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The Beaver County Times discusses family issues arising from military deployments with Managing Partner Greg T. Rinckey Esq.

Mom goes TO WAR; Secret lives of the women who protect our country

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 Stacy Keyte had just re-enlisted in the National Guard in 2004 when she got pregnant with her son, Caleb. He was a year old when she got a call at her job at a local bank. She was being deployed to Iraq. Going to war wasn't on her mind when she had her baby. "I was thinking about first steps and getting through the teething stage," she says, and then suddenly she had two months until she was shipping out and leaving her baby and husband behind. "I was in panic mode. I had a 1-year-old, I was like, 'What am I supposed to do?'" Stacy and her husband, who is also in the National Guard, prepared for her departure and Stacy "made every moment count" with her son. She picked him up from day care every day, and they came home and danced to country music to unwind - a little mother-son ritual. She took her last few weeks off work to stay home with him. Then she went to Fort Hood for four months of training, and a few weeks later, she arrived at her station in Tikrit, Iraq. "Those simple moments of having those little arms around your neck, or that big baby belly laugh, all things you do every day, you don't think how much they mean until you can't do it," she says. Stacy represents one of 200,000 women who are active duty in the U.S. military and 190,000 more in the Reserves and National Guard; women now make up 15 percent of the country's active forces. The number of women in the military has shot up over the past few decades. About 40,000 women served in the Persian Gulf War in the 1990s, and that number more than quadrupled to more than 200,000 in Iraq and Afghanistan. The number of women veterans is expected to double by

2035. Women in the military reap benefits from their service. They are better educated than their non-veteran counterparts, thanks in part to the G.I. Bill - about a third more women veterans had some college education compared with non-veterans, and 5 percent more have advanced degrees, according to VA data. And they often feel deeply committed to their roles and their country. But now, they also have the pressures of balancing their personal and family lives with wartime experience in unprecedented ways. Before the first Gulf War, mothers were given the choice to carry out service obligations, or honorably leave the military, but now women are expected to deploy. Today, more than 40 percent of women in the military have children and at least 30,000 single mothers have deployed over the past 10 years of wartime operations. It's a fascinating time for women in the military, says Dr. Amy Street, director of the Women's Health Sciences Division of the National Center for PTSD, and associate professor of psychiatry at Boston University Medical School. "We have never seen women return from war with combat experience, almost any time in U.S. history, like we have in the last 10 years," she says. Now front lines are blurred, and women often see combat, or combatlike situations, whether they are doing the dangerous work of driving Humvees or working on bases that are prone to attack. The military provides women good pay, stable work and opportunities for advancement and serving their country, which are good things for their families. Still, they struggle with separation from loved ones, sometimes dangerous work and the often-difficult transition back to family life, says Kim Olson, a retired colonel from the Air Force and president of Grace After Fire, a nonprofit group that serves women veterans. "When she gets off the plane, guess what the expectation is? She's home! Here's the kids. Here's your house. Here's your job," says Olson. "She's expected to just roll into these roles with no space to reintegrate."

BATTLE LINES It used to be that the Reserves and Guard, where a lot of women served, stayed home and filled in the gaps, but in Iraq and Afghanistan half of those who served on the battlefield came from those groups. Common support roles for women, like engineers, logistics, transportation and medical, found themselves in battle. "There are no more front lines; if you're in operations, you're in combat," says Olson. Stacy Keyte arrived in Tikrit, Iraq, in early 2006, and she missed her son every day. "But I'm tough," Stacy says, and she immersed herself in her work. To feel close to home, she covered her room with pictures and carried photos of her baby with her

everywhere she went. She was doing administrative personnel work on base, but that didn't mean that she was in a safe zone. Indirect fire from insurgents - mortar and rocket attacks - came into the base regularly. She didn't share these details with her family back home, however. "When I got them on the phone, it was more like, 'It's so good to hear your voice,'" she says. This disconnect can be isolating, says Dawn McDaniel, an Army veteran who runs a consulting service that helps servicewomen find jobs. "Some women just don't feel like they can have conversations with people - they have been in combat and you want to talk about what happened at the Emmy's," she says.

