Resilient Families
Grief, multiple deployments and leaving the defence force.
We look at 3 families and their individual responses to being a military family.

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Defence families
In this issue we focus on three defence families who share their experiences about what it is like to have young children and cope with deployment. Each family has a unique experience and we found a range of personal and family strengths. Families accessed a range of supports. One family deals with the loss of a parent in a recent conflict, another chose to change to a more family-friendly career and the third family contemplates multiple deployments.

The ADF is one of the biggest employers in Australia. Many families experience deployment when their children are young adding to the pressures on the non-deployed spouse. Younger children also struggle with difficult concepts such as time and deal with their feelings of grief and loss of a parent who can be absent for a relatively long part of their lives. A returning parent can struggle to reintegrate into civilian life. Families can find it challenging to reintegrate a returning parent particularly as family roles have changed in the parent’s absence. Compounding this is the likelihood of the returned parent having suffered trauma or an injury or just having been changed through the experience.

What is deployment?
Defence personnel are normally deployed for between 3-9 months at a time. It could be to a war zone, or a peacekeeping mission or to a remote location within Australia or for border protection. During that time, they may be able to return home on leave once, dependent on the length of time and location. Defence families also experience regular separations and relocations for training sessions to prepare for deployment.
Before you met your husband, did you have any connection to the defence forces?

Yes, my father and grandfather were both in the Navy, so I knew that culture growing up.

How did you meet Nathan?

I was working in a remote location in tourism and he was stationed nearby for a while. We started to travel to see each other and then I moved to be with him and found work there. We married soon after and Michael was born within a year. We were living in Army accommodation and then he found out he was to be deployed. They offered me the option of relocating to be with my family as we were both away from family at the base. I took up the offer and most of our belongings were packed up and left in a Commonwealth Storage Facility until when Nathan returned.

Was he able to be there at the birth?

No, he came home when I was still in hospital though. Then he went back and was killed in action not long after. At least he got to hold him and meet him.

So he was buried back home?

Yes, basically there was a delay with the media release because of the time difference. The defence personnel just took over Mum’s house for two weeks where I was staying. They controlled everything, the phone, internet use, media contact, emails, texts and everything. They would tell me to get off the phone because someone important was ringing. Even the Prime Minister rang. I only saw Michael morning and evening when he fed. It was exhausting having them around all of the time. There was no time to reflect and no time out; I felt I was public property. Defence acted like they owned us all.

Kevin Rudd rang and said: ‘Hello, is this Wendy?’

Dealing with Michael’s family who were making demands about the funeral also added to the stress.

Then what happened?

Six months after the funeral they moved our belongings down to my mother’s house because they could no longer be in a Commonwealth Storage Facility. I was no longer considered a defence family. That was a rude shock. You are not really in or out after they die.

I find it hard to connect with other defence families at Army unit days. It is hard to hear the other wives whining about how tough they have it when their husbands are on night duty. I am close to other war widows in our Facebook group. They have been a great support and know what it is like.

Did the ADF supply counseling?

Yes, I could access it but it would be a waste of time. How would a counselor know what I was going through? They have not experienced the death of a husband and the father of their child. I just talk to my Facebook group.
Dealing with death

I chose to tell Liam from a young age that his father was on the moon, rather than try to explain heaven when he was so young. He looks at the night sky and talks about Daddy. He has asked if Daddy can come back to earth. He has asked what dying means. I explained that it means he is no longer part of this earth.

Have these explanations been helpful?

I don’t know. On ANZAC Day last year he said ‘My Daddy died in Afghanistan’ That really shocked me. I was so upset. I think it was from what the journalists said to him. They said ‘You must be so proud to have a Daddy so brave, to die in Afghanistan’, and things like that. He has some level of understanding. He asks to look at photos of Daddy on the computer. On Nathan’s birthday, or on the anniversary of his death, we go to the cemetery for the day. We go together, just the two of us and get a helium balloon and have some quiet time together. I have also said that Daddy was a soldier and that he was fighting …. but now he is on the moon.

Where do you attend these services?

It has varied. Sometimes just in the local area, then once we travelled down to the regional centre, then once down to the city (state capital).

What is the ANZAC Day like for Michael?

