

## Another Tearful War Farewell

Military calls former Albany man for third tour of duty in five years

War again came for Staff Sgt. Brendan Kearns on Thursday, and for the third time in just more than five years, he and his family responded.

Kearns, formerly of Albany, had his last tour of Afghanistan unexpectedly extended to 16 months before returning home in June 2007. Prior to that, he fought in Iraq for most of 2004 and in 1991. A member of the Army's 10th Mountain Division's 3rd Battalion, 71st Cavalry, Kearns also served tours of duty in Somalia, Honduras and South Korea.

So there was a sense of the routine and a hint of resignation in Kearns' voice as he packed up his camouflage belongings for at least another 12 months in the desert. The soldier, now 40, said his emotional farewells to his wife Rebecca Spataro-Kearns and three boys — Aidan, 9, Kieran, 6, and Quinlan, 3 — at a lunchtime ceremony on this upstate Army base. Then he was gone. Again.

"It is an all-volunteer force," Kearns said, before boarding a plane. "Because of that, people should know what they are getting into before they sign up."

His wife had a harder time with goodbye. "No nervousness, no major anxiety, just sadness," said Spataro-Kearns, who grew up in Clifton Park. "You don't ever get used to this." Tears interrupted her.

For two years, the Kearnses have shared their emotions, resolve and outspokenness with the Times Union through news stories and her blog. The multiple deployments, stop-loss extension and years apart reflect the sacrifices military families are making at a time when the nation doesn't have a military draft and its forces have been heavily taxed by years of combat in Afghanistan and Iraq.

During World War II, it was not uncommon for U.S. fighters to spend years at a time abroad. In Vietnam, troops generally served one tour, sometimes two. Now, an active-duty soldier can be deployed every other year to the Middle East. Repeat deployments leave military members more vulnerable to health, family or work problems at home, military and academic studies show.

Kearns has been strong and lucky enough to avoid problems. He is expected to work out of a base in Logar Province, located south of Kabul, providing stability for the Afghan government. He said he was not nervous, but eager to be part of a troop increase expected in Afghanistan to quell a stubborn resistance that he believes has remained because of America's preoccupation with Iraq.

"We shifted our focus from the country that truly needed our help," Kearns said. "Now, we're going to do double the work."

The 10th Mountain Division is the most deployed in the country, said Kent Bolke, curator at Fort Drum, but repeat deployments are becoming increasingly commonplace for much of the

military. One-third of the 1,700 New York Army National Guard soldiers who recently returned from Afghanistan were serving their second tour. Last spring, the Army reported that of the 513,000 active-duty soldiers who have served in Iraq, more than 197,000 had deployed more than once, and more than 53,000 were sent three or more times.

"That is a lot of stress, a lot of danger," said Mathew Tully, a veteran and Colonie attorney. He said he has seen an increasing number of cases of military reservists losing their civilian jobs because of repeat deployments.

At the Kearns household, the couple's children have grown more emotionally aware of their father's absence, Spataro-Kearns said.

"I know more wives whose husbands are on multiple tours than those who are on their first," she said. "We volunteer to do this, but it still hurts."

Her husband worked as a dialysis technician at Albany Medical Center between the first Gulf War and the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The Kearnses now reside at Fort Drum, but this mission to Afghanistan will be his last.

"I'm eligible for retirement when we're over there this summer," Kearns said. "That's what I'll do when I get back."