

Coffee

By Virginia Kiernan

The church was packed but quiet. Soft music was playing as more people filed in and tried to find an empty seat. I was sitting on the fourth row. Sherry and her two boys would come in last and sit on the front row. That's how they always do it. The family left behind comes in last and sits on the front row. See, we were all there to honor Sherry's husband, Gregory and Jason's dad. As I listened to stories of this great man, I saw Jason put his head on Sherry's shoulder. Tears flowed. Sherry would now have to live her life alone. My mind wandered and then I thought, *who will sit on the front row next?* It was a horrible thought, and I tried to shake it from my head. *No, it won't be me! It can't!* But I, like Sherry, am an Army wife. My husband was in Iraq. He left eight months before in February 2003, and here I am attending another funeral.

February seemed to be years ago, yet it was still so vivid in my mind. Things were heating up in Iraq and many were asking, "Why is the U.S. waiting?" It had been twelve years since Desert Storm, and Saddam was still flicking his nose at the U.S. Rumor on Post was that the 101st Airborne Division (our husbands) would go soon—before the war started. But, rumors were always flying around post. Operations in Afghanistan started just the year before in 2002, and we constantly heard that the entire 101st would go. Then they sent only one of the three Brigades from the 101st to Afghanistan. After 3rd Brigade left, the rumors were still bubbling that the rest of the Division would be joining them. At that time, Verner, my husband, was working in Division Assault Tactical Operations Center (TOC). Verner was told several times that they (the Assault TOC) would probably join the fighting in Afghanistan within a month. The rumors were so strong that Verner

was issued the desert camouflage uniform—something not normally done until deployment orders are issued. Like many of his co-workers, he got his will in order, and Verner signed a general Power of Attorney for me so that I would have it if he went overseas. He never went to Afghanistan though.

So, it was a year later, and we were in rumor land again. Strong rumors and the activity on post seemed to point to deployment. Training exercises were canceled and family support groups were being refined. But no orders had been given. Could it be that the leaders on post just wanted the Division to be ready? After all, they were soldiers, and if the country needed them, they wanted to respond quickly and strongly. Everyone knew the 101st Airborne Division was one of the best units in the Army. The 101st fought against the Iraqi army in Desert Storm, but they were stopped from going into Baghdad and finishing the job for political reasons. We were watching the news, hitting the Internet, and trying to get a clue when or if the Division would go to Iraq.

I attended a Wives Coffee on February 5. The “coffee” is a long-standing military tradition. Once-a-month, the officer and senior Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) wives gather, but we don’t drink coffee. We normally meet in one of the wives’ homes, discuss unit and community events, eat a snack, and visit. It is a chance to meet with other wives who shared a common bond—all of our husbands are leaders in the unit and are responsible for the health and welfare of soldiers on and off duty. I looked forward to coffees. Verner was an artillery officer, assigned to an artillery Battalion, but his new job required him to work directly with an Infantry Brigade, so I actually belonged to two coffee groups, both an Infantry and Artillery group. Joining the Infantry coffee group was something that Verner had encouraged me to do, and he made sure my name was

included on the infantry unit's coffee list. Attending the infantry coffees was not expected, but my husband's suggestions are wise, so I went willingly. I had only been to a few of the Infantry coffees, and this coffee would be one I'd never forget.

It was held at Jennifer Warren's house. Jennifer was in her late thirties, seemingly shy and very family-orientated. She was a stay-at-home mom with three preschoolers, and she always had a huge smile on her face. I'd learned in the few times I went to the infantry coffees that I was safe to call almost any of the wives Jennifer because besides the host, Jennifer Franks, Jennifer Cook and Jen Romaine were also present. There were about twenty wives listed in the coffee group, but there were only about 10 wives present that evening. It was the usual crowd. One of them, Terri Seifert had her three month-old son with her, and Roni Roberts came in late after she ensured her month-old son would be okay with her husband.

