



## War Comes Home: Repeated Deployments

BY MAUREEN CAVANAUGH, SHARON HEILBRUNN  
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AUDIO

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Above: Marines pick up their belongings during a homecoming ceremony on October 4, 2008 at Camp Pendleton in Oceanside, California.

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- [Military One Source](#): 800-342-9647
- [National Center for PTSD](#)
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- Marine counseling services: 760 725-9051
- Children, youth, and teen programs: 760 725-6308

MAUREEN CAVANAUGH (Host): I'm Maureen Cavanaugh. You're listening to These Days on KPBS. Being sent overseas to a war zone as part of America's volunteer military is a stressful experience for the soldier, sailor or Marine and for their families. And that's just the first time. The unprecedented repeat deployments of U.S. forces to Iraq and Afghanistan have put such pressure on military personnel and families that the top brass has begun to take notice. The Army is introducing new mental health tests next month to evaluate how soldiers are coping with multiple deployments. Already, an Army report has revealed that mental health problems increase and morale decreases significantly for troops on their third and fourth deployments to Iraq. As part of the KPBS series "War Comes Home," this morning, we'll talk about repeat deployments and how these quick turnarounds put added strains on families and relationships. I'd like to welcome my guest Jeff Palitz. He is Marriage and Family Therapist at [Eastlake Community Counseling](#). Jeff, welcome to These Days.

JEFF PALITZ (Marriage & Family Therapist, Eastlake Community Counseling): Good morning.

CAVANAUGH: And we're inviting your calls as well. If you're an active or former member of the military, tell us about your experience with repeat deployments. If you're a part of a military family, tell us what issues arise when your loved one is home for just a few months before being sent back to Iraq or Afghanistan. Call us with your comments and your questions. The number is 1-888-895-5727, that's 1-888-895-KPBS. Jeff, you know, I think we all have this image of a

member of the armed forces returning from combat and then there's a period of transition and then they're back in the groove of stateside living. How does that picture change when the soldier, sailor or Marine is facing another deployment overseas?

PALITZ: Well, it changes quite a bit, Maureen, because families don't have an opportunity to adapt when they know that they've got another deployment right ahead of them and oftentimes – I mean, I've seen families where the active duty member will come home and they'll be home maybe only for three to six months before they have to go out again. So it doesn't really allow them to have enough time to sort of let down their

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guard and get back into a routine where they know it's going to predict – be predictable for a long period of time.

CAVANAUGH: Right, and is there such a thing as maybe redeployment anxiety for military men and women that, as you say, they can never really fully relax?

PALITZ: Certainly. I think that there's always sort of a heightened level of awareness and it becomes difficult to reengage to a normal level of intimacy with your family when you know that you are going to have to leave again soon. It – They have to maintain a certain level of emotional readiness in order to be able to withstand that.

CAVANAUGH: And what specifically does that entail? What does that mean to a family situation when someone is here but is still – has that emotional detachment?

PALITZ: Well, as you probably know, there's a lot of energy that goes into raising a family and things just that are simple day-to-day tasks and it's difficult enough for two parents who are actively engaged to do that. But when you have one parent who is, you know, contemplating the possibility of being away from his or her for months at a time and has already known what that feels like, then comes home for a little bit and has to sort of be ready to go within only a few months, I think it becomes very difficult for them to feel like they're part of the normal routine, to feel like they have an equal role in the home and to feel like they can be the parent or the spouse that they really want to be.

CAVANAUGH: And turn it around on the families now. When you have someone who's home, a mom or a dad, a father or, you know, a husband, a wife, and they're home but you know that they're going to go back again. What does that do for the spouse – to the spouse and the family? Do they always keep their guard up in being too happy that this person has returned?

PALITZ: Well, I don't know if that's the case. I think that for the spouse, in particular, I mean, this is a generalization, of course, but it – they want the person home and they're glad to have them there so they try their best to reintegrate everyone into the home but, certainly, there's a certain level to which if you've taken, say, the last six months to develop a routine in your home and you've been working with your kids, you've finally gotten them doing the things that you want them to do, then your spouse comes home and you know they're probably going to be leaving again not too far down the road, there's certainly a greater draw to try to maintain that routine and even in the face of having a family member who's returned where ordinarily there might be some changes in routine if that person were going to be staying for the long term.

CAVANAUGH: I'm speaking with Jeff Palitz. He's Marriage and Family Therapist at Eastlake Community Counseling. We are talking about repeat deployments as part of the KPBS series "War Comes Home." And we're taking your calls at 1-888-895-5727, that's 1-888-895-KPBS. I wonder specifically, how do repeated deployments affect kids? I mean, you know, I guess it all depends on how old the children are so let's start from, I don't know, I guess a child who can understand that daddy or mommy is gone and is going away again.



