My Dad is Going to War: Nick’s Story

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Hi! My name is James Nicholas, but everyone calls me Nick. My dad’s name is James too, but everyone calls him Jamie. I live in a small town in West Virginia with my dad, my mom Missy, and my little sister Emily. She will be two in a few months.

We live in a three bedroom house on a quiet street. Life is pretty good, usually. At least it was until I found out that my dad, a Captain in the Army National Guard, has to leave in a few months to go back to Iraq.

I found out on a quiet Sunday morning that the possibility of him leaving had turned into a reality. I was working with my dad in the garage when he broke the news to me. Well as you can imagine I immediately started to cry. I have a hard enough time when my dad is gone for the week or even sometimes longer. I couldn’t bear the thought of him being gone for another year of my life – another birthday missed, a basketball and baseball season without my father.

You see, he already served in the war one time when I was four. That was hard on me, but back then I thought that the good guys always won. My mom never told me any differently. That’s what moms do. They protect you. Now that I’m nine I know that it isn’t true. I know that there are all kinds of machines and guns that can take your enemies life or your life – my dad’s life – in a matter of seconds.

My parents already told me that going to Iraq was a possibility, but I prayed for it not to be true. At night in my room, I pray for the things that are bothering me. Well, this has been bothering me a lot. Especially now that I know he will leave for sure.

I am used to my dad being gone for short periods of time. I don’t like it but I realize he has an important job and has a responsibility to our country and to his guys. I look up to him and someday want to be just like him – a military man.

On the bright side, when he comes back from his work trips he usually brings home something new for me – new ACU’s (Army Combat Uniform) or BDU’s (Battle Dress Uniform) to wear, another patch, a helmet. I have a whole locker and a wagon full of military equipment I play with. My closet in my bedroom is also filled with numerous items from PX’s (Post Exchanges) across the country.

My mom gets embarrassed sometimes because I’m always dressed up like a soldier – my shirts buttoned to the top and tucked in, a belt on so tight she wonders how I breathe, my pants tucked into my brown combat boots. Then I put on my hat or helmet, depending on if I’m “fighting” or “on base”. Next, I put on my Iraqi Freedom backpack loaded up with a map, compass, first aid kit, canteen, pocket knife, MRE’s (Meals Ready to Eat), and other survival gear.

Usually I hang out like this at home (base) or head out to my friend Samuel’s house to conquer the enemy lurking in his back yard. Over the last 3 ½ years that we’ve been friends, I’ve turned him into an army fanatic too. When I get there he puts on his BDU’s, boots, and bullet proof vest. Then he gets his already packed bag of gear out of the closet and we head outside, guns in hand.

Samuel and I will study the map and plan our mission. Sometimes we hit heavy fire and have to shoot up over the small hill in his back yard. If one of us gets shot, we yell out “Medic!” Then the other one gets out a first aid kit to try to treat whatever we can until the wounded soldier can be loaded up on to a stretcher (sled) and be taken back to base. We’ve played this way so many times that we even have secret codes to decipher and fake names we use. I’m called Foley and Samuel is Bradley. We use them if we get captured by Samuel’s four year old brother – or as we call him, the enemy.

If we get tired of playing military – which is rare, but it does happen – we’ll dress up in plaid shirts and be lumberjacks. Samuel’s mom doesn’t like when we get the hand saw out and cut branches off the trees in their back yard, but it’s fun until we get caught and have to put the saw away.

We also pretend to be coal miners sometimes. Samuel and I put on our hard hats and go to work. We dig with shovels and hoes by an old storage shed until we unearth rocks, which we pretend are coal. We put the coal in buckets until they are full and then we dump the contents in to a coal car (wagon). It’s hard work but it is worth it to feel like men. We then deliver our coal to the mine foreman (Samuel’s mom). Then she gives us our wages for the day’s work – imaginary bills which we use to shop in the company store (the foreman’s refrigerator).

So as you can see I’m not one hundred percent military obsessed (maybe ninety percent), but it is a big part of my life. It’s a big part of all our lives. Not only does my dad sacrifice a lot right now by being a soldier, but we all do by him being gone so much from our lives.

Over the course of the next 4 ½ months my dad ends up traveling to four different bases across the country for training. He goes to Fort Pickett in Virginia, Camp Shelby in Mississippi, Fort Irwin in California, and finally Fort Bragg in North Carolina.

At home I go through my gear to make sure all of it is in working order. My friend Samuel gets bored making lists of inventory and checking out all of our equipment. He doesn’t see why it’s important. My dad always says that a good soldier has to be prepared for whatever lies ahead. So I check my gear, like my dad taught me, and in a

way it feels like my dad is there with me when I’m doing this. It makes my time without him go by a little quicker, a little less lonely.

Finally, the dreaded time has arrived. We drive down to see him one more time before he departs for Iraq. As we pass the Fayetteville city limits sign, I can feel the tension in our car. Everyone is really quiet, lost in our own private thoughts. My mind races as I think, “What if he gets disabled and can’t play basketball or work in the garage on projects with me any more? What if this time he doesn’t come home?”

With that thought, my mind stops. I can’t bear to think any more. I look at my mom and I can tell she is trying to be strong and brave for me. Well, I can be strong and brave for her too. I start asking her questions, anything really, to try to take both of our minds off of what we’re doing here – what we will face in the next 48 hours.

As we pull up to the offices at Fort Bragg, we call my dad’s cell phone to let him know we’re here. When he comes out to meet us he crushes us in a group bear hug. None of us let go for a long time as the tears stream down our faces. Emily, who is two now says, “Hi daddy” and smiles great big at him. As she smiles she wrinkles her nose up in that cute little way that we adore. At this, we all laugh and pull apart, grateful for something to break up the tearful reunion.

