

## Chapter 17 – The Home Front

*Behind every successful Battalion lies a force of formidable women...*

Memoirs of Home Command, Operation TANAGER

Many a time at Happy Hour at the Mess I have heard wives jokingly endeared as *The OC Home Command*. It always seemed mildly amusing but secretly quite pertinent given the lengthy periods of time our men spend away from home. It wasn't until the role became a full-time duty that the initially impressive title lost its shine.

It is very difficult to convey the trials of life for those left behind. As military wives we all made a choice to share our lives with a third person – The Army. The Army is a demanding and all consuming friend at times. For the group of women 4RAR left behind the year 2001 was one of contradictions – independence and loneliness, laughter and tears, pride and anxiety. We achieved an enormous amount; each and every one of us learnt just what we could conquer without our men. There are many personal stories of triumph and success and just as many of defeat and frustration, however one thing remains true, we did it, we made it through.

For most of us left behind the leaving part began shortly after the new working year resumed. The time leading up to Easter was hectic with training programs, bush trips and the exercise in Shoalwater Bay all accumulating to form a mass of coloured lines on a spreadsheet around which we tried (usually in vain) to plan our lives. The boys were preoccupied, frantically busy and the deployment date seemed such a long way away. We received all the books and pamphlets on long-term deployments but it still didn't seem real. Many of us had only recently been posted into the area so we had the added distraction of trying to meet new people and form a support network for the deployment.

The farewell ball, a cruise on Australia's most famous harbour, became the focal point for many couples, a night off from the arduous preparation and a chance to spend some time together before the deployment. The ladies looked glamorous and the men handsome in their finery. The wine flowed and the stories got bigger and better as the night went on. The spectacular view and the balmy evening lent themselves to some serious fun. The night went on well into the next morning and there were many sore heads the next day. The ball was the beginning of many friendships among the women and the last of social occasions with our men.

Under the gum trees on a sunny afternoon the Padre gave a farewell service for the Battalion. It was the last opportunity we had to share our pride and admiration. In the last minute chaos it is easy to lose sight of the bigger picture. This wasn't another bush trip; this was about freedom.

### *The Prayer of a Soldier's Wife.*

*Today we have the opportunity to reflect on the importance of our freedom and the need to stand up for what free people believe in.*

*You are our men.*

*Our husbands, our fathers, our sons, our brothers, our friends.*

*We honour your commitment to the freedom we enjoy.*

*We honour your commitment to the ideals that we teach our children.*

*We are proud of the men that you are.*

*We believe in your integrity, your courage and your skill.*

*We believe in the spirit of mateship that will sustain you through the toughest of times.*

*We believe you will do your very best.*

*We believe you will do us proud.*

*You are ambassadors of all that it means to be an Australian.*

*We know that you will work hard.*

*We know that you will inspire those around you.*

*We pray for you in the days ahead.*

*We struggle to imagine what it will be like.*

*We try to give thanks for what we have,*

*And not complain.*

*But as capable as we are, and as strong as we can be,*

*You are our men.*

*And we will wait, counting the days until you return home.*

*And only then, will the world be as it should.*

Katherine Mathews

Suddenly it was Easter and I found myself at the airport with this handsome man who looked remarkably like my husband but far more serious and focussed, and somehow already gone. Military men have the ability to focus on the task ahead and ignore any distractions, but the women struggled to keep the tears from welling. When the moment came and he walked away it suddenly seemed like the bottom had collapsed out of the world. I scooped up my little boy and surveyed the scene around me. There were children crying, mothers and wives crying and lots of men in uniform trying really hard not to cry. It was really happening and for the first time in my marriage to the Army I really understood exactly what I had signed up for.

*"When he got on the plane I couldn't breathe. I just couldn't imagine how I would do it. The most simple of tasks suddenly seemed completely overwhelming. I couldn't count the money for the parking machine at the airport. I couldn't bring myself to count the days until they were at least less than one hundred. It's lonely because none of my family and friends understood. Whenever anyone told me I'd be okay it just sounded mean and made me want to cry because what if I wasn't?"*

Once the planes took off we all collected ourselves and began the journey to November. The unit had organised weekly meetings of the wives and families and these proved to be a great support to many of us in the first few weeks of the deployment. Wednesday was an excellent choice of day as it broke up the week and provided a much-needed respite from the children and the isolation of life without our spouses. One of the wives gave birth to her third child just days after her husband deployed. Kim's son was an unofficial measure of time, as he grew bigger the weeks remaining decreased.

Being the spouse of a man with such a noble job is often humbling because it asks of us a certain degree of perspective. It also introduces an anxiety that never really subsides. With the terrorist attacks in America that occurred in the middle of the deployment, many of the wives found it acutely relevant to their lives; the brevity of the commitment our husbands have to their queen and country became glaringly obvious. Likewise the potential threat to their lives and our lifestyles certainly added to the already ever-present fears. Perhaps one of the greatest comforts during the separation was the huge sense of pride that the wives shared. We watched in awe as our ordinary men achieved extraordinary things.

*"I feel an enormous amount of affection for any man I see in an Army uniform since my husband left. It's almost as if smiling at him is like smiling at my soldier who isn't here."*

Mother's Day was the first major hurdle for many of us. The Family Support Committee organised a picnic at Garrison Point. It was the first of many successful social gatherings the wives were to have. The opportunity to talk with women who understood kept many of us together. Lots of wives and partners spoke of the predicted sense of relief that the waiting was finally over, they had gone, they weren't coming back for many months and it was time to find a routine and settle in for the duration.