The Brigade Commander's wife, Holly Hodges ran the meeting. Holly was a treasure, very down to earth. She always made me, an artillery wife, feel so welcome. Her husband, COL Ben Hodges, was in charge of an entire brigade, 1st Brigade of the 101st, which numbers about 1500 soldiers. Obviously, his job carried many responsibilities, but it also meant Holly had inherited the duties of a Brigade Commander's wife. She was a MUC wife (pronounced muck). MUC was an acronym for Major Unit Commander. The responsibilities of an Army officer's wife are similar to the inherent expectations placed upon you when your husband is in politics. If you looked at the top of the political ladder, the First Lady is looked to for her leadership almost as much as the President. At Ft. Campbell, the MUC wives are near the top of the pyramid. A MUC wife is looked to for strength and knowledge and is often a mentor for the other

wives. On occasion she might have to stand in for her husband, but Holly's main task was to represent all the wives in the Brigade when the MUC wives met with other officials. Years ago, officers actually received a mark on their annual rating as to how well their wives performed their duties. Now the work a wife does is all "voluntary," but the responsibilities normally fall with your spouse's job. Holly was the best. She was strong, yet silly at times, and she didn't wear her husband's rank on her sleeve. It was a great balance.

Holly stood up and said, "Our guys are going."

The room was silent for a few seconds. Everyone's stare was frozen on Holly.

"The press release is tomorrow. I think we all knew it was coming. I don't have a timeline, but they should be leaving sometime in March."

Why didn't Verner tell me before I left for the coffee? Does he know? I definitely hadn't expected this tonight. Some of the ladies began to ask questions, others talked amongst themselves. Holly told us that she didn't have any other info but would try to keep us informed.

Terri Seifert stood up with her son on her hip and told everyone that she was going to move back home.

"I don't think I can do this alone," she said.

I was struck by her comment. I wondered how many others would go back to their family roots. *Should I go home? Back to my family in Florida? No, it wouldn't make sense. Pulling all of the kids out of school - moving - plus, here in Clarksville, we are under a lease until this summer, and we just rented out our home in Florida a few days before. The cost would be exorbitant. I guess if I had just had a baby like Terri, I would*

consider it. It would probably make the separation much easier, but this will be a test.

Can I do it alone?

Verner had never deployed anywhere before. He had been away for months at a time when he went to the field for training and about ten years ago, when I was in the military, we were actually stationed at different military post. I had done it on my own before, but now we have six kids, the oldest in high school, the youngest a preschooler. The doubts all went quickly through my head. *Can I...really?* Yes, I was convinced I would be strong. Since 9-11 I had talked with many wives who were experienced with deployment, some whose husbands left during Desert Storm, other's whose husbands recently dealt with the Taliban, and deployment didn't seem too bad. They always talked about the fun side of living on your own, not being tied down, and the extra money the family earned while their husband was deployed. *Why do Terri's words stick with me, though?* Terri left and the rest of us went into the kitchen and got a snack that Jennifer had prepared, and we talked. The coffee ended early, and I headed home with tons of questions on my mind.

At home, Verner was surprised when I told him about Holly's announcement. He had heard the same thing at work, but wasn't sure that it was the official announcement. We discussed what we thought was ahead. We were up late, but this was a norm in our home. Once the kids were in bed, there were still so many things to do. But tonight it was little work and lots of discussion. That night I didn't sleep well. My dreams were wild—in one dream I was fighting in a war and our kids were there, too. Verner was absent. The enemy I was fighting was fierce, and I saw only hate on their faces. They didn't seem to mind that the kids were in the line of fire. I woke up. It took a few seconds to realize that

it was just a dream. I moved closer to Verner and closed my eyes. They were wet now from tears. I fell asleep again.

The next day went as planned. The news was released to the press and every local station carried the story – **“101ST AIRBORNE DIVISION (AIR ASSAULT)**

RECEIVES DEPLOYMENT ORDERS, Fort Campbell, KY, February 6, 2003. -

The 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) and associated units stationed at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, have received orders to deploy to the U.S. Central Command area of operations (AOR) to support possible future operations in the global war on terrorism. The specifics of any such operations are not known at this time.”

The message went on to talk about how the 101st was an elite force, but the only message I heard was, Verner is going to war.