

THE MILITARY WIVES



Our true stories
of heartbreak,
hope and love

WHEREVER
YOU ARE

The Wives

**Wherever You Are: The Military
Wives: Our true stories of
heartbreak, hope and love**

«HarperCollins»

Wives T. M.

Wherever You Are: The Military Wives: Our true stories of heartbreak, hope and love / T. M. Wives — «HarperCollins»,

From the moment the Military Wives sang together on BBC Two's The Choir, their lives changed forever. Their journey entranced the nation, and their story moved millions. In December 2011, as the nation watched, the Military Wives' single was named Christmas Number 1. A few weeks earlier they had been just regular women living on military bases: the wives and girlfriends of soldiers deployed to Afghanistan. Here the wives tell their individual stories in full for the first time – true stories of heartbreak, hope, love and loss that speak to the heart of our country. From the loneliness and isolation of life on a military base to the challenge of writing to men facing unimaginable horrors – and to the Choir that gave them comfort, solace and friendship in the darkest of times – these are true, affecting and inspiring accounts straight from the wives themselves. Sales of this book will benefit the Military Wives Choirs Foundation, a network of choirs that reaches across the military community to provide support, guidance and funding for individual choirs, but first and foremost to bring women closer together through singing. The Foundation is a registered subsidiary charity of SSAFA Forces Help.

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WHEREVER YOU ARE THE MILITARY WIVES

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heartbreak, hope and love



HarperCollins*Publishers*

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[About the Military Wives Choirs Foundation](#)

Supporting the women who support our troops

The Military Wives Choirs Foundation is a network of choirs that reaches across the whole military community. It has been established to provide support, guidance and funding for individual choirs, but first and foremost to bring women closer together through singing.

Following the phenomenal success of ‘Wherever You Are’, which raised more than half a million pounds for military charities, those involved set out to create a wider network that could support wives, partners and women serving in the forces, and would leave a lasting legacy. In particular, the women from the first choirs wanted to share the enjoyment and pride that they had already experienced through their own choirs. The Military Wives Choirs Foundation has enabled them to do just this.

Through its growing network, the Foundation is building something that brightens lives, strengthens military communities and enables hundreds of women to experience the enjoyment and friendship that comes from being part of a Military Wives Choir. The Foundation is now a registered subsidiary of SSAFA Forces Help.

Registered Charity Number 1148302. Established 2012.

[Introduction](#)

We felt the poppy petals settling on our hair, our faces, our new black dresses. A large screen showed a roll call of men lost in war during the past 12 months, some of them men we knew as friends of our husbands, men who never made it to the homecoming, men who would never see their children grow up.

Ahead of us, and right in our eyeline, stood the war widows, the brave contingent of women who had taken part in the Festival of Remembrance at the Royal Albert Hall to celebrate the lives of their lost husbands. These women were living our worst nightmare; they had heard the knock on the door that we all dread. If they could keep strong, so could we; if they didn’t break down, neither would we. We battled to hold our tears back.

But it was a very long two minutes.

This, we thought, was what it was all about. Our choir, the Military Wives Choir, had borne us up and carried us through the long, gruelling seven-month tour our men had just completed in Afghanistan. It had given us a focus, it had broken down barriers, it had formed us into a tight and supportive community.

And now we had made the world know of our existence. Earlier in the evening we had sung our beautiful song, written especially for us from the words of the letters and messages we share with our men when their lives are in danger. And as we poured out the song, we told everyone that there is another branch of the armed forces: the military wives who stay behind, adding our quiet strength to our men's courage.

'Wherever you are, my love will keep you safe,' we sang, and every one of us thought of the man in our life, and our gratitude that once again a tour was over, and he was back. We knew, from the reception there at the Royal Albert Hall, that our song touched the hearts of others, reaching out beyond our own private relief and pride.

What we did not know, at that moment, was how it would also touch the hearts of an entire nation, and how our lives would be transformed by the whirlwind of fame that was to come.

