



“He Went to War and Came Back a Changed Man”

Her turn: “I knew when I married Jack that our life wouldn’t be easy,” said Maureen, 34, whose husband of 15 years is a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army. “Still, I accepted the fact that we’d have to move a lot and that he might go to war. This became a virtual certainty after 9/11. Back then, Jack was an operations officer for a combat battalion in Germany, and we assumed he would go to Afghanistan. Instead, in April 2003, a month after the Iraq war began, Jack’s unit was sent to Baghdad. I stayed in Germany, where I had good friends.

“After finishing his 14-month deployment, Jack was assigned to a desk job at an Army base in Virginia. We’ve been here five months, and my husband is a changed man. The fun-loving, upbeat guy I married is now dark, defensive and short-tempered. He scolds fast-food workers, swears at other drivers and picks fights with me. He has started smoking again, has lost his sex drive and is constantly telling me he needs ‘space.’ I feel like I’ve lost my best friend.

“I met Jack in 1989, when I was a senior in high school. I went to a fraternity party with my friend Meg, who was a freshman at a local college in our South Carolina town. In a room filled with hippie types in unwashed jeans, Jack stood out in his blue oxford shirt, pressed khakis and loafers. His black hair was cut military short, and he carried himself with confidence. Meg introduced us, and we



spent the rest of the party talking. A senior in the Army ROTC, Jack was smart, friendly and courteous—the perfect Southern gentleman, with a soft drawl that exuded charm and sophistication. I really liked him but assumed his age—he was 22 to my 18—put him out of my league. I said good-bye and told Meg to give him my phone number if he wanted it. He called three days later.

“We were a couple from our first date. After Jack graduated that spring, he reported for active duty in Georgia. I started community college, and we maintained our relationship through phone calls, letters and occasional visits. Soon we were discussing marriage. Jack was up-front about the stresses of Army life: We would have to relocate often and he would

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PHOTOGRAPHS, JENNY ACHESON; HAIR AND MAKEUP, AMY MARIE FOR PRICE, INC.; INDIVIDUALS PICTURED ARE MODELS.

be stationed overseas on a "hardship tour" for at least a year without me. But we were deeply in love, and I liked the idea of living in different places. Jack and I got married 18 months after we met. He was 23; I was 19.

"Three months after the wedding, my father died of a massive heart attack. The loss staggered me. My dad and I had always had a good relationship, but I was consumed with regret over not having told him just how much I loved him. Jack listened to my venting for a few weeks, then copped a 'get over it' attitude. Eventually, I worked through my grief and our marriage proceeded smoothly. We lived on the base, socialized with other military couples and enjoyed hiking and camping.

"In 1992, Jack fulfilled his hardship tour in South Korea; afterward, he was sent to Colorado, where we spent four wonderful years. Jack thrived in his job, I finished school and we traveled throughout the West. We had hoped to have kids, but after two years of trying, our doctor determined that Jack had a low sperm count. We considered in vitro but didn't want to undergo the stress and expense of a procedure with no guarantees. Our lives were happy enough that we chose not to pursue adoption, either.

"Colorado was followed by a one-year stint in Virginia and a three-year assignment in Kentucky. By the spring of 2001, when Jack received orders to join a combat battalion in Germany, we couldn't pack our bags fast enough. We had always dreamed of living overseas, and Jack and I immediately immersed ourselves in the German culture. We went on romantic getaways every weekend, and over an 18-month period, we visited 16 European countries.

"We were happy until the fall of 2002, when the buildup to war began and the Army imposed travel restrictions, requiring Jack to stay near the base. We lived in perpetual stress for five months, wondering whether the United States would invade Iraq and Jack's unit would be deployed. Our views on Iraq were a sore point: I opposed the war and he supported it. But he didn't want to argue. 'I don't have time to debate politics,' he'd fume whenever I raised the subject. Ultimately, we agreed to disagree and to stop discussing Iraq. Neither of us was going to change the other's mind.

