

An army of one: young military wives cope on the home front

by Jenifer Goodwin

Valerie Villela was 17 when she found out she was pregnant. She told her boyfriend, a 22-year-old Marine named Narciso, in the parking lot of a Circle K. He immediately proposed.

Villela had loved Narciso since she spotted him on the school bus. They shared their first kiss the day before he went to boot camp. When she agreed to marry him, Narciso rushed into the store to buy her a Snickers and a Coke, her favorite foods.

AN ARMY OF ONE - Valerie Villela chases son Narciso and daughter Heaven outside their military housing complex in San Diego. Life as a single parent is often a struggle for military wives. CNS Photo by Laura Embry. MILITARY FAMILIES - Valerie Villela keeps photos of her husband, Narciso, in her children's bedroom. She tells them he's watching over them. Narciso is serving with the Marines in Iraq. CNS Photo by Laura Embry. A few weeks later, after a hastily planned wedding ceremony in her grandparents' backyard, Villela and her husband headed west, away from Rio Grande City, Texas, and toward her new life in California as a wife and mother.

The enormity of her transformation - from high school girl to a married woman with an infant living 1,500 miles from home - hit quickly. Pregnancy complications landed her in the hospital shortly after they arrived at Twentynine Palms, a stark Marine base in the California desert. Her son, born prematurely, spent a week in neonatal intensive care and had to wear a heart monitor at home.

"I thought I was going to be a mom, but not this young, not right now," she said.

The U.S. active duty enlisted force is overwhelmingly young - nearly half are between the ages of 17 and 24, according 2005 Department of Defense statistics. So are their spouses, most of whom are women.

Newly wed, new at parenting and living apart from their parents and hometowns for the first time, the military's youngest wives have to navigate some of life's most profound transitions at once. At an age when many are too young to legally share a champagne toast, they're getting married, dealing with the endless needs of young children and managing households on paychecks that sometimes don't leave enough left over for groceries.

The war in Iraq has added to the strain. With many servicemen on their second or third deployments, wives are coping with their new responsibilities alone, all while knowing they could go from bride to widow in an instant.

"In addition to all the challenges of wartime deployments, they're dealing with the challenges of figuring out how to be a grown-up," said Kristin Henderson, a Navy chaplain's wife and author of "While They're at War: The True Story of American Families on the Homefront."

Villela was 19 and pregnant with their second child when her husband got word he was headed for the combat zone. While her college-age peers were busy writing term papers, Villela and her husband were pondering their mortality. They bought headstones and side-by-side cemetery plots back home in Texas that they're paying off in monthly, \$75 installments.

After her husband left, worries about losing him, exhaustion from the pregnancy and taking care of her toddler on her own took a toll on her mental state. She couldn't sleep, couldn't stop crying and couldn't bring herself to switch off CNN. She had little interest in mingling with other women on base.

She had so isolated herself that when she went into labor, she drove herself to the hospital and gave birth with only the hospital staff by her side.

"My head was spinning," she said. "All I could think was, 'What if he doesn't come home? I'm going to have two kids, fatherless, husbandless.'"

"If the military wanted you to have a wife, it would have issued you one," goes the old saw. It might have once been true, but the makeup of the military has changed in past decades, and so have attitudes toward families.

When the military became an all-volunteer force after Vietnam, it needed to boost pay and benefits to attract and retain recruits. On average, today's enlistees stay in the military several years longer than the draftees of earlier decades - which also means more of them stay in long enough to marry and have children.

About 31 percent of low-ranking enlistees are married, according to the government. The nearly 1.4 million members of the U.S. active duty force have nearly 1.9 million dependents, spouses and children.

"It became a military not just of service members, but of families," said James Hosek, director of the Forces and Resources Policy Center at the RAND Corporation's Santa Monica, Calif., office.

Policymakers, realizing that supporting families helped bolster morale and that wives influenced re-enlistment decisions, launched "Family Team Building" and "Family Readiness" programs. The recruiting difficulties brought on by the Iraq war have made keeping families happy all the more crucial.

Today on Camp Pendleton, Calif., spouses can sign up for new mom support groups, marriage counseling and classes on budgeting, confidence building and anger management.

During Vietnam, when husbands went to war, families usually lost their base housing and were on their own to make new arrangements. Today, "We really try to encourage families to stay here instead of going home," said Bill Bonney, who was the Family Readiness coordinator for the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force at Camp Pendleton until recently. "We think we can take better care of them."