But we did know that music and singing are such powerful drugs that our choir would live on, even after the television cameras were gone and after Gareth Malone, our inspirational choirmaster, had kissed us all goodbye. And, perhaps, today, despite everything else that has happened, our greatest achievement is that we have helped spread the healing, bonding and uplifting spirit of the choir to military bases all across the land, and in Germany and Cyprus.

From now on, military wives everywhere will find each other in choirs, and will form there the sort of friendships that will last a lifetime, and carry them through the anxiety and fear we all share when our men are away from home.

We are proud of so many of the things we have done, but this ranks at the top – above the number one single, the hit album, the trip to Downing Street and singing at the Queen's Diamond Jubilee concert, as well as all the other celebrity moments.

We are thrilled and delighted, too, that the public have taken us to their hearts: we have never asked for sympathy, just support in our lives which are dedicated, in turn, to supporting the men who keep Britain safe.

WORDS WE USE

We use words and phrases that we pick up from our men – military terms and slang that you may not understand. Here's an explanation of the ones in this book:

Afghan A shortened version of Afghanistan

BFBS British Forces Broadcasting Service

Blueys Letters on special thin airmail blue paper

CO Commanding Officer

Comms Communications, covering everything – phone calls, emails, letters

Comms are down is a phrase we dread: it means that something serious, a death or serious injury, has happened

Contact Enemy fire

E-blueys Email version of blueys, sent to a central email reception and then forwarded on

FOB Forward Operating Base: a secured position away from the main base

Headley Court The Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre, where many of the most serious military casualties go after they leave hospital to continue their recovery

Hive The welfare and information centre for wives and families on a military base

March in/out The takeover or handover inspection of married quarters when we arrive or leave

MERT Medical Emergency Response Team

NAAFI Navy Army and Air Force Institute

Patch Name given to any military housing estate

POTL Post Operation Tour Leave: the time off the men get when they return from a tour

Pre-Op The months of preparation before an operation, or tour

PTI Physical Training Instructor

R & R Rest and recreation: the break, usually two weeks, the men get in order to come home in the middle of a long tour

REME Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

SAR Search and Rescue

Selly Oak The hospital in Birmingham that hosted the Royal Centre for Defence Medicine, where injured troops are treated; now hosted by the new Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Edgbaston

SSAFA Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association: a charity that helps serving and former members of the armed forces, their families or dependents

TRIM Trauma Risk Management: designed to identify and help forces personnel at risk after traumatic incidents, delivered by trained people already in the affected individual's unit

UNDERSTANDING RANKS

ARMY AND ROYAL MARINES

Private

Lance Corporal

Corporal

Sergeant

Staff Sergeant

Colour Sergeant: the same rank as Staff Sergeant, used in the Royal Marines and some regiments

WO2: Warrant Officer class 2 (Sergeant Major)

WO1: Warrant Officer class 1 (Regimental Sergeant Major)

OFFICERS' RANKS

2nd Lieutenant

Lieutenant

Captain (LE Captain is someone who has worked up through the ranks; LE stands for Late Entry)

Major

Lieutenant Colonel

Colonel

Brigadier

Major General

Lieutenant General

General

NAVY (NON-COMMISSIONED RANKS)

Rating

Leading Hand

Petty Officer

Chief Petty Officer

Warrant Officer

ROYAL AIR FORCE (NON-COMMISSIONED RANKS)

Leading Aircraftman

Senior Aircraftman

Corporal

Sergeant

Flight Sergeant

Warrant Officer

OUR LIVES

'He tells me I've got to be strong for the children, and he's right. But who's going to be strong for me?'

We don't just marry a man we love: we marry a way of life. Our lives are dominated by his career, in a way that rarely happens outside the military. We move home, on average every two years, as he is posted from camp to camp. Our children are uprooted; our own careers and ambitions go on hold. We live in houses we did not choose, we make friends who move on as soon as we have become close. It's not an easy life, and that's without the biggest challenge of all: our men leave home to go to the world's most dangerous places, leaving us behind to nurse our loneliness and learn to be both mother and father to our children.