"Days after the war started, Jack learned that his unit would be going to Baghdad. After he left, I relied on three close friends for companionship and support. I was cordial with the other Army wives but in their eyes I was the boss's wife. It would have been awkward for me to share my personal feelings about anything with them, let alone the war in Iraq. After Jack left, I avoided most social situations. The other wives' concerns heightened mine; I would leave a group dinner feeling worse than when I arrived. I felt isolated in both the military community and in Germany, a country

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that was staunchly anti-war. I also missed Jack terribly and worried constantly about his safety. Unfortunately, we had limited contact. When he first arrived in Iraq, it was hard for him to call, and when he did, the line would often go dead in the middle of our conversation. He had no e-mail for the first few months, either, which meant it was impos-

sible to schedule calls. We wrote letters, but they are no substitute for someone's voice.

"Halfway through his deployment, Jack got a two-week leave. I imagined a romantic reunion, but he was distracted and depressed, and our lovemaking was perfunctory. He wouldn't talk about the war or the shooting death of a close friend. Our short vacation in Sweden was a fiasco. The old Jack was a great travel partner, but the new Jack set our daily agenda and walked two feet ahead of me. We argued constantly. When he left again for Iraq, I feared that the war might permanently change his personality.

"We've been together in Virginia for five months now and his attitude has yet to improve. His road rage is getting worse, so I now insist on driving us everywhere. I can't remember the last time we made love or even held hands. I decided to go back to work to stem my loneliness, but the prospect is frightening and Jack gives me no support. The other night, I started to cry as I struggled to write my resume for a sales job. 'Stop feeling sorry for yourself,' Jack yelled, looking at me with disdain. 'You don't have it so bad. You don't even know what bad is.'

"I realize that Jack needs time to adjust after the battlefield, but I can't take much more of his insensitivity and anger. This is not the man I married. I still love my husband, but I don't like him anymore. And I can't stay in a marriage where my emotional needs aren't met and I feel so hopelessly alone."

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His turn: "I don't blame Maureen for disliking me," admitted Jack, 38, a tall, handsome man who looks every inch the high-ranking military officer he is. "I don't like the fact that I'm constantly irritable and I've taken up smoking again, or that I yell at Maureen and swear in anger. And it kills me that my sex drive seems to have disappeared.

"I'm still living in a state of heightened sensitivity—a 'combat mode' that probably saved my life in Baghdad but doesn't work at all on the home front. The other night I saw a helicopter turn on its landing lights as I drove across a bridge and I had a flashback. Thinking I was under fire, I felt an adrenaline rush and started screaming and pounding the steering wheel. Another time I heard a garbage truck drop a trash bin as I drove off the base. It sounded like a rocket, so I panicked and almost crashed into a light post. Even the smell of burning leaves reminds me of Baghdad, where fires raged day and night. I have nightmares about being lost in a combat zone, caught in a firefight without my gear or sent back to Iraq. I'm proud of the work I did there, and I'll go back if the Army asks me to, which is highly likely. But I'd rather not.

"Since my return I've become super-impatient. If I order a hamburger, I don't want to hear from the cashiers about the combination meals. 'Listen to me,' I snap when they launch into their spiel. 'I ordered a hamburger. A *hamburger*.' I never raise my voice, but I know my stern tone is withering. Even worse, I feel disillusioned. I'm haunted by the brutality I witnessed in Iraq, such as a revenge killing where some Iraqi soldiers gunned down a family of seven in their home because they were suspected of being loyal to Saddam Hussein's Baathist Party. I'll never understand that kind of cruelty.

"After seeing the conditions the Iraqis have had to live with—the open sewage, the stench of rotting bodies, the oil spills, the lack of electricity—I despise the way people back home sweat the small stuff. I'm sorry, but I just can't sympathize when Maureen mopes and whines about being unemployed and lonely. There's no financial need for her to get a job immediately, and she'll make new friends in due time. The Army counselors who met with my unit explained that our readjustment period would likely last for as long as we were deployed—for me, 14 months. By that benchmark, I've got another nine months to go. Why won't she cut me some slack?