FAMILY LIFE AND ACTIVE DUTY

More women are going into active duty, but the military is still an institution that is geared toward taking care of men. "There was a generation of women - mine - in the late '70s and '80s that blew the doors open for women in the military. We were flying the jets and driving the ships," says Olson, who was part of the first generation of female military pilots. But now the military is "playing catchup" to support the women it has come to rely on, she says. "When we took the door off the hinges for women, we didn't have a safety net to care for them, especially when they deploy and leave family behind. That's what we missed," she says. One of those issues is child care. Stacy Keyte took comfort knowing that her son and husband had each other. But six months into her contract, her husband, who is also in the National Guard, was deployed. This left her family in a unique military situation, and a sometimes controversial one, in which they had to sign over legal guardianship of their child to someone else. A "family care plan" is what dual-military families like the Keytes, or single parents and divorced parents, use to arrange for someone to care for their children when they're deployed, and it requires legally signing care of your children to another caretaker - a grandmother, sibling or friend. The responsibility falls on the soldier to find a willing caretaker and, if necessary, pay them. If a family care plan falls through and a soldier fails to ship out, punishment can be harsh. Consequences range from dishonorable discharge, loss of rank and benefits, and even court martial. In one high-profile case in 2011, a 21-year-old Army cook and single mom was arrested when she missed her flight to Afghanistan because her mother backed out of the agreement to care for her 10-month-old son just days before her departure date. Dawn McDaniel was working as a bodyguard for a general when she got pregnant in 2000, and she decided to leave the military. She was married to another soldier, and she

didn't feel comfortable signing a family care plan, she says, because in rare cases, child custody issues arise for soldiers when they return. "Maybe I just had a lawyer who didn't think women should be in the military," says McDaniel, but after getting legal counsel, the risk for her felt like too much. Indeed, in rare cases, soldiers who sign over custody of their children temporarily can face child custody battles when they return, according to Greg Rinckey, managing partner at Tully-Rinckey law firm in New York and a former Army prosecutor. This happens most commonly to parents who are separated he said, and the child becomes "stabilized" in the environment of the parent who stays home. "Judges are not supposed to say that because you were out of the picture we're now going to give custody to the other parent, but the judge is going to rule in favor of what's best for the child, not the parent," says Rinckey. Stacy Keyte and her husband were grateful to have a close family friend, who was like a second mother to them, to take care of their son while they were both serving orders. These policies can seem harsh to civilians, but they are in place to protect other service members, says Rinckey. "If you are in the Army, the understanding is you need to be deployable," he says. If multiple members say they can't go, then a unit deploys not at full strength and there are holes in that unit. Then you can start taking casualties. **EASING BACK** Deployments can be taxing, but they can also be enriching. Maj. Annette Barnes of the Utah National Guard was deployed to Kosovo last year as a civil affairs officer for the local population, which she describes as one of the most rewarding experiences of her life. She helped get a roof for a local orphanage, took donations for linens and clothes, and even helped a family get a lifesaving heart surgery for their infant. She joined the National Guard after college because she had a "nagging feeling" to serve her country. She spent 16 years in the service before leaving to raise her three children, then returned again at the age of 46. She had mixed feelings, though, when her oldest child and only daughter, Chloe, had a "nagging feeling" to join the Guard her senior year of high school. Chloe signed up and was deployed to Afghanistan in March, just a month after Barnes returned home from Kosovo. Barnes also missed some major family events while she was gone - her same daughter met and got engaged to a man who Barnes had never met, and Barnes ended up planning her only daughter's wedding from 6,000 miles away. "That was something that we talked about doing together her whole life," says Barnes. "Planning a wedding from the other side

of the world was fun and stressful - but mostly stressful." Keyte's family had changed when she returned, too. Her son recognized her from pictures, but he was uncertain at first. "I remember him looking at me as if to say, 'I'm not too sure about you, lady,'" she says. "I was somewhat prepared for that, but it was hard." As more women are exposed to violence while serving, many also suffer from PTSD. Dr. Amy Street says that women seem to be returning with similar levels of PTSD to men, but women are more likely to suffer from depression as a result, while men are more likely to act out physically. Keyte says that she did not experience PTSD, but she did feel "on edge" after nine months of wearing gear and carrying a weapon. "I would catch myself driving my child in my car, and something doesn't feel right - It's because I didn't have my Kevlar and M16. It felt strange and not safe to not have that with you. At first it feels like something is missing." Keyte left the service after she returned from Iraq. She got pregnant with a second child and as long as her husband was in the military, she wanted one of them to be able to stay with the kids. Now she works for a nonprofit group that helps women veterans transition home. "Serving my country was something I always wanted to do - but for me it was time," she says. Barnes, now age 50, is still serving in the Utah National Guard. Her daughter, Chloe Card, still has until at least the end of the year in Afghanistan. When it comes to her military service, she "can't imagine doing anything else." NOTES: "When we took the door off the hinges for women, we didn't have a safety net to care for them, especially when they deploy and leave family behind. That's what we missed." KIM OLSON, A RETIRED COLONEL FROM THE AIR FORCE