When they go, we struggle to put a brave face on it. We don't want to distract him: we've heard the saying 'If his head's at home, he'll struggle out there.' So we accept, and are even glad, that as he prepares to go he seems to shut us out of his mind. When he's gone, we shake ourselves out of our misery and get on with it: we feed the children, walk the dog, go to our jobs, all the time blocking out thoughts and fears about what he is facing.

Our men chose this way of life; they love it and thrive on it. We made a choice too: to be with them. We hear from civilian friends and family: 'You knew what you were letting yourself in for,' or 'What did you expect when you married a man in uniform?' But the truth is that most of us did not know what we were getting into. We had only the haziest idea of military life when we walked down the aisle and stood proudly next to our man, splendid in his dress uniform, at the altar.

We are not complaining. Military wives are a stoical band: we get on with it.

Here, in this book, are the stories of a few of us. We don't claim to speak for all military wives, but we are a cross section: we are women of different ages, with husbands in different services, and of different ranks. These are very personal stories and, by telling them, we hope that all wives will find something they recognise and can relate to. We also hope that anyone who has no experience of military life will read this and understand more of what it is like to marry into the services.

[Katherine Catchpole](#)

As soon as I heard his voice I knew something was wrong.

'All right, babes?' he said. 'I don't want you to panic, but I've had a bit of an accident.'

My husband, Andrew, was phoning from Afghanistan, on his first tour out there.

The bottom fell out of my stomach when I heard the word 'accident', but in my head I could hear this running commentary: he must be all right, as he's talking to me. He told me he was in hospital with a suspected broken leg. When he put the phone down, I had no idea what to do. I'd gone to stay with my mum in Watford for a few days, taking with me our son Freddie, who was two, and I'd been changing Freddie's nappy when the phone rang. I didn't have an information pack with all the emergency numbers, and as we lived in Yeovil, but Andrew was serving with a unit from Plymouth, I didn't know who to ring. In the end, all I could think of was to ring a friend who had been posted to Germany, and she promised to try to find out for me. There is an official drill, and I should have been informed, but somehow I'd dropped off the radar. My friend texted me to say she was trying to get some information, but I had a terrible night.

The next day I had a phone call from Andrew again. 'All right, babes? I don't want you to panic, but I've had an accident ...'

By now alarm bells were ringing loudly: I hoped he'd got concussion and not a more serious head injury, but he clearly didn't remember ringing me the day before, and I still hadn't heard anything official. Eventually I got through to the right welfare number, but there seemed to be no record of him having an injury.

The next day, he rang again: 'All right, babes? I don't want you to panic ...'

I was *really* panicking. I asked him if there was anyone else near the phone who could talk to me, but he said the nurse had just wheeled him over and left him there. I was getting desperate, especially when he told me he had a bad headache.

Finally, that afternoon, a liaison officer rang me. Looking back, I should have been making more of a fuss, but I just didn't know how to. Now I don't go anywhere without all the right numbers with me.

He was flown back to Selly Oak Hospital, in Birmingham (the centre for treating wounded servicemen). I was told that he had leg, arm and head injuries, caused by an accident when he was on a quad bike.

My dad drove me up to Birmingham while Mum looked after Freddie. When I saw Andrew he had a massive gouge in his head and a long line of stitches up his left arm; then they operated and put pins and plates in his ankle. There were bits of gravel stuck in his face, and where he had been badly shaved there were tufts of hair all over his chin. He was ashen grey, with bags under his eyes, and he looked 15 years older. But he was so pleased to see me. We cuddled and he told me he had a thumping headache.

After the relief of seeing him and holding him, I started crying and berating him. All that emotion, the relief, the fear, everything I'd held in while I didn't know what had happened, exploded.

'How could you do this to me? You've put me through hell,' I said.

He was half-laughing, and then he grabbed me and said, 'I'm really sorry.'

Part of me was happy that at least he was now off the tour. But being what he is, he told me straightaway that he wanted to get back out there. Although I would have loved him to stay at home, I know him well enough to realise he would not be happy if he didn't get back out, and he would feel he'd let the others down.