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PALITZ: Well, you know, children thrive on structure and predictability. They love it when things are the same day-in, day-out. So, of course, when mommy or daddy is going to be going away, it's difficult for them. Now, children don't often express these things in verbal ways. More often you'll see changes in behavior. They may act out at school. You may see changes in their grades. Or just sort of a regression at home where you may see, say, an eight year old child who's behaving more like a six year old child. And they do those things just sort of as an instinctive reaction because they don't really know how to identify and cope with the feelings that they're having. They can't speak about them the way adults do so they act out with their behavior. And it is very challenging for them. You know, again, that structure and predictability is what gives them a sense of security and, I mean, I have one six year old, for example, whose father has been gone for close to four years out of the first five years of his life, and that makes it very difficult for that child to establish a bond with that parent. So they really have a lot of work ahead of them once they're home for the long term.

CAVANAUGH: Is this the kind of anxiety that can affect a person for the rest of their life?

PALITZ: You mean starting as a child?

CAVANAUGH: Yeah.

PALITZ: Well, I suppose it could. You know, it certainly depends a lot on how the parent who's remaining home handles that anxiety and, well, how the – how both parents handle it leading up to the deployment, what they do in terms of talking to the child and encouraging the child to express his or her emotions, to be in touch with mommy or daddy via e-mail, to talk about that person and show pictures and things like that, to do whatever you can to keep them connected. I think that you can mitigate that pretty well. You know, if you had parents who were excessively negative or excessively anxious about it themselves, well, kids are perceptive and they pick up on that and, certainly, it could have long term effects.

CAVANAUGH: I want to talk about your practice, Jeff Palitz, just for a minute. How – just about how much of it is made up of military families and of active duty members themselves?

PALITZ: I'd say it's about a third of my practice.

CAVANAUGH: And how – what kinds of specific issues do you – do they come in with, you know, regarding deployments and the quick turnaround that military members have to go through?

PALITZ: Well, it's a mix. I mean, I see couples, I see individuals, and I see children. So, you know, sometimes it'll be the children being brought in by their mother or father because there's an active duty spouse who's going away again and they know from previous experience, you know, that their kid starts to have emotional issues when a mom or dad goes away. So sometimes they're bringing the child in as a preventative measure, sometimes they're coming in because they're already seeing these behaviors and, you know, most often I'll work with the child and the parent together because I really believe that the parents have a very great power to positively affect how their child handles these things. I also work a lot with couples and, you know, as you might imagine, repeat deployments are very challenging just to maintain a marriage even if you kind of set the children aside for a moment. It's a tremendous strain and it makes it very difficult to have the kind of intimacy and companionship that people need when they're married.

CAVANAUGH: We are taking your calls at 1-888-895-5727. This is part of the KPBS series "War Comes Home." And this morning we're talking about repeat deployments and

how these quick turnarounds put added strains on families and relationships. We do have a caller. Danny is calling from Mission Valley. Good morning, Danny, and welcome to These Days.

DANNY (Caller, Mission Valley): Good morning. Thank you very much for having me. And I just wanted to emphasize on the child behavior. I just got out from the military like two years ago. And I was called like into two consecutive deployments because I was one of the few people that speaks Arabic, so I was like a CT. I was doing like Special Ops for my fleet pretty much, not only my command. And one of the things that I witnessed, I missed my daughter's birth and the first time I saw her, she was nine months. And we had a problem for almost three or four months. Every time I come back from work, and her mom tells her, hey, daddy's here. The first thing she sees is my picture, not me. She goes and she might take a look at my picture because she got used to her daddy in a picture every time they'd say that is your daddy while I was away. This is your daddy, this is your daddy. So it was hard. It was hard. It was – that was one of the things that made me decide to just leave the military but beside that, I've had like a good experience in the military.

CAVANAUGH: How long did it take for her to get over that, Danny?

DANNY: About three – three months.

CAVANAUGH: Wow.

DANNY: You know, three months and, you know, with excessive, you know, I used to just like, you know, stay with her all the time, play with her, explain, you know, trying to, you know, like make her feel that, you know, that's – this is me on the picture but the picture was just used, you know, while I was away.

CAVANAUGH: Right, right. Thank you so much for the phone call, Danny. And you've been shaking your head, Jeff. You've heard this before?

PALITZ: Well, certainly. I mean, you can only imagine how much young children change in the course of six months, nine months, and for some people, twelve to fifteen months. And when you miss your child's birth, those six to eight months that he was talking about, that's a very critical time in the development of a baby where they're developing sort of an attachment to their parents and then, certainly, that's something that's, as he expressed, can be repaired and children are very resilient and with time I'm sure that they'll have a perfectly normal father-daughter relationship but it's incredibly difficult when you come home and you see, I mean, in his case, a child he'd never seen before and there's this nine-month-old baby. He didn't get the opportunity to bond with that child like most of us do. We take time off, we stay home, we play with the baby. And, you know, there's mommy and daddy. And here he's got to try to establish that with a nine-month-old child and people do it but it definitely is a – takes a greater level of effort.

