground combat," Manning said.

They can, however, fly F-18s, drop bombs and launch Patriot missiles. Manning believes the Army and Marines may soon allow women to join short-range artillery units after Pfc. Jessica Lynch and Spc. Shoshana Johnson, both captured by Iraqi forces, proved they had the stuff of soldiers and could survive under extreme conditions.

"They defended themselves," Manning said. "They didn't let their men buddies down. A lot of people are saying, 'You go, girl.'"

But equality has come with a new set of challenges, especially among families who are feeling the pressure of life without mom. When men are deployed their wives will sometimes tag along to the base or live with relatives. They're also more likely to reach out for support.

In the case of most men, however, they have jobs and can't leave town.

In October 2001, Kim Fryar was called to active duty and deployed to Fort Polk, La. In a matter of days, Ben Fryar had to learn how to braid his daughter's hair and separate whites from colored clothes.

"The past two years have been the hardest of my life," said Fryar, a barrel-chested, 5-foot-11-inch, 200-pound former quarterback for the Marine Corps. "I don't know how single parents do it. It's nerve-wracking."

Joan Williams, director of the Program on Gender, Work and Family and a professor at American University Washington College of Law, said deployment of a parent is always difficult on a family, but more so when it's a mother.

"When it was only men who were called up, women were still the primary caregivers," she said. "It put a lot of stress on the family, but it didn't disrupt the day-to-day care of the children."

Now men are left behind, and in many cases they're finding out just how hard their wives worked on the home front. They're also being challenged to become more involved parents.

"When mom goes to war, when handled properly, it can be a net benefit for the family in deepening the father's relationship with the children," Williams said.

Before she was called for active duty, Kim Fryar worked full-time as a civilian at the Greenville, S.C., Reserve unit, and was responsible for the cleaning, cooking and child care at home.

"She did it all," said Ben Fryar. "I was the typical male. I got up and went to work and did my thing. I never had to do laundry or clean the bathroom."

Now, he's Major Dad.

"Many times, I'd call my parents up and say, 'I quit.' It was only a couple of months ago that I said, 'OK, you can do this.' "

Still, it's not easy.

It's 6:45 a.m. Wednesday when Ben Fryar climbs the steps of his two-story suburban home to wake his children for school. It's still dark out and Fryar's eyes are ringed with shadows. He stayed up late watching the news, finally turning off the television around 1 a.m.

"Ben," he says softly, nudging his 7-year-old son from sleep. "Come on."

He adjusts the water in the shower and steers "little Ben" toward the bathroom.

"Don't forget to pick up your towel," he admonishes before walking next door to his daughter's room, where he kneels beside her bed.

"Sissy," he whispers, calling her by her pet name. "Time to get up."

Her given name is Kora, but Fryar rarely uses it, preferring Sissy and Boo-Boo, pet names that suit the dimpled, doe-eyed 5-year-old.

He picks out a pair of Barbie sweatpants and a pink shirt from her closet and lays them on the bed.

"Sissy, come on," he says, nuzzling her neck with gentle kisses. "If you get up and get dressed you can be the first one downstairs."

She pulls a Cinderella comforter over her head.

"I have to approach her a little bit different than him," her father explains. "She's a woman. She can be grouchy."

As the children dress, Fryar pours them bowls of Cocoa Puffs cereal and begins emptying the dishwasher, neatly stacking blue and white plates in the cabinet. He is wearing a short-sleeve T-shirt, and the tattooed tail of a panther protrudes onto his bulging bicep. When asked its significance, he replies, "Swift, silent and deadly." It was applied with bamboo needles during jungle training in the Philippines.

The children eat breakfast while watching the cartoon "Ed, Edd and Eddy" and their father scrubs their sneakers with a toothbrush and cleanser, applying spit and polish to the domestic front.

"I like my kids to be neat," he says.

"My mommy got me my shoes," says Kora, momentarily released from the hypnotic spell of the television. "They've got Barbie."

"She usually sends them stuff all the time," Ben Fryar said of his wife. "She orders stuff online."

He doles out Scooby-Doo vitamins.

"They don't eat properly or anything like that," he said. "They had to grow up quick, especially with me working the hours I did."

Before Kim Fryar was called to active duty, Ben Fryar was a recruiting machine, winning awards for persuading young men and women to join the Army. He has trophies and medals displayed in glass cases throughout his house to prove it. It wasn't unusual for him to work six days and 80 hours a week.

"I was placing my mission first," he said. "I saw them Saturday nights and Sundays."

That changed when his wife went to war.

"Managing a house, working full-time and taking care of the children is overwhelming," he said.

To cope, he reduced his weekly hours to 60, a move that he says didn't sit well with his supervisors.

"I probably won't get promoted because of that," he said. "They didn't understand what I was going through. I was losing a life. They took my wife and I had all these responsibilities I never had before."