So when he got home from hospital I used my nursing skills to help with the physio. I arranged private physio, acupuncture and massage for him, and then worked with him on the exercises.

He got back out there for the last six weeks of the tour. It was important to him. In a funny way, I was happy to see him go because it meant so much to him. He says it was down to me that he recovered well enough in time. 'You fixed me,' he says. He was elated to have qualified for the tour medal, and that feeling helped him get over the tour better than usual, although it was still a difficult time.

That was my worst experience as a military wife. Looking back, I was so green when I first met Andrew, a few years earlier. I had no idea what it was all about. It all started with a kiss at the end of a party. The town I come from, Watford, has no military connections and I didn't have a clue about life in the forces; I didn't know anyone who was serving. But I'm a big believer in fate, and I'm sure fate had a hand in bringing me and Andrew (who is known as 'Catch' to all his mates) together.

I was 18 and training to be a nurse when a friend persuaded me to go to a 21st birthday party. She planned to set me up with a local lad. I was feeling ill, with raging tonsillitis, and I nearly didn't go. I wasn't attracted to my blind date, and to be honest I didn't feel well and didn't want to be there, so I was trying to make my excuses to get home to bed when Andrew arrived late at the party, after returning home from a posting in Brunei.

He nearly didn't go that night, and I nearly left just before he arrived. We almost didn't meet.

A couple of months after we started going out, he went on a three-month tour of the Mediterranean, sailing to France, Spain, Italy, Cyprus and Egypt. I learnt he was going from one of his mates. He was so casual about it, and I was distraught. I bought a big map and put it on the wall of my bedroom, and I cut out a little paper ship, which I moved about with pins, following his route. I sobbed all the time, saying to Mum, 'I don't think I can do this,' and playing our song, 'I Wanna Be the Only One' by Eternal, over and over. I had a wall-chart calendar and I was crossing the days off with a big red pen. The only thing I did was go to university; the rest of the time I was in my bedroom, being miserable.

Mum said, 'You'll have to toughen up. You have to live your own life when he's away.'

I wailed, 'But I don't want to ...'

And he wasn't even anywhere dangerous! I really dragged it out. Now I'd just be glad he was going somewhere safe.

Early on, he gave me a catchphrase that covers everything that military life throws at us: 'It's life in a green suit, babes, life in a green suit.' It covers all the problems his job brings with it, and if ever I say anything about his life my family repeat it back to me. I've learnt to accept it.

I fell in love with the man, and he *is* the job. It's his life. It runs through his blood, and he is the man I love. For the first three years we were together I stayed at home in Watford, doing my training, and we saw each other whenever we could.

When he was away I used to go out with friends, but I always felt like a gooseberry because they had their boyfriends with them. Someone would ask me how long it was since I'd seen him and that would set me off. 'It's been 70 days, 8 hours ...' – even down to the minutes. It was like a digital clock in my head.

I'm a Cinderella nut so we had a huge Cinderella-themed wedding, complete with glass coach and glass slippers, and he was my Prince Charming, in uniform. Afterwards we moved together to Portsmouth, to a top-floor flat on a military patch.

My family couldn't believe I was the one who moved away: I'm such a home bird. I know it doesn't sound far, Watford to Portsmouth, but for me then it seemed a long way. Where I grew up I had my mum and dad and little sister, my big sister and her husband round the corner, my nan and my aunties and all my school and nursing friends nearby, and Andrew's family not far away – I felt I was going to the other end of the country. It was a really big wrench.

At first we were welcomed by the neighbours. But as soon as Andrew put his marine uniform on they ignored us. I didn't know why. I couldn't understand – and I still can't – why there are rivalries between different branches of the armed forces. A bit of friendly rivalry is one thing, but we heard about social things that we weren't invited to, and that really hurt.

Most of those around us were naval people. I'd no idea a uniform could make such a difference. I was used to people being friendly; I'm a friendly person myself. Now I'd be tougher. My attitude is: I'm Katherine, I'm not a rank or a number. Or I'd mentally just say, 'Stuff you.' Luckily I had my job – I was doing a midwifery course in Southampton – and we made friends through that.

