

**As wars rage overseas, more
and more military spouses in**



**Savannah are struggling with
self-reliability, solitude and
assimilation into base life.**

Dinner for Two:
Jenifer Putnam and
her son, Thomas, are
painfully aware of the
empty seat at the
head of the table.





Stars and Stripes Forever: Thomas Putnam awaits his father's return.

“They say that everything happens when your husband is deployed,” says Putnam. “You just have to learn how to deal with it.”

and making memories in the few weeks before leaving for Iraq. Essentially, they train families and spouses how to live as members of the United States military.

Savannah became a military wife when the Army moved into Fort Stewart and Hunter Army Airfield in the early 1940s. Since then, international politics have been coursing ceaselessly through the community. Revolving deployments only quicken the pulse, haunting the military enclaves that have sprouted around each base; they are a sign that the war in Iraq beats on, many miles away.

For the roughly 26,000 3rd Infantry Division soldiers and their families that call this balmy corner of America home, a deployment means living without the touch, comfort and familiarity of a loved one for months at a time. While a soldier's hardships are easily identified and frequently honored, the family members they leave on the home front face a quiet, introspective struggle. Waking up in an empty bed, preparing meals for one or not even bothering; explaining to babies where daddy is and waiting for time to pass become the new routine. Just like the troops form familial bonds with the ranks with whom they are entrenched in the sandy landscape of the Middle East, their spouses must learn to rely on the helping hands of family, altruistic strangers and, most importantly, themselves.

Aside from the voice of the speaker and the occasional fuss from a baby, the auditorium on Hunter Army Airfield is quiet and somber. The troops and families of the 2nd Battalion 3rd Aviation Brigade have gathered together for their family pre-deployment briefing—a meeting that covers all the risky business of a deployment.

The meeting, a function of the Family Readiness Group, covers everything from the proper handling of legal issues and assigning power of attorney, to preparing children for a parents' absence. The FRG

is an official Army program aimed at enhancing the flow of information between the families and the command, encouraging resiliency among members with mutual support, referrals and information, which enhances the well being of the entire unit. Commanding officers soberly describe the official casualty notification process to attentive ears, and plead with family members to rely on the established information channels, rather than feed into rumor mills that can run rampant in Army communities. They stress the importance of quality time

The War at Home

Brandi Savage is a native Savannahian. She lived here all her life until her husband, an E-5 Sergeant, was moved to Fort Campbell, Kentucky—home of the 101st Airborne Division. Like many military families, the Savages are anxiously facing the next in a string of deployments. In the five years since he enlisted (shortly after they married in 2002), Savage's husband has deployed twice—each time in grueling twelve-month increments. Brandi doesn't know when he'll leave again, but she knows it's coming.

"For me, every time he goes away it gets harder because I know what it's like and all the memories from the last deployment start playing back in my mind," says Savage, who posits that her husband will most likely deploy again sometime between September of this year and February of 2008. "They can call him to go at any time."

This uncertainty is characteristic of military life, a fact that family members have to learn to accept when their loved ones make the decision to enlist. They don't know how long they'll live in a particular area of the country before the Army stations them somewhere else. They don't plan holidays or family vacations too far in advance because the situation can change without notice and the soldier can be called to work at any time; some families resort to erecting Christmas trees and cooking elaborate Thanksgiving dinners during months that typically call for water balloon fights and Independence Day fireworks. The strains of military life often lead to divorce, infidelity and other family hardships—strains of which Brandi Savage is painfully cognizant.

Like many young military families, deployments have not been easy for the Savages, and their marriage has suffered during their time apart. When her husband first suggested enlisting in the Army, Savage felt like it wasn't her place to tell him no; she was barely twenty years old at the time.

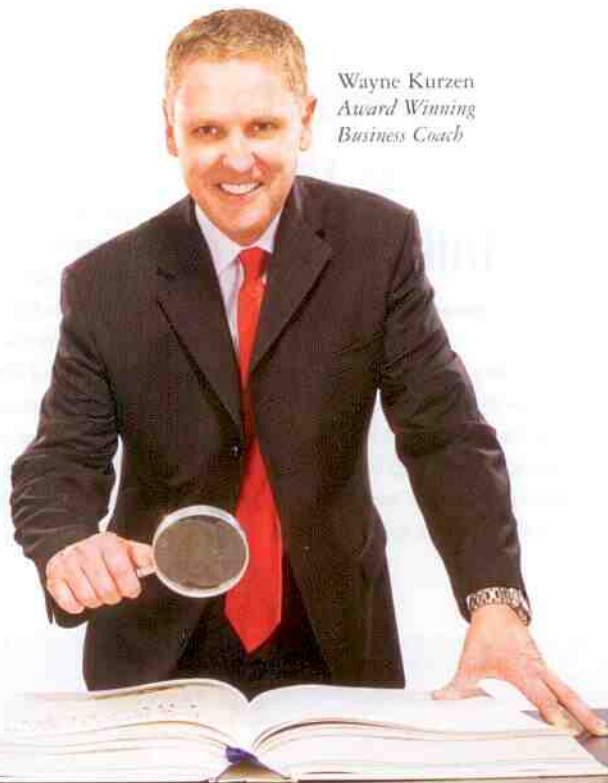
"I was very sad, but certain decisions in a person's life must be made alone," says Savage. "He didn't have a career, he was just working a job and we thought it would be a good life. We were young and it sounded good." But looking back on the first five years of her marriage, she feels wistful for the newlywed bliss most young couples enjoy in their first years together. Savage often retreats to her hometown of Savannah during deployments, surrounding herself with friends, family and community to fill the void.

"You get married to be together," she says. "We've been married for five years and I would say two-and-a-half of those years he's been away for training or deployments." For Savage, who is pregnant with the couple's first child, the hardest part of her husband being gone is making the most of their few opportunities to talk and keep in touch. "Sometimes when he does call, I don't know what to say," she says. "Everything you say is vital when they're at war because you may not get that chance again."

Samantha Reid, who was a student at SCAD when she was introduced to her husband—an E-6 Staff Sergeant in the 3rd ID—has had a similar experience. They've been married for six years, and they have a three-year-old son. Unlike many women married to the 3rd ID, Reid lived in Savannah before meeting her husband.

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