As we stand there, my dad tells us that he is on leave until his departure. He then takes us to the army hotel called the Airborne Inn where everyone will be staying for the next couple of nights. We get settled in and then call to see how far away my Papaw and Gran (dad’s parents), and Mamaw and Pop (mom’s parents) are. They are all coming down to see my dad off too.

When everyone arrives we head out to enjoy our evening together. We talk and laugh a lot telling silly stories from over the years. My dad holds me on his lap like he did when I was just a little boy. He tries to hold Emily too, but she doesn’t want to sit still long enough. That’s okay with me because it means I can be the center of his attention. It sure feels good to be in his arms again.

The next two mornings my dad and I dress alike in our ACU’s, boots and hats. This is not unusual for me, but I do feel like a real soldier now that I’m on base with my dad. At breakfast, I wait patiently as my dad finishes his cup of coffee. I give him a hopeful look and then smile as he passes me his almost empty cup. I fill the rest of it up with water and watch as it turns a light shade of brown. Then I kick my feet up and enjoy my own cup of joe.

It has felt good to spend the last couple of days with my dad, but sadly now our time is

almost up. We hang out together talking and playing until mid-afternoon. Then we all head to the air terminal called the Green Ramp to wait for the C-17’s to arrive. Inside the terminal there are rows and rows of benches set up for everyone to sit on. This area is called the Pack Shed because it usually holds all the soldier’s parachute packs. Today their gear is all piled up alongside the walls of the building. We sit down on the benches and make small talk waiting for the planes to arrive.

My dad tells us that although they are riding on the C-17’s (Globemasters) today, they usually ride in C-130’s. Unlike the C-17’s which have seats in them, the C-130’s don’t. He tells us how on these planes you have to ride in a hammock-like net with a strap holding you in. Dad explains that the inside of the plane is made that way so it can also transport jeeps or other large army equipment.

After three hours of waiting, seven C-17’s taxi up to the runway outside. I had forgotten just how big these planes are. They’re huge! Emily is impressed too because she says “Oh wow!” She says this all the time when she sees something that she likes. Finally, in their places, the planes stop. From the back of the aircrafts, their ramp-like doors lower to the ground. Next, the soldiers grab their gear and place it on palettes which will be loaded onto the planes in between their seats.

As we watch this all too familiar process, we know that our time together has come to an end. My dad returns from loading up his gear and hugs us one last time. At this point, we all start crying. He tells us that he’ll miss us and be thinking about us all the time. He promises to call and e-mail us as often as possible.

He then engulfs Papaw and Gran in a long hug. After he lets go, Gran sinks down onto a bench. She can’t seem to stand as she watches her son get ready to leave for Iraq again. He hugs my Mamaw and Pop. My Pop says, “I’ll be praying for you and your men every day Jamie.” Then with a hand on each side of her face, he kisses my mom and whispers something in her ear which makes her cry even harder. Next, he cradles Emily in his arms and tenderly places a row of kisses on her cheeks. He then bends down and tells me, “I’ll especially miss you buddy. Be good for your mom. I’ll be home before you know it. I love you son.” He then hugs me so tightly that I can barely breathe.

With that he is off. He walks over to the back of the airplane where his men will board. As the manifest is called, all 82 of his guys line up to board the plane in a single file line. As he walks alongside his men, he doesn’t look back at us. I can understand why he doesn’t look. It would be too much. Our sad faces would haunt him.

As the soldiers walk up the C-17’s ramp, all the families move to the terminal’s opening for a better view. Lastly, my dad and his First Sergeant board the plane. My mind flashes back to the last time my dad left when I was only four. I can still remember my Papaw holding me as I reached out my arms and cried, “I want my daddy!” Now at

nine, I want to do the same thing again, but I have my pride. So I stand there in the doorway, with my arms at my sides, and simply watch their departure. The tears make a silent path down my face. Even though I am surrounded by hundreds of people, I suddenly feel alone.

As the planes take off, we watch them until they become no more than a speck in the sky. Finally, we lower our heads and start walking away. I silently follow my family out the terminal doors. My Papaw has his arm around me lending me his strength. My Gran breaks the silence as she suggests that we stay another night at the hotel because of how late it is. Everyone nods in agreement. No one is ready to go back home yet, anyway.

At the Airborne Inn, everyone says their goodbyes and heads to their separate rooms. During the night, I climb into bed with my mom. I am not embarrassed to do this – not tonight. I just need to feel protected and loved, and in her arms, I do.

In the morning, I gather up all the soap to take home with me. My grandparents give me all their extra soap too. It has the army insignia on it so I want it to add to my growing army collection. After breakfast we shop at the PX before heading home. After all, a boy can never have too many military items.

On the way home, I think about how long it will be until my dad is safely back in West Virginia again. His 10-12 months in Iraq start as soon as his boots are on the ground over there – or as the military calls it, BOG.

Over the course of the next few months, I settle into a normal routine – a new normal. I have good days where I’m happy and I run around playing like my old self. I also have bad days where I’m grouchy and snap at everyone around me. Some days I just want to be left alone to think – to work through all the emotions that are running wild in me. My family, teachers and friends are all understanding of this. They try to work with me depending on what kind of day I’m having.

I continue to play with my best friend Samuel. He even helps me inventory all my army supplies. I know it still probably bores him, but he doesn’t let it show. I’ve learned that he is a true friend.

Every night I use my army soap in the shower. As I lather up, I smile as I think of all the good things in my life. Waiting for my dad to come home is hard but I’ll make it. Why? Because I have friends who are there for me. I have a family who loves and supports me. I have a dad who I am so proud of that one day I want to be just like him. Not many kids can say that their dad is a hero. He is a hero for our country, but most importantly, he is a hero to me.