We moved to a house in Taunton a week before Andrew deployed for Iraq, and I unpacked the boxes while he went through his joining routine. I knew nobody. I didn't even know where Tesco was. Luckily, the following week I started work, which helped me cope with him going somewhere dangerous for the first time since we'd met. It was a steep learning curve: a new town, a new home and all the worries of him being in a war zone. Once I got sorted it was, socially, a much better posting, and for the first time I made really good friends with women who were in the same boat, with their men out there too. It was my first taste of how supportive and strong a group of military wives can be.

It was meant to be a three-month tour, but it was extended several times, and he ended up serving seven and a half months out there. That was difficult to deal with. When he got home, he had changed, mainly because it was his first dangerous posting since we'd been together.

I'd always said I wanted children one day, but he had said he wasn't ready. His parents had split up, and he was very conscious of not wanting to repeat that pattern. He's a big softie to me, but at work he's a textbook marine: he eats, sleeps and breathes it. It took him a few weeks to get over that tour, to come home mentally. Then, one night in bed, he told me that he'd never thought he could miss someone as much as he had missed me when he was away. For a moment I was a bit insulted: we'd been married three or four years by then, and I'd known before he went how much I would miss him.

He said, 'I'm not very good at explaining things, but I never thought I could love you more than I already did. I never thought it could hurt as much as it did, missing you. You were the part of me I couldn't get away from.'

He was so serious that I made a little tent out of the bedclothes and used my phone for a light to see his face.

Then he said: 'I want us to have children. I'm ready. I realised out there, missing you so much that it was a pain in the pit of my stomach, that it doesn't matter about anyone else. You and me are what we are. When I'm over this tour, back to being the normal me, I'd like to try for a baby.'

I was jubilant. It was a magic moment. We waited a couple of months, because I knew he needed time to recover, and then our son Freddie was born the following year.

People don't realise that a six- or seven-month tour lasts, for us, for over a year. For six months before they go they are training hard; then when they come back they have to readjust, which also takes time. It's hard. During the training it's a real struggle for me: half of me wants to know what he's preparing for; the other half wants to blank it out. He has the ability to shut off: I don't know whether that's his personality or whether it is something he has been trained to do. But I feel he has to stay open in order to stay close to me, and we are better at it now than we were. But I have to face the fact that, as the training goes on, in his head he is more and more out there.

I'm glad he is so well prepared, mentally and emotionally. But that doesn't make it easier for me. It makes for a high-pressure marriage. The pre-training is very intense. In his first tour of Afghan he was in a specialist team, and it was important that they became a tight team before they left. There was no gentle progression: he was deep in it from the start of training. I tried to talk to him as much as I could, but I struggled not to feel excluded.

We say goodbye at home – he won't do it in public, and I'm glad about that. If he is going to feel choked up, he wants to do it away from the lads, in private. That first tour of Afghan was really bad. I can't hold it in when he leaves. I blub. Just talking about it now I can feel it: that choked-up sensation half in my chest and half in my stomach. I try to hold it back, but it's like having terrible stomach cramps. Then he'll say something and it'll set me off. The last kiss goodbye is the longest kiss ever: you don't want it to end.

When he did that first Afghan tour, the one when he was injured, Freddie fell asleep on my lap a few hours before Andrew left, and as Andrew carried him upstairs without waking him, I couldn't stop myself thinking: This could be the last time he holds Freddie. I didn't want to think it, but terrible thoughts like that just come into your head; you can't stop them. I knew, anyway, that it was the last time he would hold Freddie for six months, and that when he came back Freddie would have changed so much. That was a gut-wrenching feeling.

He's upset to leave us. But I can see, when he walks away, that he's excited to be going; he's pleased to be joining the lads and putting all his training to use. With maturity, I've come to realise that I'm glad he's up for it, and it would be a lot worse for him if he was worrying about me and Freddie and home. A few years ago I'd never have dreamt I'd be saying I'm pleased he's excited to go, but I am.

