

Just where does the chip fall anyway?

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Some say, "Let the chips fall as they may." In regards to military spouses I ask, "Just where does the chip fall anyway?" I stood there in the parking lot of the Merry Christmas tent sponsored by Wal-Mart for Operation Homefront outside of Fort Stewart, GA. I had my five year old daughter Wrena on my side snuggled up with her backpack full of coloring books and tucking her hands in my pockets to avoid the chill. My husband, in his uniform, stood to my other side. We were surrounded by military families.

A sense of pride swept over me. Each and every one of these military families was just like us. They knew what deployment felt like. They knew what separation can do to your emotions. They had been through holidays, birthdays, births, and deaths without their soldier. Their soldier had been through them without his/her family. They knew the commissary, the post exchange, the little brown buildings that all looked the same. They knew what it felt like to be known by "last four" and what to do when the sound of the bugle call was heard at day's end. I felt embraced, included, and proud.

My heart hurt as I stood there smiling up at my husband knowing he would be leaving us in just a few short weeks. We had just found out about our new baby to be born in August of next year while he was deployed. We hadn't told Wrena yet, so as I stood there holding her hand, I wondered how she would feel knowing she was a big sister and what on earth is going through her head right now knowing Daddy was going to be leaving so soon. We eased up the line and were given pop-tarts, granola bars, and juice. I was thinking to myself, "What a wonderful program." As I looked around I had expectations in my head. I expected smiles, laughter, tears, and the same pride as I felt standing there. I shouldn't have looked up. I should have stayed in that thought--in that bubble.

Instead, I looked up to see my husband nervous, though he would never say a word. Because he was in uniform and because he is a Captain, he was being saluted by his colleagues. You could tell he was uncomfortable. My mind began to race. Why was he uncomfortable? What was making him nervous? His uniform? The salute? I knew that he was in uniform because, as soon as we were done, he had to go in to work. He was on leave, but because we had come to the post he was going into work to make sure all was well at the unit. Did he just not want to go to work? Was he anxious to get there and go home? I just didn't know.

Then I heard what he must have anticipated hearing. The very reason he was nervous. A comment I wish I had never overheard. A military spouse leaned to her husband to say, "What do they need to be here for? He's a captain." My heart sank. Undoubtedly this person had no idea of my family's commitment to the military and military families. There it was plain and simple; the chip. It was all I could do to not say something. I was overwhelmed with guilt. Maybe we shouldn't be here. Just then, the corporate sponsors and the Governor's wife took the podium to speak. Each spoke of the pride they felt and how happy they were to be a part of Operation Homefront. They spoke of the sacrifices of the military family. Instead of wallowing in that guilt that I had allowed another to place on me, I decided to focus on them instead.

How could the way that I was feeling teach others to throw that chip somewhere so far over the fence we'll never see it again? That chip that separates some military spouses.

I don't know if I have the answer. I don't think anyone ever will because we cannot control an individual. Maybe the best thing for me to say to any military spouse would have been to watch what they say, because you never know who is listening. That didn't seem good enough. Not only did I want to change that I heard what she said, but I wanted to change what she said and what would have made her feel that way in the first place.

We all know it happens. We all know it can't be changed overnight. The simple truth is that we are the only ones that can change it. The military is its own little world. You are going to see cross sections that you would see in any other part of an organization – the worker bees, middle management, and corporate representatives. The difference is that you work and live together with all of these people every single moment of every single day. There is a responsibility with the military and a controlled environment you won't ever see in any other civilian corporation. We are different. We are special.

The bottom line is that we are all military families. Our commitment and our sacrifices, they are the same. So much more would be accomplished if we supported each other together, regardless of rank. There wouldn't be a need for anyone to feel angry, hurt, or slighted. There wouldn't be a need for anyone to feel guilty, a need to explain their contribution, or to defend their soldier's paycheck. In essence there would be no chip to carry on anyone's shoulder. We would all live together as military families, supporting one another just the same.

As for my husband, what a wonderful guy he is. There isn't a need for him to feel guilty or uncomfortable standing in line for something that supports the troops because of his rank. I know, what I wish everyone knew, was that he felt that way because he truly believes in his heart what we all should feel in ours, which is that regardless of customs and courtesies such as a salute, we are all created equal and fighting our battle side by side.