CAVANAUGH: And his daughter related the word daddy to the picture instead of him and so she always had to go to the picture first and look...

PALITZ: Yeah.

CAVANAUGH: ...and then say, oh, oh, that's daddy. Oh...

PALITZ: Umm-hmm.

CAVANAUGH: ...that's – that's something. You know, you alluded to, Jeff, the fact that there are many forms of communication available for today's military members that really were unknown in previous wars. Tell us the ways that families do stay in touch with these repeat deployments.

PALITZ: Well, I'll tell you, it's really terrific and I can't even imagine what the impact must've been on these families when there was almost no method of communication or perhaps, you know, letters that would take weeks and weeks to arrive. You know, certainly the advent of e-mail and in some cases even webcams, I mean, it depends on the circumstances. There's relatively frequent phone contact. But, you know, with – think about just e-mail alone, you can exchange pictures and so in the case that we were just listening to, I don't know if this took place but the wife could have sent pictures of the baby as she was developing so he isn't really seeing her for the first time, he's seeing her for the first time in person. But I definitely think it helps. It's not the same as being here but it certainly helps that they can exchange e-mails, talk about the day-to-day issues.

CAVANAUGH: We're talking about repeat deployments as part of the KPBS series "War Comes Home." My guess – guest, that is, is Jeff Palitz. He's Marriage and Family Therapist at Eastlake Community Counseling. We're taking your calls at 1-888-895-5727. And John is calling us from Poway. Good morning, John. Welcome to These Days.

JOHN (Caller, Poway): How are you?

CAVANAUGH: Just fine. How are you?

JOHN: I'm doing very well. I'm an active duty Marine. I've been in the Marine Corps for about 23 years.

CAVANAUGH: Uh-huh.

JOHN: I have deployed to Iraq three times and over my 23 years of service, I've deployed away from home, oh, ten times or more.

CAVANAUGH: And what...

JOHN: So I'm pretty well versed in it and I think one thing that may not be a total cause of some of the issues that we're having now but during the '80s, the early '80s and – you know, we were involved in the Cold War and in those days, we were constantly preached to that we had to be ready to go, ready to go, ready to go, ready to go, don't, you know, put down roots too deep because you could get snatched out at any time to go away and we don't know when you'll be back. But then as we shifted out of the Cold War, we shifted into, you know, this period where the focus was more on, you know, staying at home, being stabilized, the quality of life type thing, and then, you know, now we find ourselves getting pulled away for, you know, six, nine, ten, twelve months at a time, back, you know, for anywhere up to a year and then back again. And I think that's had a lot of effect on the way things are nowadays.

CAVANAUGH: So mixed messages. I'm wondering, what did the deployment, the double deployment to Iraq, how did you take that?

JOHN: Well, it was – I mean, it's kind of – I actually deployed to Iraq three times...

CAVANAUGH: Three times.

JOHN: ...in the – Yeah, it's kind of tough because in between two of those deployments I, you know, moved from one base to another base so, you know, that's something that's also sometimes forgotten is that in between deployments sometimes military members move from a base to a base and sometimes that's just part of, you know, military life. I got promoted so, you know, I was promoted out of a job. I had to move to an entirely, you know, different base to assume a new position.

CAVANAUGH: Got it. Well, thank you so much, John, for calling in and telling us about that. I'm wondering, Jeff, I know that you have – You're no connection with the military

and they don't take your advice, okay, but as a mental health professional, would you recommend the military stop repeated deployments?

PALITZ: Oh, goodness, I mean, it's – you know, it's easy to say, yeah, hey...

CAVANAUGH: Yeah.

PALITZ: ...stop repeated deployments. Of course, for the health of families, that would be great. I mean, I know the military has a whole host of reasons why that's just not practical right now. But, sure, I mean, it would either be that they stop them or that they, you know, it would be great if they could at least find a way to create a larger amount of space in between deployments so that, as the last caller was saying, they could develop sort of a greater sense of some roots in between. You know, but, again, I just don't know how that – practical that is with the military commitments we have right now.

CAVANAUGH: Well, in that case then, would you suggest that perhaps more members of the military and their families get counseling from one source or another? And do you know if the military is going in that direction to try to help members of the armed services get some help if they're going to be repeatedly deployed?