When he went to Afghanistan for his second tour, Freddie was five, just becoming aware of his daddy's job. I never said the words 'Afghanistan' or 'fighting' in his hearing. I just told him, 'Daddy's doing lots of marching,' because he's seen them marching. Then, before Andrew went, we told Freddie that Daddy had to do SSM – a Super Special Mission – which only Daddy could do. Whenever I had a tough time with him missing his dad, I reinforced that Daddy was the only one who could do this SSM. I kept ringing the changes, saying that Daddy was doing some camping: I fixed on harmless elements of the job.

When he finally walks out I'm devastated, with nothing to look forward to except getting through. It feels as if my right arm has been cut off. The bed feels very empty, even though I am used to him being away. It's always different when he is at war.

R & R is a strange time. I'm more used to it now, but on his first tour it was tough. He was here in body but not in mind. It was as if a video was playing behind his eyes all the time, as if he was looking at me but seeing something else. I was so glad to see him, touch him. But I struggled with trying to cuddle a man who was not there. I wasn't prepared for it; I hadn't thought through what it

would be like for him, and how, in a way, his head had to stay out there. Now I know what to expect, and I'm glad if he stays out there in his head, because he has to go back.

Over the years I've got used to living in married quarters. I was thrilled with our first little flat, just because we were living together. Then I loved the house at Taunton. I painted a seascape on the bathroom wall, with sand and water, and ceramic plaques of starfish, crabs and a whale. I painted a wave that ran right round the room, and I sponged bubbles on to the wall of the downstairs loo.

But when you leave a quarter you have to put it back the way it was. You are inspected: it's called the march out. They do a full inspection and write a report, telling you everything that has to be done. If you don't do it, you have to pay for it. It took about eight coats of magnolia paint to cover my seascape. Cleverly, the men are never around when you have to repaint it ... I thought then: I'm never doing that again. So now I have the decor in my things – pictures, photos, furniture and furnishings. I don't paint the walls.

Andrew is now a colour sergeant. I've been with him all the way as he has been promoted. We moved to Chivenor in Devon in the winter, and it was hard to meet people, as everyone went everywhere in their cars. Freddie was in pre-school, but the other mums all seemed to have their friends. They didn't ignore me, but I just didn't crack it. The first couple of months here I felt I went backwards in my progression as a military wife. I kept thinking, Bring on Christmas, so that I could go home to my family. But it got better, especially after the choir started.

[Sarah Hendry](#)

I'm a tough Yorkshire girl, and we don't cry. I've not been brought up that way. I don't do emotional stuff. But when I dropped David off for his first Afghan tour and I tried to say goodbye, I went into the biggest meltdown ever. The kids were in the back of the car, with a blanket over them, sleeping. He kissed them and I got out of the car, still OK. Then I was suddenly in floods of tears, sobbing to the point where I couldn't catch my breath.

He gave me a hug and said, 'I've got to go.'

'I can't stop,' I said, struggling to speak.

'You have to. I'm going to have to walk away.'

'Just go.'

I was crying so much I could only see him as a blur as he got on the coach. Then I bent down at the back of the car because I didn't want the kids to see me, and I cried myself out. After a couple of minutes I gathered myself together and drove home. Then it was, 'Come on, boys, you're in Mummy's bed tonight.'

I'd been waiting for him to go, and I was sure I'd be all right, because I'm so stern and strong, but I just lost it. When he rang from transit I couldn't apologise enough – I felt I'd let him down. It must have been the worst goodbye ever, and it was his first time to Afghan. I felt ashamed that I'd let him go worrying about me.

He's been to Afghan twice since, and I've got the hang of it now. I drop him off and say, 'See you – ring me when you get the chance.'

He knows I can cope, and I know it's important for him not to have to worry about us. It's not that it's easier: I'm just better at holding it all in.

The boys are now old enough to understand a bit of what's happening, so it wouldn't do them any good to see me in a state. Crying doesn't make the tour go faster: you just have to get on with it.

On that first tour to Afghan Owen, who was three at the time, wouldn't speak to his daddy on the phone. It didn't matter what I did to coax him: he just wouldn't speak. But he would draw pictures for him.