We get up when it is still dark and go to the dawn service. He is getting better at the services; sometimes he plays, sometimes he falls asleep. There are photos afterwards, and journalists ask questions. Then we go to the RSL for breakfast then head off to the march. We have lunch at the RSL, then we go home for some quiet time and he often falls asleep.

What are those days like for you?

Sometimes when the bugler plays at the dawn service I have to really hold back as it reminds me of the funeral. The anniversary of Nathan’s death is a really rough time, especially when I talk to Michael about Daddy up on the moon.

What supports have you had and how did they help?

Legacy have been helpful, but mostly are older. They got me a new computer. The local RSL (Returned Services League) branch have been a great support. The Defence Trust is also there to help but I am not entitled to the Commando Trust because I was given the wrong paper work by the Department of Veteran Affairs (DVA).

My family organized a reality TV show to re-do my backyard for Michael which was wonderful, except the journalists really tried to get me emotional. I am entitled to a Defence Mortgage and a Gold Card from the DVA and I chose a pension for life, rather than a payout. The money took over 6 months to come though.

Because of my family background, I feel it is important to keep the traditions of remembering and respecting.

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I have Mum nearby and she picks me up to go shopping once a week because I don’t have a license. I have a sister and some other extended family in the area.

Army days are hard with the hierarchy and feeling like I am not really part of the defence culture anymore. Michael enjoys them though and tends to gravitate toward the other Dads. He gets upset when he sees other Dads at school or at the park.

Neighbours have helped out. The early childhood teacher was great and helped me access funding for a specialist for Michael due to his learning issues. He had a difficult birth with the chord wrapped around his neck and shoulders, and I had a Caesar.

His school-teacher is not very helpful getting a letter organized to help with funding now that he has been diagnosed with other issues. The school counselor has had a chat to Michael too.

I am not really part of the defence group anymore. You are not really in or out after they die.

How do you find time for yourself?

Up until he went to school I felt like I was on call 24/7 because he does not have anyone to play with at home, but he is at school now and I am enjoying that first year. I hope to get a job next year. I am trying to look forward and can think about having another relationship now. I have donated a portrait of Nathan someone donated to the local RSL as I didn’t want the house to become a shrine.

Has anything else helped?

Yes, I got a lot of closure when I was allowed with a small group of other families to Afghanistan. I got to see Nathan’s room, and got some understanding of what his work was like over there at the base. We were away 5 days and had 8 flights. It was only for families of those of higher rank.

I want him to know that his father did not die in vain

What do you hope for Michael to learn?

That his father did not die in vain, but in active battle. He enjoyed his work and enjoyed his job as a soldier.

Fiona, how much notice were you given for Caleb’s two deployments?

Before East Timor we had a few months to prepare. For Afghanistan it was longer, perhaps even 6 months. I am not sure what is worse, dreading him going for months or a sudden announcement.

How did the children show their stress?

For East Timor, Sam was a toddler so sleep was an issue, but many children that age have sleep issues. For Afghanistan, Jess was having major sleep issues but she was probably too young to know what was happening. Maybe it was just sleep issues she would have had anyway. Sam took a long time to want to go to bed and a long time to get to sleep when Caleb was away. He would also have bad dreams and wake up a lot in the night. Sam would get frustrated and show his frustrations with Dad being away through throwing more tantrums than normal and acting out. He was not really talking properly so this was his way of communicating his anger.

Jess would cry for Dad if she was fighting with Sam or just very upset.

Were they noticeably clingy during this time?

That is hard to say because I was just home with them and available all the time.

What would comfort them when Caleb was away?

I created albums for each of them with photos of themselves and Caleb and they really enjoyed those. I also had made DVD’s of Caleb reading to them and they loved watching themselves and Dad on TV.

When was it hardest for you?

After the first 4 weeks and right at the end when you know they are coming home. You just want them back.
Before 2009 Caleb’s absences for training had usually only been a about a week long.