PALITZ: I – Yeah, absolutely. And, you know, from what I understand and what I hear from the people in my community, there are numerous programs available directly through the military to help spouses that are home, to help children, to prepare for deployment, to prepare for returning from deployment and, you know, there are community resources like myself where, certainly, a lot of people are not aware of the benefits they have through TRICARE and through Military OneSource where they can receive counseling and it's free of charge to them. So as long as they can find a little bit of time to do it, it can really be a great source of support and one more quick thing. What John brought up before is that he's right, a lot of people are moving to areas where they have no ties and then their spouse deploys and they're there with their children without any support, or feeling like they don't have any support.

CAVANAUGH: And let me get some of those names again of support services: Militaryonesource.com. There's also Operation Comfort and there's the Homefront San Diego. We actually have a list of resources for vets and active duty families on our website, KPBS.org. It's on our "War Comes Home" page, so there's a whole list of resources that you might want to take advantage of. I wonder, Jeff, what can families do? Can they do anything to prepare themselves for the idea that the active duty member of the armed forces is going to go away again? Going to deploy again into a combat zone.

PALITZ: Well, certainly there are things they can do to prepare themselves. I mean, foremost among those is just to talk about it, to make sure that it's not a taboo subject in your home, that you talk about different ranges of feelings that – especially for children that their parents talk about how some days you might feel sad or you might feel angry or you might have questions and that it's okay to ask. It's important for parents to lead by example and let their children know that the door is open to communicate about those issues. And same with husbands and wives, they really need to make sure that they talk about the worries they have, the fears they have about their relationship with each other and about what may or may not happen while their spouse is deployed. You know, there are serious safety issues for a lot of these men and women. So, you know, it's mostly just about making sure that they don't pretend like everything's fine and just put on a brave face because they feel like that's what they're supposed to do.

CAVANAUGH: I wonder, you know, a lot of people in the military think – use sort of like a structure, sort of a calendar, this is when daddy or mommy is leaving and this is when they're – this is the halfway point, and this is when they – Do you recommend something like that? Some sort of structure for a family to rely on when they're – during a deployment?

PALITZ: Certainly, I think it's a good idea when it's getting closer to the end. I mean, maybe the last couple of months. I think that it can be difficult for children to track something over the course of six months, you know, and that's a whole lot of counting down. And in some respects, it may actually put an unnecessary emphasis on the fact that that parent is gone. But, certainly, as the parent is approaching – I mean, the return is approaching, I think it's a great idea to have something where the child can count down and talk about what we're going to do when mommy or daddy comes home.

CAVANAUGH: And what about for the service member himself or herself? You know, we always think of the military people as being so strong and so centered and so focused and so ready to go because that's their job. But, you know, you're going back again for the third time. What kind of issues do you hear active duty military members bring you about going back again and, you know, after this turnaround even without the idea of leaving their family?

PALITZ: Well, sure, I think, you know, it is mentally and emotionally exhausting for a lot of them. I mean, look, these people sign up for their jobs out of a sense of duty, for a lot of other reasons, and across the board, I hear men and women say, look, you know, this is my job, it's what I signed up to do, it's my duty to my country, and I rarely hear people complain in that regard. But still there's also a sense that, you know, I'm – they're sort of doing their time, that I'm going to get on that ship and do my job from morning until night, it's very structured, there is things that I have to do, and I'm just going to grind away day after day after day until, you know, it's time to go home. And in that sense, again, I think there's almost an emotional shutoff that comes along with that, that you just sort of put emotions aside, you stuff them down and you do your job until it's time to go home.

CAVANAUGH: And I'm wondering, again, I guess it would be very helpful for the military to actually actively engage some mental health support during – for their military members.

PALITZ: Certainly, and I can't comment on what they have during deployments...

CAVANAUGH: Right, right.

PALITZ: ...I don't really know. But I think that that's essential. I know that they do – they have implemented a recent program where they're starting to do some counseling via webcam where they can have military dependents do counseling sessions in an office and have some sort of counseling with the active duty person who's deployed but I think that's on a pretty limited basis. In any case, you know, everybody – they need support and it's a big concern of mine because I feel sometimes both the dependents and the active duty members have this feeling that they're supposed to be able to do it all without the help of others.

CAVANAUGH: I want to thank you so much for speaking with us today.

PALITZ: Oh, it's been my pleasure. Thank you.

CAVANAUGH: I've been speaking with Jeff Palitz, Marriage and Family Therapist at Eastlake Community Counseling. And, again, if you would like to take advantage or find out what kind of resources available – are available for both vets and active duty families, check out our "War Comes Home" page at KPBS.org. The KPBS series "War Comes Home" will continue tomorrow here on KPBS. Now, coming up, we'll have a conversation with actor Richard Dreyfuss. You're listening to These Days on KPBS.

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