

In Our Own Words

Thoughts on the experience of evacuation and extended separation

More than anything, the Separated Tour has strengthened us as a family

“Few people want to have an “unaccompanied tour”. Marriages and partnerships form because people want to be together in sustained, committed long term relationships. However, in our case, we found that circumstances led us to this situation, and while it wasn’t our first choice, our family made a conscious decision to face it with a positive attitude.

The hardest part about the separated tour is realizing that the family unit can’t be together every day. However, we were facing this dilemma no matter how the next assignment would have played out – either dad would go alone, mom and dad would go while the youngest attended boarding school, or dad, mom, and the youngest would go abroad while leaving behind the two older college-age siblings in the States. No matter how we looked at it, we would be facing a painful separation. We decided that this time around, not everybody’s needs could be met equally, and thus Dad got the green light to accept the tough, unaccompanied assignment. Since he does get to come home periodically, we framed the issue as “Dad is going to boarding school and coming home for breaks.” Not really, of course, but it seems to help put some kind of framework on his absence.

The experience has been different for all of us. For my husband, it gave him a chance to take a challenging assignment, and he feels a sense of mission that is admirable. We’re all supportive and very proud of him for his service to his country. This is vital, since the whole family is able to share in the importance of his work and understand the reason for his absence. He’s had a chance to really dedicate himself to his work without the distraction of worrying about us. However, it’s also been tougher on him than all of us, I think, for we have each other while he’s out there all by himself. To keep the family connected, we’ve relied heavily on email and cell phones. My son has even called us “the chat room family!”

While there is no substitute for being present, I have seen the kids develop more individual relationships with their father and I hope they save some of the beautiful emails from him with his sage paternal wisdom. What’s been really hard is to have him miss all the school events and just the everyday events of life. When former Secretary of State Colin Powell gave his farewell address and spoke of his appreciation for the sacrifices our families are making for our nation, my eyes welled with tears. Yes, this is a sacrifice, and we are doing it for our country. We are living in times in which many Americans are being called to serve and sacrifice.

For me, I've been grateful for the chance to be home to keep the house open and serve as "anchor lady". There is continuity to our lives – the kids come and go and we try to keep life as normal as possible. I manage to pass the time of this separation by staying so busy with work and life that I don't have much time to dwell on anything else. When I do have those rare moments of free time, I pour myself into things I like to do but my husband doesn't. I have decided to make this an opportunity to do the things I enjoy but haven't done for awhile because they are not shared interests for us as a couple.

Handling the logistics of every day life and home ownership has been a huge challenge, but one made a lot easier with the other men in my life – Rob, Steve, Danny, Jim, Chris, etc. These "other men" have been my landscaper, yard maintenance service, painter, handyman, etc. I don't try to do it all – I have my "guys" I call on, and then they refer me to their buddies for the things they don't do. Then there's been Tom, John, and John – the financial advisor, accountant, and lawyer. I turn to others for help, and pay to get professional advice. I've learned that a stop at the attorney's office was very important to help us get our legal affairs in order – we had gotten a lot of advice on how to handle important matters, but unfortunately most of it was almost, but not 100%, correct. The lawyer was needed to set us straight on things like wills, power of attorney, and living wills. And if only the State Department could issue us wonderful neighbors – I have been blessed with two fantastic neighbors who seem to anticipate what I might need and are there to help. I don't know how I'll ever be able to even the score.

More than anything, the separated tour has strengthened us as a family. My husband and I realize more than ever how deeply we have grown to love one another and become one as a couple, just as prophesized in our marriage vows. While we miss each other terribly, we look forward more than ever to the days ahead. The kids have rallied around and been there for each other and us. Our extended family, though far away, has tried to do what they can to help us out, too.

In sum, we remember the words of one of our wise Founding Fathers, Benjamin Franklin, who said, "While we may not be able to control all that happens to us, we can control what happens inside us." It's not easy to live by those words, but we try."