

## Southtown Article #19 The Strains of Marriage

When we attempt to measure the success or failure of the war in Iraq, it is frequently done in terms of the number of dead and wounded. There is another casualty of the war in Iraq, and that is marriage. This war unlike any other has seen a dramatic increase in the number of divorces of men and women in the military. The effect has been particularly dramatic for officers in the Army. They have experienced a threefold increase in divorces.

I can't even begin to count the number of times I've counseled soldiers struggling in shaky marriages. It's not hard to imagine the root causes. Soldiers are generally deployed for twelve months. Marines are normally deployed for seven months and Airmen are gone for six months. Their divorce rates haven't changed significantly. For Soldiers, however, long and frequent deployments place an extraordinary strain on relationships.

My experience has taught me there are two sides to this problem. If there were significant problems in the marriage before, things tend to get worse. Oddly enough, if the relationship is solid and healthy, I've heard time and again how the separation actually made the couple grow more committed to each other.

If a married couple is having serious difficulties with one another you can almost do the math in your head. They are asking the question, is it worth the upheaval of trying to manage life for twelve months without my spouse knowing things weren't great to begin with while he or she was home? Factor in the reality that in a year or two your spouse will likely be deployed again and you will have to face all the same issues once more. I get the sense that many simply opt to "cut their losses" and move on.

It strikes me that in the age of convenience in which we live, we have made everything into a disposable object, even marriage. When I served as a priest in Chicago and officiated at weddings, I often wondered just how ready couples were to make sacrifices. During a Catholic wedding, the priest or deacon asks the question, "Do you take this woman (man) to be your lawful wedding wife (husband) to have and to hold, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, all the days of your life until death do you part?"

It is beautiful to watch the couple as they look into each other's eyes and exchange these powerful, life altering vows. It is sad to so frequently be on this end of the scale where anger and sometimes hatred are the only words used to describe one's spouse.

The added difficulty of the skyrocketing divorce rate is that it is always personally devastating to the soldier. He or she may try not to let on, maintaining their "military bearing." But it has a tremendous effect and this can be dangerous or deadly. How does a soldier keep his mind on the task at hand when he feels his life is falling apart back home? How do you remain ever vigilant for a roadside bomb when your heart is broken and all you feel inside is pain?

In previous wars, soldiers learned of their fate through famous “Dear John” letters. Technology has changed this completely. Most troops have at least occasional access to the internet and phones. The “Dear John” letter has occasionally become the “Dear John” email, but much more commonly the “Dear John” phone call. The big difference now is troops are in much more contact with people back in the States. Rarely does the news come as a complete surprise anymore.

I write this journal entry knowing that it is from the point of view of the soldier. There is no couples counseling in Iraq. I only hear one side of the story. It’s not about assigning blame. But I do wish that couples would be more willing sacrifice for each other and treat their relationship as something that is sacred. But the reality is that shattered marriages are a hidden price this war.

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