• 2009 Caleb deploys to East Timor for 9 months when Sam was 15 months old.
• During this deployment Fiona relocated to her parents house in a regional city. She also visited Caleb’s parents in the same town.
• 2010 Jess was born.
• 2011 Caleb’s training course meant he was away for 5 months starting in February, then Sydney for 3-4 months Caleb was home for about 2 weeks full-time for 2011.
• 2012 The first half of the year training was a month long on and off so Caleb was not home very much, then he deployed mid year.
• 2012-2013 Deployed to Afghanistan for 6 months.
• Fiona and the two children moved house during that deployment by choice.
• Early in 2013, Caleb returned from deployment and was home for 6 weeks, then he went straight back into training.
• 2013 The family moved again, and Caleb had a 6-week course, then he was home for 1 month then away on a 4 month course. At the end of this course, Caleb gave his discharge notice. The Army wanted to promote Caleb, meaning a further 5 months of courses so as a family they decided to avoid this, by giving his discharge notice before this process started. He could then serve out his time based at home and the Army would not spend the money training him.

He was able to use Skype™ most days. He said he found that really helpful being able to see us every day and know we were OK. I found it very draining. Phone calls were better as I could be on speaker-phone and I could keep attending to the children and do housework while we chat. Skype™ sessions every night meant you had to be totally available for an hour at a really bad time of night. The kids and I were both tired, the kids were whiny and sometimes it was the last thing you felt like doing. I did it anyway and of course would never tell him how much I hated it. He sent some parcels and we sent him a care package most weeks. We would cook his favourite biscuits and send drawings the kids did and other things.

What special supports did you give your children to understand and cope?

I had some photo books made with photos of Caleb and the kids. We also video-recorded Caleb reading to the children that they loved to watch. We made up a special calendar so Sam could mark the days he was away with stickers. He didn’t understand the difference between deployment and going to work, that created huge meltdowns when Caleb was home after deployment and then said he was going to ‘work’.

Was there anything you could not talk about?

Before he deployed there was a family information session defence put on where they said not to bother your partner with things that can be solved by yourself or with support at home. They also said to avoid telling them things that might play on their mind and effect them on duty. That made it really hard. Jess was really sick and we were in and out of hospital and medical visits and testing a lot for many months and I couldn’t mention it except to downplay the seriousness of it. Caleb’s Aunt also got really ill and I couldn’t mention that either. It was weird when he come back as we had lots of conversations where I had to explain to him what really happened. That was hard as he felt he was lied to.

What support did you have?

My parents were great during both deployments, but especially the first because I moved in with them. There was another mother whose husband was a FIFO worker (Fly in Fly Out miner). I don’t think I would have survived without her. Sam’s preschool teacher was amazing and had child psychology training. She was very helpful with Sam’s phases and behavior and encouraged us to have conversations with Sam when he was acting out before the deployment. She told us Sam may have been behaving like that because of the things he may have overheard about deployment. We took her advice and put a map of the world in Sam’s room with a star where we lived and one where Caleb was going to Afghanistan. Once we explained it all, the behaviour stopped immediately. Sam was also helpful at home, he would bring me toys and give me cuddles, bring me the tissue box if I was crying and help with the bins, gardening and feeding the dogs. He would also help me to get Jess ready sometimes if we were going out.

What supports did the ADF give your family?

The Padre was really good and the social worker was helpful. There was also a head person to email if anything was needed and he was really excellent. The welfare people called a few times and I totally panicked of course. Those calls were really reassuring though, after I calmed down. It was great to know that they were checking up that we were OK.

What else could the defence have done to help your family?

For our personal experience I really don’t think there was much more they could have done for us. We were given a book on dealing with deployment that was very informative and helpful. They covered everything from the emotions of deployment to a check list of things we should organise before Caleb left. It also gave tips to deal with the home-coming. I had been given a list of all the numbers and email addresses of all people we could contact if I needed help or had any questions. There was a farewell parade before Caleb left which was turned into a family day where all families got to meet each other and meet people like the welfare officer. For us I think they prepared us very well and I never felt like they were not supportive of us. I’m not sure if it the same for everyone though as all units may be different and do different things.
Getting used to Caleb being home full time took a while for the children. Sam acted out at him being home all the time and would avoid him. Jess did not want to speak to him in the mornings. She would completely ignore him at other times. I told Caleb the kids were punishing him for having been away for so long. Since leaving, things are much easier for us all. We can plan events and know we will all be there, including the holidays. The uncertainty is gone. The children are more settled. It’s great knowing the time you have will be yours as a family.