Starting next month, Fryar will begin a new job as a retention and training noncommissioned officer. His duties will include encouraging former and current military personnel to stay in the Army.

Kim Fryar was only supposed to have been gone for six months, but her deployment was extended because her unit's expertise is in demand. The 18-month separation has put pressure on the couple's relationship, and she is returning home at the end of this month on a 30-day emergency leave to try to straighten things out, one way or another.

"We haven't been able to get along since I left," she said.

There are no statistics available for divorce among military personnel, but for civilians who work different shifts it is three to six times the national average, Williams said.

"Absence sometimes makes the heart grow fonder and sometimes it makes it tougher," she said.

Shelley MacDermid, co-director of the Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University, said deprivation of daily contact with a companion can be isolating and challenging.

"It's especially tricky when it's a military family because the person who's at home doesn't want to unload on the person who's away," she said.

Ben Fryar acknowledges the marriage is strained, but not in front of the children. Before setting out to school in his black Dodge Ram truck, he asks the children to bow their heads and pray.

"Father, watch over Kim and protect her," he says, "and help them learn."

Pulling the truck out of the driveway, Ben Fryar turns to his gap-toothed son, who is in first-grade. "Let's have a good day at school today. No cards, OK?"

A card is the equivalent of a demerit, and young Ben has been accumulating quite a few of them recently, his father said.

"I think Ben's taking it harder than Kora," Fryar said. "He's not real emotional or anything like that. When the war first started he heard the TV say something about Kuwait and he knew his mom was there. He said, 'Dad, is my mom in that war?' I said, 'Yeah, son, she is.' He dropped it, but then we were driving down the road and he turned to his sister and said, 'Kor, you know if mom's in that war, she's probably going to die.' Kor got all angry and said, 'No, she's not.' Then they asked me. I'm not going to lie to my children or hide it. I said it's in God's hands. We can pray for her.' "

Since her deployment, Kim Fryar says she's noticed a subtle shift in her children's attitude toward her.

"Ben was real good at first," she said. "Now it's getting harder to talk to him because I think there's hard feelings from me being gone so long."

Kora, too, she believes, resents her absence.

"She'd sit there and cry and wouldn't get on the phone," Kim Fryar said. "It's been really hard hearing her in the background saying she doesn't want to talk to me. It just kills me."

After dropping the children off at their respective schools — Ben at Calhoun Elementary School and Kora at Luper's Daycare — Ben Fryar heads to Iron Works Gym. He's taken the week off to refinish his kitchen, but spends the morning lifting weights.

Both Fryars are fitness fanatics and the dining room of their home holds a treadmill and barbells. Kim, her husband says proudly, can do 50 push-ups in one minute.

They met at the now-closed World's Gym in Whitehall Township in 1994 while Ben Fryar was working at the Army Recruiting Station, which used to be on Fullerton Avenue. His shift started at 8 a.m., so he'd arrive at the gym around 5 a.m. every day. Most days, Kim was already there, her blond hair pulled smooth in a ponytail.

"I thought any woman that can get up that early, I have to talk to," Ben

Fryar said.

They married in 1997 and moved to South Carolina the next year to be closer to his parents, who live about 90 miles away. They help out when they can, but both have full-time jobs.

At 5 p.m., Fryar sets out for his children. After school, Ben is bused to Luper's Daycare where he waits with Kora for his father.

Ben runs out the door and greets his father with a firm hug.

"Are you guys hungry?" Fryar asks.

"Can we go to McDonald's?" Kora asks.

"No, Burger King because it's closer," Ben says.

"Daddy, look what I got today," Ben says, pulling out a fabric Easter bunny filled with jelly beans.

"Any cards pulled?" Fryar asks, wondering if his son got in trouble.

Ben says no.

Sitting in the drive-through line at Burger King, Fryar's cell phone rings.

"It's Mommy," he says, after a terse hello.

"When are you coming home?" Kora asks, clutching the phone. "Now, come home now."

Then it's her brother's turn.

"Did you get me those Yu-Gi-Oh cards?" he asks. "Please tell me."

Dinner is chicken nuggets and french fries in front of the television followed by a bath for Kora. Ben Fryar shampoos his daughter's waist-length hair, then blows it dry, pulling the brush through her chestnut tresses while she stands patiently in front of the bathroom mirror.

Bedtime is 8 p.m.

"Brush your teeth," Fryar yells up the stairs. "Hurry up, everybody's tired."

After prayers, Ben wants a glass of water, but doesn't want to go downstairs and get it. Kora volunteers but spills half the glass on her pajama top.

Her father tells her to change.

Then there are hugs and kisses and more attempts to stave off the sandman. Finally, Fryar issues a firm "good night" and turns out the lights before heading back downstairs.

Exhausted from the nightly routine and his patience stretched, he collapses into a chair. This soldier's new mission — albeit rewarding — is taking its toll.

"Man," he says. "I gotta take my boots off."

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