*"Who will organise Mother's Day? My toddler certainly won't and it wouldn't be the same to do it myself."*

The first month was busy, weekly meetings and the Kids Bike/Scooter/Rollerblade Day, Australia's Biggest Morning Tea and a Wine and Cheese Night. Regular updates started to come in as the men got themselves settled in. Phone calls began and letter writing became part of the daily routine. On reflection, the first month was the most difficult. Establishing a routine was hard, the simple things often the most difficult, sleeping alone, feeling frightened of the bumps in the night, remembering to put the bins out, cooking for one less, filling the weekends.

*"There is nothing glamorous about running down the street at 6am in your husband's pyjamas with hair sticking out from your head at odd angles and a wheely bin in tow. My neighbours must think I am insane since my husband left but I just can't seem to remember everything."*

The children adjusted to their father leaving in their own individual ways. My toddler would crawl up the leg of innocent bystanders in army camouflage and look longingly to see if it was Daddy. Many women spoke of being unable to go to the base with youngsters as it was too upsetting for them to see uniformed men. Women with older children spoke of them pushing the limits at home and at school. The first month was a testing period for all and once June arrived and the first wave of ROCL was in sight we all prepared for a disruption to our hard-earned routine!

The Family Support Committee kept themselves and everyone else busy organising the monthly calendar of events. By mid-June we were all starting to feel a little more in control and the friendship groups really came into their own. The meetings evolved from information sessions into an open forum for humorous tales and friendly heckling of Captain Kerr, the OC Rear Details. The 'regulars' had established themselves and the Waratah Centre came to resemble a noisy café. With no husbands to feed many resorted to feeding Captain Kerr and Lieutenant Ferguson, and as a result the weekly meetings became a buffet of chocolate cakes, slices and biscuits. The wall of the Waratah Centre was slowly being covered with photos of our beloved men and the locals of East Timor.

July brought with it the school holidays and many departed for time with grandparents and family. Those behind enjoyed a variety of activities organised by the Social Support Committee. Sunday BBQ's at the Officer's Mess, a visit to the Fire Station and a day at Wonderland kept the children busy. The weekly meetings continued with a highly amusing introduction to Yoga. Captain Kerr enjoyed a hand massage at his first Nutrimerics party. DHA appeared to discuss home maintenance and left with enough customer feedback to fuel the following year's market research quota. The ROCL rotations were well and truly underway and many happy faces were noticeably absent from the weekly meetings. The Market Day was a huge success with many people enjoying the benefits of retail therapy. The goods on offer ranged from clothing and makeup to jewellery, kitchenware and some battery operated devices that aroused many giggles from the ladies. Halfway was approaching and we were all starting to actually believe we would make it and have some fun along the way.

*The orange glow of the Balibo Sunset casts a calmness to all who watch.  
The anticipation of another day looming.  
The only sound is of a gentle breeze and a chopper in the distance.  
The pink glow of the evening sunset brings with it an emptiness.*

*The cold wind its only companion.  
There is a sound of police cars, and traffic and in the distance a child is crying.  
In the kitchen she sits and wonders, her mind drifts to East Timor.  
On the gun, he sits and wonders, his mind drifts to home.  
The loneliness of two people intertwined by time but not place.  
Images are all they have; they cling to them dearly.  
Certain smells are all but a memory; she reaches for his aftershave.  
A tear falls from her eye.  
As she marks off another day on the calendar she realises she has survived.  
He eagerly crosses off another day and knows things can never be the same.  
The greatest test of love has been tempted and a bond stronger has evolved.  
As the fog clears on another frosty morning she prepares for another day.  
As the sun rises over a sleepy Balibo he walks the dusty track.  
She smiles as the children hug her and she feels at ease.  
For the biggest critics have given their approval.  
He sees children smiling and he feels at ease.  
For a brief moment there is peace and time to play.  
She reads his letter with the greatest sense of pride, her heart aches.  
This is my husband she declares to her empty heart.  
Suddenly she is filled with a sense of richness, the richness of love.*

*Anonymous*

In August we decided there was no valid reason why a Dining-In Night at the Officer's Mess required officers so a few of the wives organised a Cross-Dress Dining-In Night to be held in September. We donned our husbands' uniforms, invited some members of the 4RAR Association, and had a Dining-In Night to remember. Like all good parties at the Mess there was great consumption of food and wine and far too many speakers and toasts to maintain concentration. Major Berry relished the position of Dining President and gleefully charged a number of the *Usual Suspects* with heinous crimes and administered suitably severe and intoxicating punishments. The Padre got creative and shared a novel Grace

*Lord we ask your blessing as we gather here tonight  
Bless the wine we're drinking as well as every tasty bite  
Bless our conversation and the sharing of our stories  
As we recount our men abroad and tell of all their glories*

*We're conscious as we gather in these comfortable surroundings  
Our spouses are experiencing conditions less abounding  
Many are on duty and wearing their night vision  
Others are at orders groups and banding on decisions  
Some will be patrolling through the streets and through the weeds  
Some are writing letters telling loved ones of their deeds  
Maybe some are taking time to pray to God above  
That they'll return home safely to the arms of ones they love*

*So here tonight so far away from loved ones sadly missed  
As we dine together and perhaps get slightly pissed  
We ask your blessing as we dine and share ourselves around  
And also bless our loved ones that they'll come home safe and sound*

*Chaplain Jim Cosgrove*