"I grew up in the rural South. My dad, an engineer, and my mom, a nurse, raised me to mind my manners and love my country. I'm a fifth-generation soldier—my ancestors fought in the Civil War and the Spanish-American War—but the first member of our family to be an officer. As a member of Junior Army ROTC in high school, I discovered that I'm a born leader and natural problem

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solver, two skills essential to a successful military career. Another selling point was the travel required by the Army. When my sister and I were kids, our parents took us all over, and we loved those trips.

"The night I met Maureen I couldn't take my eyes off her. She's tall and muscular, with long brown hair, brown eyes and a sexy

smile. And her sharp humor and candor distinguished her from the demure Southern belles I'd dated. We fell in love fast and four months into our relationship, I knew I wanted to marry her. She and I have fundamental personality differences: She's spontaneous, easygoing and gregarious—a happy person who wakes up smiling, eager to embrace the day. She depends emotionally on family and friends. I'm organized, stoic and independent emotionally. But instead of letting those differences divide us, we've drawn strength from them throughout our marriage.

"As Maureen mentioned, our marriage did get off to a rocky start when her dad suddenly died. I didn't know how to help my wife grieve, and I failed to give her adequate emotional support, something I'll always regret. But beyond that, the biggest crisis in our marriage was when we found out we couldn't get pregnant. In time, we came to terms with that and concluded that we could be happy without children. If it weren't for the Iraq war, we'd still be getting along great.

"As soon as we knew I might be deployed, my emotions were all over the map. I was terrified I might be killed but never mentioned my fears to Maureen, because I didn't want to increase her anxiety—or mine. I also felt frustrated by her pestering me to discuss the politics behind the war. I repeatedly explained that I had to remain neutral in order to stay focused on my job, which was preparing my soldiers for battle. Finally, we agreed to stop discussing

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it. That helped ease the tension somewhat.

"In Baghdad I was overwhelmed by the stench of fires burning and the sight of dead bodies in the streets. Our mission was to handle 'cleanup' in the aftermath of the invading forces, so 75 percent of our time was spent on duties like restoring electricity and 25 percent on fighting the bad guys. I never fired my weapon but I sent my soldiers to chase down the enemy. My closest call came when we provided security for another unit conducting a raid in a village where Baathists still operated. A man with two small children drove up in a donkey cart and kept approaching, despite my soldiers' repeated shouts of 'Stop! Stop!' in Arabic. Assuming he was dangerous, I aimed my gun and tightened my pull on the trigger. Then, in the glow of the moonlight, I saw that the man was unarmed. In another blink of an eye, I could have killed three innocent people. I'll live for the rest of my life with the image of their terrified expressions.

"Then, to add to my stress, I had a conflict with a superior, who relied on me to make the tough decisions about combat operations—and took credit when things went right and blamed me when they didn't. He played politics behind my back, so for several months, my name was mud with some Army leaders. There was no long-term fallout, but I worried my career could be damaged.

"I missed Maureen and worried incessantly about her, but I couldn't express those feelings. In the beginning, I tried to call every week, but as Maureen said, the phone system was unreliable. After I got Internet access, we e-mailed each other. Our phone conversations were strained, in part because Maureen was mad at me for dodging her questions. I didn't like being so guarded, but I couldn't tell her about the challenges of my work, my problems with my superior or about how I nearly killed three innocent people. I didn't want to upset her or let her know how much danger I was in.

"My two-week leave was awful. Maureen longed for romance, while I wanted only rest, and we expressed our disappointment by arguing. I was struggling with a million different emotions. I felt guilty about leaving my troops behind in Iraq, I was depressed about life in general and I was annoyed that Maureen pushed me to discuss topics I wanted to avoid, including how I felt when one of my buddies was killed. Why couldn't she give me some space?

"Maureen is the love of my life and I'm heartbroken that she might leave me. I am determined to do whatever it takes to feel normal again."

"Maureen needed to be more independent. Jack needed to be less critical"



The counselor's turn: "I have treated several military couples whose marriages are at risk in the aftermath of war," the counselor said. "The stress of being in a life-threatening situation for months on end cannot help but affect a serviceperson's attitude and behavior. Similarly, it's difficult for military spouses to know their partner is in harm's way—and not know whether they'll ever be reunited. As a result, both parties suffer significant emotional trauma.