The kids would be all over Caleb at first. Sam developed this extreme reaction where he would be really angry and awful to Caleb after a 3-5 days and not want anything to do with him. This would last for quite a while. He was not speaking well and I think it was just his way of showing his anger. It was particularly hard on Caleb. After Afghanistan Caleb decided to take a step back for the re-integration period. This meant I took care of them and all discipline for the first couple of weeks.

Why we left the Army

We had never planned for it to be Caleb’s career forever. In the end we chose to leave much earlier because of the promotion they offered him. This meant he was going to be away more often for training. When Jess turned 3 we realized Caleb had only been there 1 year of her life. All the time away was the big issue for us. Caleb had missed the first soccer games and other big events in the children’s lives. Employment was the big risk. We were losing security and leaving the Army family. We were excited but nervous. We still see another family whose husband was in Afghanistan with Caleb. He has just discharged too for family reasons.

Life after the Army

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The story-books

Our two children featured in a research-based story book which explored some of the experiences and issues our children were having when Caleb was away. They loved the books and we used them on our iPad when Caleb was going away all the time.

Recently, I read them again to the children and they enjoyed them very much and loved seeing themselves in the photos. They also had a reaction I wasn’t quite expecting. They both cried and cried. Sam got incredibly overwhelmed first as I read his book first and got very emotional then cried and cried. He said it made him remember how sad he was when Dad was away. Jess followed and cried as well and she was incredibly emotional all day. Seeing Sam cry I think set her off. I was surprised to see how upset Sam got since Caleb hasn't been away for a large stint since last year. It has shown me how much they have held onto the emotions they used to feel when he was away and how raw it obviously still is for them. It was a good chance for Caleb to have a chat to them about the whole thing. They did love reading through the books though and Sam couldn't wait to take it to school and read it to his class.
A father’s perspective

I miss the camaraderie, the variety of work and I didn’t think I would ever say it… workplace structure. My job in the army was specialised and each day was different. Now each day is the same. I am responsible for my own work now in the company I work for. Everyone else is responsible for themselves too. That means you see some people being really slack and it is hard, but nobody does anything about it.

I was able to use Skype™ most days and that was great. It was really helpful to me to be able to see them and know they were safe and OK. I sent them a couple of parcels and they sent me a care package most weeks.

I tried to call my parents every other week, but that is all. Any other family or friends missed out.

How did you find re-integrating back into family life and civilian life?

There was some nervousness about coming home and trying to fit back in with the children, especially after Sam’s episodes of not wanting to have anything to do with me. I made the decision to take a step back with the kids for 1-2 weeks after Afghanistan and that helped. After East Timor and then during the extra time away, Sam had a rebellion against me I suppose you would say. This improved with age.

There was no great drama fitting back into civilian life for me.

What were the positives of deployment?

Well there is the financial gain and a certain amount of personal growth. You also develop an appreciation for what we have as a couple and a family. We were resilient. We appreciate each other in the marriage more compared to other couples who have never been apart.

How did Fiona cope when you were deployed and what supports did she have?

Fiona coped by being busy. She is busy anyway with kids, but she had friendships as a support base along with family.

What supports did the ADF give you as a parent and spouse to deal with deployment?

There was one talk we went to one day. It was a seminar and there were some handouts. The Welfare Officer and Padre were also available.

In the lead up to East Timor my unit was based away, so I had to keep travelling to them to train. That helped the family and I get used to being apart.

What led you to the decision to leave the defence force?

We had never planned as a family that I would be there forever. In the end it came down to more time away for promotion and I was away all of 2012, came home in February for 6 weeks, then home for 2 weeks then away for 3-4 months again.

The main reason I left was just lifestyle. It was a nervous time as I left in February and although I had part-time casual work to go to, I did not get full-time permanent work until May. We had a home-loan and bills and the usual expenses with kids.

It was the right decision for our family to leave.
A family contemplating multiple deployments

How old were the children when your husband first deployed? Brian was 2.5 and Davina years was almost 1 year old.

Can you explain to me the lead-up to deployment?