A SISTER'S JOURNEY

Past Camp Pendleton's Abby Reinke Community Center with its bulletin boards offering Bible study for moms, English as a second language and belly-dancing classes, in a tidy duplex on a block of identical duplexes, Samantha Forrester, 20 years old and 9 months pregnant with her second child, passed the time watching "The Tyra Banks Show" while her 1-year-old daughter napped.

Forrester was 15 when she and her sister, 17 and pregnant, drove from their parents' house in New Webster, Ind. (pop. 1,067) to visit her sister's husband, a Marine, in Missouri.

It was a fateful trip. At Burger King, Forrester met Josh, a 19-year-old Marine lance corporal from Texas with piercing blue eyes. He hardly said a word, but Forrester was intrigued, even though he wore Wrangler jeans and cowboy boots, and she usually went for guys in baggy pants and Nikes.

A few months later, telling her parents she wanted to help her sister with the new baby, she dropped out of ninth grade and moved in with her sister at Camp Lejeune, N.C. It just so happened Josh lived there, too. He proposed after his first tour in Iraq. "I wanted to be with Josh, and the only way we could be together is if we got married," Forrester said.

The military's pay structure encourages couples to tie the knot. While single Marines live in barracks, married couples are provided more private base housing or extra money to rent an apartment. In San Diego, enlisted service members in 2006 received a housing allowance between about \$1,000 and \$2,100 a month, depending on rank.

Forrester's mom and dad weren't thrilled at her decision, but they signed the marriage consent form anyway.

Forrester is 5 feet 2, with long, straight, light brown hair and clear, pale skin. She weighs a little more than 100 pounds, when not pregnant, and almost never wears makeup, which makes her look even younger than her years.

Still, she's headstrong, something her parents know all about. Forrester's mother, 41, dropped out of high school and ran away to Florida to marry Forrester's father. Forrester's sister got pregnant and dropped out to marry her husband.

Forrester cried the day she packed her clothes and stuffed animal collection and left home, a wife at 17. "I was a teenager. I was sick of my parents. But when that day come, I thought, 'What am I doing?'"

When her husband left for another tour in Iraq the following year, Forrester moved back in with her parents in Indiana. At the time, he was stationed at Camp Pendleton, and they were living in an apartment nearby. Forrester, who didn't have a drivers license, was scared to go out alone. "There was weird people walking the streets," she said.

But at home, her old bedroom felt stifling. She bristled at her parents' rules. She'd gotten used to thinking of herself as a grown-up. In Indiana, she felt like a little girl.

So in August, when her husband left for his third tour in Iraq, she and her daughter stayed at Camp Pendleton.

Being on her own can be difficult. She turned down an invitation to spend Thanksgiving with a friend's family and instead cooked a 15-pound bird, green-bean casserole, mashed potatoes, stuffing and gravy for herself and her daughter, who'd been up all night with a cold. They spent the day watching Christmas movies, talking on the phone to her parents and waiting for Josh's call.

She struggles with math, and she's not sure how much something costs when it says 30 percent off, or how much one item costs when the price is three for \$7.98.

Still, she takes pride in paying the household bills without her husband's help. "I'm taking care of my own

house," she said. "It gives me more confidence being a mom and a wife and knowing I can do all this by myself."

Forrester loves her husband, who's now a sergeant and is expected home by the end of the month.

She'd wanted to be a mom for as long as she could remember. Even so, she regrets being so impatient. "I look at my daughter and I can't believe I have a baby, and she calls me 'Momma,'" she said. "My friends at home are still partying and I can't do that."

She'd like to get her high school general equivalency certificate. Her dream is to go to college and become an X-ray technician.

"I want to be a good role model for my kids. I don't want to depend on my husband for the rest of my life," she said. "If I just work at McDonald's or Wal-Mart for the rest of my life, I'll have to."

HELPING OUT

Twenty-five miles south of Camp Pendleton, in a courtyard of a Navy town-house complex in San Diego, Valerie Villela and about 50 young military wives, many pushing strollers, waited in line to receive free bread, produce, pasta and canned goods.

"Honey, I have four kids. I am not too proud," said one woman to her girlfriend as she picked through celery and onions.

San Diego is home to an array of charitable organizations that work closely with the military to provide assistance ranging from low-interest loans to crisis counseling.

Immaturity, lack of education and difficult family backgrounds mean some of the military's youngest couples can hardly take care of themselves, let alone children, said Diane Armstrong, clinical supervisor at the Armed Forces YMCA in San Diego, which sends social workers to the homes of struggling moms.