"After listening to Maureen lament Jack's changed personality and lack of support, and hearing Jack describe his adjustment and impatience over her neediness, I told them their issues

were serious, but not unique. 'You are experiencing a crisis connected to the war, and your responses are appropriate,' I reassured them.

"I had no doubt that this couple's marriage could be repaired. Maureen and Jack were in love, and they were brutally honest with each other in the first session—always a good sign. Each accepted responsibility for his or her behavior, avoiding the blame game that often masks the real problem. There were no lingering childhood issues, and both were motivated to change. As Jack put it, 'Tell me how to fix what's wrong.'

"Our work began by discussing Jack's service in Iraq and then examining its effect on him. Until then Jack had been tight-lipped about his anguish at losing his friend, his despair over nearly killing an innocent farmer and his bitterness toward a superior who'd bad-mouthed him up the Army's chain of command. He had suppressed his emotions while operating in survival mode in Iraq, hence his need for emotional

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distance and impatience with everyone, including Maureen. Jack's reports of nightmares and flashbacks suggested that he was suffering from a mild case of post-traumatic stress disorder. 'You need to discharge the trauma you've been carrying around,' I explained. 'The sooner you open up and release your anger, the sooner you will be able to reconnect with Maureen.'

"Ever the good soldier, Jack complied, and as he disclosed the emotions and fears he'd long kept buried, he broke down in tears. Men rarely cry in session, but when they do, it suggests that they've become emotionally available to their partners. 'This was the only time I wept about my service in Iraq,' Jack acknowledged. 'I left that therapy session feeling cleansed.'

"Maureen was moved by her husband's vulnerability: 'For the first time, I understood how the war really affected him.'

"Jack was still seething about his former superior, so I gave him an exercise. I told him to write a 'grudge letter,' never to be sent, in which he put down on paper everything he wanted to tell the man. I asked him to read the letter aloud in session, then I encouraged him to burn it. 'This helped me realize that my superior was unqualified for his job and that I was angry over my inability to do anything about it,' he said. 'With that insight, I let go of my anger.'

"Jack also needed to be more sympathetic to his wife. I validated his assessment that Maureen was emotionally high maintenance but also pointed out that his failure to support her during this transition was akin to his lack of sympathy when her father died. 'If you continue to be dismissive and condescending,' I explained, 'your marital conflicts will escalate.'

"As for Maureen, she was justifiably traumatized by Jack's deployment, the possibility that he could have died in Iraq, his changed personality and the loss of her social network after they moved from Germany to Virginia. For people mired in crisis, simply being heard in the safety of therapy can spur the healing process. That's what happened with Maureen after she described everything that had been bothering her since the buildup to war.

"Our next step was to explore Maureen's apprehension about the job search. I helped her create a schedule for answering ads and making cold calls. Within months, she accepted an offer for a sales position at a telecommunications company. I also believed Maureen would fare better if she were less isolated, so I encouraged her to seek out people with similar interests. She joined the art museum and took up yoga. 'I still don't have any close friends,' she said, 'but I look forward to seeing acquaintances at work and at events.'

"Finally, I recommended that Maureen and Jack change their antagonistic communication style. Jack had to become less critical

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and blaming; Maureen had to use 'I' statements, so that Jack wouldn't misunderstand her. 'Now, if I want Jack's support, I say, "I need a hug," and he delivers.' Also, I urged Maureen to give her husband the 'space' he kept requesting.

"Gradually Jack began to feel like his old self again: His libido returned, he stopped smoking and his

nightmares, road rage and impatience subsided. As they felt more loving, their sex life not only resumed but improved.

"Toward the end of our therapy, we discussed the possibility that Jack would return to Iraq. They accept that this might happen and believe they will be better prepared to handle a second deployment. 'If Jack goes back, I'll stay in Virginia and continue working,' Maureen said. 'If necessary, I'll get therapy to help me work through it.'

"I was skeptical about therapy, but it has been one of the best experiences of my life,' Jack said. 'I'm a better husband for it.'

"Jack is back to being the wonderful man I married,' Maureen agreed, 'and I love him more than ever.'"



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