



PRAY FOR THE FAMILIES

By Lady Pippa Dannatt

This article is taken from a talk given by Lady Dannatt at the Day of Prayer for the Armed Forces at St Clement Danes on Thursday 6 November 2008. Lady Dannatt is married to General Sir Richard Dannatt, currently Chief of the General Staff, and AFCU Vice-President.

There can be a perception in the community, and even amongst retired Service personnel, that soldiers' families have got everything they need; good housing, good social life, good pay, and they don't know how lucky they are. I believe that this view is quite out of touch with the real needs and concerns of our young service families today – and of the enormous pressures they face.

Last November I was able to meet young wives in Germany whose husbands were serving in either Iraq or Afghanistan. One of them was Lizzie – who has two young children – and Lizzie's husband is half-way through his fourth deployment to a war zone in five years. When I asked Lizzie what was the hardest bit she said, "Pippa, it's the fear; living in a state of constant heightened awareness, tears never far away, that's the toughest bit."

At a human level, the fear of that dreaded knock at the door is, of course, entirely understandable, and very real. As Padre Colin pointed out, "It's not just the anxiety of losing a husband, or of hearing that he has been quite dreadfully injured, that is out there. For military families there is the realisation that they could face losing a whole way of life too". If a husband is killed, the wife and children face losing their home, their income, their friends and neighbours, and their community support.

I was talking to Karen about the difficulties she was facing with her husband away. She was describing the effort of keeping up a cheerful façade – no one would ever believe, seeing Karen, that she had a care in the world. However, when the doors close, she often feels that she is "falling apart". Karen went on to say that Christian men, in particular, have great expectations of their wives. Christian women are not supposed to do depression, never have marital or financial problems, never shout at their children or reach for that bottle of wine (do they ... ?!). Being a Christian wife can often be an additional pressure, as well as a lonely one, and can imprison you, instead of doing the reverse, and setting you free.

Thankfully, the vast majority of servicemen and women do come home safely from their deployment. However, the ecstatic pictures we are accustomed to seeing on the front pages of our newspapers can mask very real tensions once the press has disappeared, and front doors are again closed. A previously loving husband and father can be aggressive with his wife and rough with his children. Stephanie told me that the worst thing of all was the silence, only broken by inexplicable outbursts of anger followed by his disappearance, often for hours on end, and sometimes overnight. Matters eventually came to a head when Stephanie's teenage daughter snapped one day, yelling at her mother, "I wish he'd never come home at all - I wish he were dead".

Stephanie and her daughter had little idea of the horror of the scenes that had confronted her husband in theatre, and of the things he had heard and witnessed there. Fortunately this couple were living on a base in Germany where good professional relationship counselling was available free of charge. Stephanie and her husband are back together again today, but it took a long time before they felt a proper family again.

Sadly, free marriage counselling is available only to servicemen and women in Germany. The cost of most counselling in UK is way beyond the salaries of most ranks. I think the message about counselling is starting to get through, and we may be allocated a sum in the next budget round. My fear is that it is all too little, and for many couples, of course, it has come too late.

Twenty seven years ago there was a young woman married to a junior officer. While not facing the pressures of an operational tour like so many of our families are today, there was one year when this particular family moved to the North of England with their little boy of two. They had their second baby ten days later, then moved again four months after that, because the husband was on a six month unaccompanied tour overseas. On his return the family faced a third move within the year, and the wife, probably still suffering from post natal depression, was deeply unhappy. She hated the army, and a return to a place that held few happy memories for her, was almost the last straw.

However, that changed when they arrived at their new quarter. There was a letter waiting, and a cake for tea from a very special Christian lady welcoming them, and saying how much they'd been missed. That family was us. It was a turning point for me and the story illustrates how a simple act of practical and sustained friendship can mean so much, and change a life.

Today, family life is under threat as never before. Our families really need your interest, your prayers and your practical help. They need you to be non-judgemental. They need your love and unquestioning support – just as I was supported so many years ago, and have been, so faithfully, ever since.

What can you do?

- a. Read the news. Look at the MOD's website. Get informed, and then pray for our servicemen and their families.
- b. Lobby for relationship counselling to be made free to all our Service personnel in this country
- c. Offer the hand of Christian friendship to the wives and partners of our Service personnel – see Harriet Heard's Top Tips on how to support folk whose partners are deployed.

TOP TIPS... **...on how to support folk whose partners are deployed**

By Harriet Heard

If you know folk who are deployed and whose families live near you or near churches you know, here are some tips on how to support them... Harriet's husband Geoff has recently returned from a tour in Afghanistan.

1. Invite spouse to email with ANY concern for prayer eg. children not sleeping; illness; packing and travelling for weekend away.
2. Texting is wonderful for 'arrow' prayers when there is a sudden crisis at home eg; child has an accident; not heard from partner as usual and worried; children playing up; Mum at end of tether!
3. Offer to babysit – either personally or recommend someone you trust from your church – so temporarily single parents can get out for a well deserved break.
4. Taking meals – especially to Mums with new borns. Your church could get involved in this and commit to taking a meal a day for a week including to non-church going military wives.
5. Invite family to tea and cake – preferably on a sunny day in the garden so they don't worry about their children destroying your house. (An invitation to a sit-down meal is very kind but can actually be stressful to the guest if their children are not angels!).
6. Encourage spouse to contact you if you are handy and can offer practical help – DIY emergencies; decisions about fixing cars etc - very stressful if they can't discuss it with their deployed partner. Or if you are not handy enlist someone from your church who is!

Offering help on partners' return:

7. Offer to baby sit so that the reunited couple can go out.
8. Encourage your church to run a marriage course and invite serving personnel – there are video courses available which just need a host to cook a supper for 6-8 guests and offer a private space to discuss the video.
9. If you have served in the forces yourself, and have the wisdom of experience, invite your serving couple around to chat through their experience of being deployed – 'senior people' can be very good listeners.
10. Pray with them (in person or correspond by email) about specific needs on return; for protection against nightmares and flashbacks; depression; problems re-engaging with the children; differences in attitudes to discipline. This might need some discerning questioning rather than just 'let us know any prayer needs'.