We were thrilled that David had managed to get his R & R over Christmas: we thought it would be great for the children. I built myself up for it, getting really excited. But then we all caught some horrible vomiting bug. We were being sick, all of us, the whole time. We didn't even have Christmas dinner. When he went back to Brize Norton the flight was delayed, and the other lads were sent home

for another night with their families. But he was vomiting so much they kept him there. He had to be injected with an anti-vomiting drug before he could get on the flight to go back to Afghan. So that was our wonderful R & R.

Now I say to him, 'Don't bother with Christmas. See if you can get back for half term. Otherwise, just leave it as late as possible.' If it's delayed, you don't get extra time at the end. It's rubbish, but I'm a veteran and I don't wind myself up thinking about it. That's how it happens. Don't worry.

When I first met David and he told me what he did, I said, 'What the hell is a Royal Marine?' I'd heard of the army, navy and air force, but I'd never heard of the marines. When I told my mum I was going out with him she said, 'It's not like *Soldier Soldier*, you know.'

My family were worried because when I met him I was 16, and he was eight years older than me and in the armed forces. We met because my best friend from school was dating his brother, and I was invited to a party David's mum threw to celebrate his passing out into the marines, in Sheffield where we are both from.

We've been together for over 14 years now and married over 12, so we've proved everyone wrong. But I think for the first two years, when I lived in Sheffield and he came down at weekends, out of the whole of that time we spent less than five months together.

I was pregnant when we got married, in Christmas week. We got married on 27 December 1999, when I was 18, so it was a crazy week – Christmas, the wedding, then the millennium. We moved down to Gosport on 2 January, and then I had Callum in May.

At first he was away one week every month and I'd go back to Sheffield then, getting a bus to the ferry, the ferry to Portsmouth, a bus to the station and then three trains to Sheffield. I didn't have a friend in Gosport, and I didn't know how to meet anyone. Most of the people living near us were in the navy, not the marines, so David couldn't introduce me to anyone, and they didn't make an effort to befriend me. It was all right when he was coming home at night, but when he was away for a whole week I couldn't stand the loneliness.

I was glad we went to Gosport, because until four weeks before our wedding I thought I was going up to Arbroath in Scotland, where David was posted at the time. Every time I'd visited him up there the weather had been atrocious. Coming from Sheffield, I'm used to bad weather, but that was something else. So when he was posted to Gosport it was a relief. We didn't see the flat until after the wedding and I wanted to cry when we walked in. I was pregnant and hormonal, which made it all seem worse. The walls were covered in woodchip wallpaper, which had been patched in places with different kinds of woodchip. There was some awful 70s furniture. There was a little serving hatch between the kitchen and the dining area and I thought: I've seen that on TV sitcoms set in the 1950s.

I'd made our house in Sheffield really homely, and this seemed terrible. I knew nobody, and I hated the quarter. I didn't know the rules: I thought I couldn't even put pictures on the walls. But once I found out I could change the hideous curtains and get all our own stuff in, it looked better.

When we leave a place I always scrub it from top to bottom and leave it spotless, and then move into one that's disgusting, so I have to start scrubbing again. That's something you hear from wives all the time and I can't understand how some people can get away with leaving the houses in such a poor state, because it's inspected when we move out.

Looking back, my introduction to being a military wife was a horrible time, and I think now: How the hell did I do that? Luckily, it's got better ever since, and I can drive now. Our next move was to Plymouth, then to Bordon for a year, which wasn't a lot better than Gosport; then we went to Lympstone, where we had a lovely house in Exmouth. I'd go back there in a heartbeat. Owen, my second child, was born there, a home delivery with the same midwife I'd had all the way through my pregnancy – a lovely experience. After that it was Chivenor, briefly, and then back to Bordon again. You get completely used to packing everything up and starting again in a new house, finding new schools and nurseries.

