

## In Our Own Words

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Thoughts on the experience of evacuation and extended separation

### ***Observations on Separated Tours***

Following are some observations on conditions or circumstances, which I believe have a bearing on making a long separated tour work. Obviously, there is no standard recipe. And one can certainly not say that the presence or lack of any of the conditions mentioned below will make a separated tour a success—if that word can even be used—or a failure. These observations are not listed in any particular order.

**Communications:** Having done a shorter separated tour when e-mail and fax did not exist and when long distance phone service was variable, I can only say that the existence of e-mail and fax and good telephone connections makes a world of difference. There is no need to feel really isolated when one has these mechanisms. Many people pick a regular time to talk—ours was Sunday morning while I was at the breakfast table and my husband wanted an excuse to put his work aside. I kept a list during the week of what I wanted to ask him and tell him and he kept a comparable list. And he also took advantage of “flowers by wire” services so for Mothers’ Day, birthdays etc. there was often a plant or flowers.

**The Marriage:** Obviously, marriages are very different in nature. First, I think that to make long separations work, it is an advantage to have had a long and stable marriage. But a lot depends upon the nature of the marriage as well. Marriages in which the couple sees themselves as being in a roughly 50/50% relationship seem to lend themselves best to these long separations. The couple stays together because they *want* to be together—not because one is so dependent on the other that he/she needs that person to function. Clearly, if one member of the couple is extremely dependent, a long separation will probably be more difficult.

**Children:** Having experienced long separations both with very young children and with adult children, I can say that it is much easier to be on your own with older children. There are two different aspects to this. Mothers with very young children are extremely busy and it helps enormously to have two adults in the house to make things work. But beyond the practical, if a father is gone for a long while, there is the whole question of somehow continuing to remind really young children that they have a father who loves them. It can be especially difficult when a long absent father returns to find young children who seem distant and timid.

**Practical considerations:** In order to make a long separation work, it is absolutely mandatory that the spouse who remains at home knows how to handle all financial matters and all home maintenance matters. If the spouse who stays at home is accustomed to being fully involved, then there will be no problem on this score. In fact, it seems that in many families, it is the wife—dare I use that word—who handles the finances along with everything else—perhaps a full-time job, home maintenance, children, food shopping and preparation etc., etc., etc.

**Having Important Papers and Affairs in Order:** It's not pleasant to think about, but especially if an employee is going into a potentially dangerous situation, it is very important to have all papers up-to-date and to be able to locate them. This means things like a will, insurance, stocks and the like. Obviously, the death of a spouse is a wrenching experience. However, I have seen spouses just about paralyzed—not by the thought of a spouse's death—but by the fact that they would be totally helpless and unprepared to assume responsibility. This is akin to the practical considerations mentioned above but the scope is much broader.

**Going to Post for a Visit if Possible:** If at all possible, it is wonderful for both spouses if the spouse who stays in the US is at least able to visit the post where the employee is on a separated tour. If a spouse has been to post to visit, it's much easier for the employee to talk about what he is doing because the home-bound spouse has seen the local situation. It's also good to meet the employee's colleagues. And, once the colleagues have met the visiting spouse, the colleagues see the employee more as a whole person.

**Visits in General:** Usually, if an employee is on a separated tour, it is possible for the employee to schedule visits home also. It's good for the employee to get out of the work situation (which is often consuming because of the volume of work) and to come home to lead a "normal" life, if only for a while. In our case, much as my husband appreciated his seven bodyguards, it was also nice for him to be able to move about freely. Depending upon the degree of danger, it is absolutely essential for the employee to get out every once and a while.

Depending on the post and the situation, these extra visits may be part of the package, or may be at the employee's personal cost

**The Spouse who Stays Behind:** A spouse who stays behind fares better if she (and it usually is "she") has well defined and strong interests—to include a regular job. Personally, I found that it was an enormous advantage to have a job that I really liked. Beyond that, the presence of a job helps to give one's life a bit more structure when one is alone.

**Remaining in touch with the Department of State:** If a spouse is on a separated tour, it is important to establish contacts within the Department of State—especially with the bureau or office to which the spouse reports. In this

way, the US spouse always has a source of information. And of course the Family Liaison Office is always ready to help in cases like these. Personally, I found that actually working in the Department of State was an added advantage because contacts were readily available to me.

**Reasons for a spouse to remain in the US:** Obviously, in some cases, there is no choice. But if a spouse does remain in the US because of the couple's decision, it is important to have discussed the matter so that both people are in agreement. The reasons are many, but the more common ones seem to be: (1) A spouse is finishing up an academic degree; (2) elderly parents need assistance; (3) requirements of a child's education or welfare dictate remaining in the US; or (4) a guaranteed second income is a necessity. But whatever the reasons, the issues remain largely the same.