

**My Story: I Have Not Deployed**

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Over the last decade, deployment has become such a central aspect of the military experience that civilians often assume I have been overseas to Iraq or Afghanistan. For better or worse, I have not. This common assumption causes me to feel inadequate and guilty. At times it makes me feel like I have not done my part as a soldier. I have yet to deploy.

I served actively in the Army in 1990's when deployment was not nearly as common. My active duty time was spent in a motor pool on the island of Oahu of all places. I just recently reenlisted in the Army National Guard and, therefore, am lacking the experience of deployment. Consequently, I cannot personally speak to the experience of war or the reentry process. I can speak of how it feels to be on the other side, that is, to be a soldier who has not had the honor of serving overseas during wartime. Instead of wearing a combat patch, I wear the guilt of not having done my part. Sometimes I feel left out when others speak about their time "in country." They share a language and emotion that I lack. I am just not part of that club.

In addition to fulfilling my duty as a soldier, an upside to deployment is that it is a rare opportunity to gain unique experience and earn significant benefits, such as the Post 9/11 GI Bill. I used the Montgomery GI Bill to fund my undergraduate work. As a student, these benefits can be crucial to the completion of a degree. Therefore, I am very aware of the power of this resource. The new GI Bill offers even greater opportunities to returning veterans. As someone who is passionate about education and the college setting, the new GI Bill tempts me greatly. Sometimes it seems so simple: I should just volunteer for deployment and return with the greater financial resources I need to fund my education.

I am not alone in this conception of deployment as a route to credibility, inclusion, and financial stability. Some of my fellow soldiers describe their plans of volunteering to join a mobilizing unit to reap these rewards. Many look forward in particular to the financial

advantages. Active duty can mean employment in an economy where steady work is hard to find. It can also mean a break from the consumerism of everyday life which equates to an opportunity to save money. Others dream of finally being able to afford college.

However, my friends and family view deployment through a different lens. Fear of harm and stress causes them to desperately not want me to go. Furthermore, I am a single mother of a quickly growing boy. Deployment would cause me, just like every other deployed parent, to miss out on precious years and developmental stages of my child's life. Having a son on the verge of puberty, I fear I would leave a child behind and return to a man. Nevertheless, if the time comes, my mother and stepfather are more than prepared to care for him. Fortunately, my mother sees it as her patriotic duty to care for her grandson while her daughter is engaged in military activities.

Yet, I must consider my parental role. As the only parent my son has, I am a critical part of his life. He has me and me alone. If he loses me, he has no other parent to turn to. If I deployed, he would spend many sleepless nights worrying about my well-being and whether I would come back home. How would this affect him? How much stress would he experience imagining the challenges of my environment and situation? Would it affect his performance in school? Would he have a romanticized, heroic image of me or would he resent me for leaving him? He is probably unaware of the probabilities or possibilities of me returning with post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injury, which would inevitably affect our relationship and my ability to care for him.

My parents' only frame of reference of the conflicts is the news which typically shows the most extreme events and consequences. Before reenlisting, I had the same point of reference. However, now I am surrounded by the formerly deployed. When I reentered the military, I felt genuinely relieved. This may sound naïve, but despite the many stories of divorce and personal

hardship, the vast majority of soldiers seem just fine. Of course, this is a personal observation, and I am sure much goes unsaid or unseen. But, family and friends do not benefit from this exposure and consequently, often imagine the worst.

After the summer of 2011, I will be deployable. I am currently a second lieutenant in the Michigan Army National Guard and have yet to finish a block of required training which is needed before I can deploy. This training will be over in a few months and I will then be approached with opportunities to volunteer to go overseas with other units. Plus, there is always the possibility of my own unit activating.

I wonder if my internal sense of obligation and need to serve is self-centered. Or, whether, considering the sacrifices that thousands of military families are making every day, is my family's need for me to stay safe at home and care for my son greedy? Which choice is the selfish path?

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