We write to him all the time. When he was on his second tour I worked opposite the Hive, so I could pop in every day and fax blueys. I wrote in bed every night with a cup of tea. The blueys were more a diary of what we'd been doing than love letters. On his first two tours out there I sent a letter every day, and on his third tour I did e-blueys, which are good because you can send photos. I always send one or two parcels a week, mostly with sachets of hot chocolate and cappuccinos, and lots of munchies. He lets me know when he needs toiletries. The kids send their paintings, and he decorates the wall behind his bed with their drawings and photos.

During his second tour of Afghan his nan died, but there was no way to get him home for the funeral, as she wasn't a close enough relative. I went to the funeral. I didn't tell him how much his nan had suffered at the end, because he couldn't be here and it wouldn't have helped him to know. On the same tour his nephew was born, so that was great news and we could send lots of pictures. It's good to have something positive from home.

That was the tour when there was a change of public mood towards the troops out there. I think it was because everyone became aware that children were being used as suicide bombers, after there was a terrible story of a little boy blowing himself up. During his first tour, our involvement in Afghan was frowned on: people didn't approve of it at all, they were against the decision to go there and we were associated with that. But after that second tour, the mood of the whole nation changed, and there was a big 'welcome home' march through Barnstaple. I felt so proud. I'm always proud of him, but it was great to be able to show it in public, and see thousands of people cheering the lads.

The second tour was not an issue with the children. They both missed their dad but they weren't difficult. But the third tour was bad because Callum was ten, and much more media aware. He had a recurring nightmare, and he'd wake up crying. When I went to him he'd say: 'I keep having horrible thoughts.' I'd hold him and he'd tell me he'd dreamt that two men came to the door to tell him that his daddy was dead. It broke my heart. All I could do was reassure him that it was only a bad dream. I told him that Daddy's job was just fixing vehicles, and that he didn't go anywhere dangerous. It wasn't true: David was on difficult and dangerous convoys. But I needed to get Callum through and I wanted him to sleep. I just held him and comforted him as much as I could.

I make a point of planning a holiday abroad for David's POTL. He needs to relax, and so do I. We need to be a family, without school, housework or mates around. It's good for him to have fun with the kids. If we stay at home he doesn't want to tell them off when they're out of line, because he's been away, so it's difficult. And he feels he should be doing stuff around the house, helping me, not just taking it easy. On holiday, we get back to being us. His mum comes, and she looks after the kids to give us a bit of time together.

I'm lucky, because he's very laid-back, so there aren't emotional or mental problems when he gets back. He just looks a bit odd: he's mucky, smelly, hairy and a funny colour.

When he's away, it's as if your whole life is on pause. You don't even like to go out and have fun: it feels wrong while he's out there, as though you are betraying him in some way. But you can't spend a whole tour sitting by the telephone. As soon as the kids were old enough, I found a job. I can't imagine sitting around all day; I like to keep busy. When we were in Bordon I worked in a home with adults with learning and physical disabilities, and I loved it. A year later we were on the move again, back to Chivenor. We've been here now for seven years, which for a military wife is fantastic. I haven't had to pack my home up for ages, but I know we'll be on the move again soon, first to Plymouth and then possibly back to Bordon. I'm not looking forward to leaving all my friends, but I already know loads of the girls in Plymouth.

I'd heard so many bad stories about Chivenor being unfriendly and isolated. But we moved in the summer, which makes a big difference. When the sun shines, everything looks good, and there are great beaches and great walks. I thought: What the hell's wrong with everybody? This is a really good place.

I guess if you move in winter it's different. And I'm lucky because I've got a great job as the deputy manager of the local nursery. We've made the tough decision to put the boys into boarding school, because of the moves that are coming up. It's important for them to have continuity of education, so that they keep the same friends all the way through school, and they don't have the disruption of packing up and moving. Callum loves it, and Owen is joining him at the same school. It's me that misses them; they're really happy. It's a decision you have to face. We get a lot of help with the fees, and we've decided it's better for the boys. For me it means that every time David, who will soon be a sergeant, moves, I'll go with him.

The choir has been one of the best things ever, for me: I know that if he goes away again, I'll have the choir to support me.

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