It was really tough for us all. On the day, we went to the airport that I found really helpful for the children because I had explained to them that was what was happening. We could say goodbye and see his plane fly away. Then I could refer to that when they asked where he was. I could say ‘He went on the plane and he will come back on the plane. Then we will go to the airport and pick him up’. The kids needed that. Seb hated it though. He says he doesn’t want that to happen again because it was just too emotionally draining saying goodbye to the kids at the airport. He said because he started crying, the kids started crying and that just made it all too hard for him. I still want to do it though and it is an issue we need to keep talking about as a family. I got a recording of Seb reading a story and sent it in for a book with the recording so they can press the button and read through the book. We did the same for some bedtime prayers because that is important for Seb.

How did you cope after he left?

I found it really tough at times. The kids would be asking for him, asking why he had to go away. I told them he needed to go to another country and help them learn how to behave. Before he left, we moved to the coast to be near my Mum and Dad so I could have that support when he deployed. We had lots of sleep-overs with them and they would look after me. It’s nice going home and someone caring about me. The girls also just go there sometimes and I have a break. Working part time, having the girls and coping by yourself is hard, so they are a big help. Moving was good, but it means Seb has to do more travelling when he gets home, 90 minutes each way. He can stay overnight at the base when he needs to.

What communication did you have available to your family with Seb during his deployments?

Skype™ and phone calls helped. Sundays were special Skype™ days once a fortnight normally. There were no mobile phones or texts. Seb left his phone at home. We emailed each other every day. Sometimes Brian would say ‘Tell dad this’ or ‘Show dad that’ and I would scribe for him. The kids fought at times over time on the phone with Seb. Davina would stay on the phone for a long time just listening to Daddy’s voice and trying to talk and Brian would get very cross when he had to wait.

How much detail could you give over such a distance?

I was not told to hold back any information from Seb, but I felt guilty if I told him how bad things were at home and how hard I was finding it. There was a period of about 2 months when the children were continually sick between the two of them and I was really struggling with very little sleep. After it was over I told him. Then he was really upset I had held that back from him and he felt really guilty I had gone through that by myself.

When did you find it the hardest?

Around the first month mark; that’s when reality set in and I was getting so tired. For Seb, he found the month before he left the hardest. I also got really emotional on ANZAC Day when Legacy made us some ANZAC Biscuits all wrapped up beautifully with a card for us each saying, ‘Thanks for your sacrifice in letting them go’. That just made me lose control completely and I cried and cried. I thought ‘finally, someone understands’. I still cry when I think about it now.
What was it like reconnecting again as a family?

I made him come away on a family holiday soon after he came back. He didn’t want to, but it made a big difference to reconnect. It is hard because the kids were up to different stages so he was often babying them and they didn’t like it. Nine months is a long time in a young child’s life and they changed a lot. He was also really upset by some of the parenting decisions I had made in his absence. It was hard having those very honest conversations where he was saying he thought those decisions were wrong. I made them in order to cope during that tough time. Issues like the kids coming and sleeping in our bed. We were all having trouble sleeping and Brian was having nightmares. It just saved the fights at the time and was much easier on everyone. I think I just had to get through it at the time by doing things my way.

Was he changed when he got back?

He was really tired and tried sleeping during the day to catch up. The kids just made really loud noises suddenly and he would be angry at being woken up. I kept saying: ‘They are just young kids, Seb’. He said it is hard because when you are on base you are with adults for 9 months; adults who are good at following orders. When he came home, he was dealing with a toddler and a preschooler. He also said it was really hard to fit back in as a civilian. When he was deployed, people just got out of their way because they were heavily armed and soften in armored vehicles. Back here he found it really difficult to be just someone ordinary again. When people cut in front of him in traffic he would be so angry. He needed help with anger management at first.

How have things moved on now?

Well we are facing the real possibility of another deployment. That just makes things so hard and we are both really struggling. It puts a real strain on the relationship knowing that is going to happen. Now we know how hard it is and I think that makes it worse.

What do you think the ADF could do to support your family, and other defence families more?

We need resources for parents that appropriate for really young children and that are Australian. There is just nothing out there that helps us. We need books that help them understand what is happening in their families and that explains deployment in a way they can understand.