"We see a lot of postpartum depression," Armstrong said. "We see a lot of difficulties with parenting. We see the isolated young person who really doesn't have the social skills to be able to reach out to another person, to

make a friend in an area that's so different to them."

Finances are another concern. Financial inexperience and poor credit, or lack of credit, means young military families are prone to taking on debt with high interest rates. Payday lenders, which charge exorbitant interest rates, flourish around military bases.

"Many of them are not terrific money managers," said Ann Evans, director of the Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society in San Diego, which offers interest-free loans and grants of up to \$4,500 to pay for car repairs, gas, utility bills or medical expenses. "They're right at the edge and if an emergency comes up they don't have a buffer."

Sadie Satterfield coordinates the food handouts for the San Diego chapter of Military Outreach Ministries. As she hustled between her van and a picnic table carrying pallets of bread and vegetables, she kept a close eye on the line, searching for women who looked like they might need a few words of encouragement.

Satterfield, wife of a Navy electrician, knows how it feels to be short of food with a week until payday. She and her husband, high school sweethearts, married at the courthouse in Pensacola, Fla., when she was 19 and he was 21. She was soon pregnant.

While her husband was at sea, an administrative mistake delayed his paycheck. Satterfield ran out of food and diapers and was wrapping her infant in dish towels. "I was desperate," she said. "I couldn't reach my husband. All these bills were piling up. I was freaking out."

Though servicemen have the reputation for being tough, people who work with their wives say the women have their own brand of strength and resilience.

Husbands move up in rank, which means more money and fewer financial pressures. Young moms gain life experience. They learn to make friends, who share information about where to find help.

Satterfield was so grateful for the help from Military Outreach Ministries that she signed on as a volunteer. Now 30 and the mother of two children ages 4 and 10, Satterfield parlayed the volunteer work into a part-time job with the organization.

"Most of these girls are going from mom and dad right out of high school to having a husband and getting pregnant. Then they have a husband and a child and then the husband leaves," she said. "You think you get

married and it will be 50-50. Instead it's 90-10."

In the backyard of her duplex on a quiet cul-de-sac, Valerie Villela's sons, 3 and 5, along with the 2-year-old daughter of a friend, played with sparklerlike toys that Villela had brought back from Mexico. The toys sparked and crackled when scraped on cement. The kids had a ball, at least until the 2-year-old got burned and came in howling.

Though Villela has her doubts about the war, they've decided her husband is going to make a career of the military. She figures her husband's military paycheck and benefits are better than they could do in the civilian world.

Villela has an eat-in kitchen, a park nearby and enough bedrooms so that all three of her children - her youngest, a girl named Heaven, is 2 - can have their own.

She and her husband owe \$6,000 to Pioneer Military Lending, a private company that drapes its Web site in red, white and blue and markets itself to military families. The Villelas, who don't have credit cards, used the money, in part, to buy a laptop computer and to pay for gas and food while visiting family in Texas. They also have a \$514 a month car payment on their used Ford Expedition, which they bought for \$19,000.

"We talked about him getting out," she said. "But he can't. We have three kids. If he did, we might not make it."

OVERSEAS

This deployment has been easier and harder than the others. Easier, because she learned the importance of having friends to lean on, who taught her where to get help, like free food and free Christmas gifts for the kids. More difficult because the kids are older and understand what it means when daddy leaves.

In September, the day after his father took him to his first day of kindergarten, 5-year-old Sebastien Villela watched his father board a bus, the first step on his journey to Iraq. Sebastien begged his father to stay. "I'll behave Daddy! Please don't leave me! I'll behave!" he shouted.

Villela tried to hug her son, but he wouldn't let her. "Sometimes, I can't believe how many responsibilities I have. I'm like, 'Oh my gosh. What was I thinking?'" she said. "I feel old."

And seven months apart is hard on their marriage. In high school, her husband was a lady's man. They're both flirtatious, and they both have a jealous streak. A few months ago, her husband, now a sergeant, called her from Iraq and asked: "How's Jody?" referring to the man of military lore who steals the wife while the husband is at war.

Villela had never heard the saying before. "I don't have no friends named Jody," she said, confused. They ended the phone call angrily.

She's expecting her husband home any day now. When he's there, she says, everything will be all right. Together, they're like big kids. "We have mashed potato fights, and fights with the water hose," she said. "People see us, and they think we're crazy. But that's just us. I guess I got lucky."

At 23, Villela is finished having babies. Someday, she'd like to take a trip alone with her husband, something they've never been able to do. She'd like to go cosmetology school. "I don't do the party life. I don't do the college thing," she said. "I'm a mom first, a wife, and then I'm Valerie."

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