

Return, Reunion and Reintegration: Beginning the end of the IA Continuum

PART 5:

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Seeing loved ones again, celebrating the accomplishments of the previous months and taking the time to relax and reconnect is what many Sailors and their families look forward to at the end of a deployment. It's no exception for the thousands of individual augmentee (IA) Sailors and their families who have experienced the hardship of non-traditional expeditionary deployments.

But the IA deployment is not like the routine six-month deployment where Sailors assigned to a ship or squadron deploy as a group and return as a group. IA Sailors have been embedded with Army units for six to 12 months in support of the global war on terrorism in locations around the world. Their transition home requires a different approach to ensure the well-being of each Sailor — what the military has termed Return, Reunion and Reintegration (3R).

The 3R process begins with the Warrior Transition Program (WTP) in theater. Just as each IA Sailor processed through the Expeditionary Combat Readiness Center (ECRC) detachment in Kuwait on their way to their deployment location, each IA Sailor will process out through Kuwait.

"The Warrior Transition Program, which was begun by ECRC and requires all IAs to funnel through Kuwait on their way home, was designed to address the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of each deployed service member," explained Capt. Jeffrey L. McKenzie, ECRC's commanding officer. "In the course of three days to a week, service members rotate through discussion groups and training run by the chaplain, safety officer, medical officer and staff members from their homeport Fleet and Family Support Center."

The program provides the education and tools to strengthen them through the mental and logistical transition out of their assignment. WTP is also designed to increase the awareness of and management of combat and operational stress.

"The program has proved effective because it allows the service member to talk about their deployment experiences, their homecoming expectations and reintegration into their home life," McKenzie said. "The program gives Sailors a few days to decompress before reuniting with loved ones, and a start on identifying the most common conflicts and help by giving them options and potential resolutions."

While in Kuwait, Sailors must also complete a Post-Deployment Health Assessment (PDHA). The PDHA and the Post-Deployment Health Reassessment (PDHRA), which must be completed 90 to 180 days after return, are designed to identify health concerns after the deployment and facilitate the appropriate care.

After Sailors complete either health assessment, treatment for any deployment-related issue is coordinated through a Deployment Health Center (DHC). The DHC provides face-to-face interviews with health care providers and any necessary referrals for medical, dental, behavioral healthcare or any of the diverse community support services. A psychologist is also available at the DHC to



Photo by Harry Gerwien / Military Newspapers of Virginia

Hospital Corpsman 3rd Class Raymond Houston completes his Post-Deployment Health Reassessment in the Deployment Health Center at Naval Medical Center Portsmouth after returned from an IA deployment in Iraq.

address mental health concerns.

"I think it's a great idea to embed psychological services with medical services," said Elmer C. Maggard, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist with the DHC at Naval Medical Center Portsmouth. "There has been a great deal of energy devoted to shifting the idea of mental health from an illness model to a wellness model. By making these services easily available for referral, and by having it seen as part of the medical process, we can make sure Sailors can address any unresolved is-

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sues.

"Within days of return, people can be affected in terms of emotional and relationship problems, or delayed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms can surface months later," Maggard continued. "Sailors have been in danger, and it may take a while for their nervous systems to feel safe again. The best way to re-acclimate is to feel reconnected to people and to re-establish communication."

According to national statistics, many service members begin to experience combat stress-related and other complications six or more months after return from deployment. To reduce the emergence of such complications, it is critical for Sailors to receive realistic and relevant support for a minimum of six months after return.

Master-at-Arms 2nd Class Danielle Carawan, currently stationed with the Security Department at Naval Air Station Oceana, was deployed to Baiji, Iraq, from November 2006 to June 2007 as part of a Military Working Dog (MWD) team. Carawan teamed up with Suzi, an Explosive Ordnance Detection dog, for dangerous assignments.

"Every time we went out on a mission, I had at the back of my mind that I might not come back alive," Carawan explained. "Getting used to that was the biggest challenge of the deployment, but I knew I had a job to do."

"Now that the deployment is over," Carawan continued, "I find the best way to deal with it is to talk about it. Things didn't really seem to bother me much until about a year later when I started dreaming that I was over there again. So I wouldn't say there is a time limit to

when the whole experience catches up to you. But talking about my experience with other MAs, and relating to each other about what we have each gone through, helps keep things ok."

This type of experience is typical according to Maggard, who wants IA Sailors, their families and their co-workers to understand communication and reconnection is vital, and that the opposite — the feeling of abandonment — can lead to depression, hopelessness and suicide. Maggard encourages awareness of the signs and symptoms of PTSD, depression and suicide.

Outside the medical system, many resources have been established to facilitate 3R, including retreats and workshops through the Spiritual Fitness Division.

The Warrior Transition Workshop (WTW) offers participants a practical two-hour self-assessment workshop designed for all IAs who returned at least two months before. The WTW offers training for IAs to assess how they are doing in their return, in identifying problem areas where they may need help, and in directing them to resources where they can get the help they need. The workshop is held once a month at the Fleet Ministry Center at Naval Station Norfolk.

The Warrior Transition Retreat is held twice a year at a remote location with the goal of helping each IA Sailor make the transition after their return.

"This retreat gives IA Sailors an opportunity to relax, reflect on their experiences and share a commonality with other IAs," explained Cmdr. (Chaplain) Fred Hilder of the Spiritual Fitness Center Mid-Atlantic. "We also give them the resources to live a healthy life in the aftermath of what could have been a life-changing experience."

According to Hilder, many IAs find their experience has had an impact on their personal and professional relationships, regardless if they are active duty or reserves, as well as the way they look at life.

"All of them have survived what they may have found to be a risky combat zone," Hilder said. "Now they are back to the routine or their regular life, which can be mundane comparatively, and we can help make that transition. Our number one priority is to make sure they know they are valued and appreciated, and that they get a chance to process their experience and understand their reactions are normal given the situation."

The Spiritual Fitness Division retreat is offered every six months, with the next one scheduled for Aug. 28 to 30. They are ideal for IA Sailors who have returned in the previous 60 to 90 days, but the time recommendation is flexible since they are not offered every month.

IA Sailors and their families are also

Master-at-Arms 3rd Class Danielle Konzelman, now MA2 Carawan, from Naval Air Station Oceana's Security Department, was paired with Explosive Ordnance Detection dog, Suzi, for more than 18 months before Suzi was medically retired and Carawan adopted her.

encouraged to attending Personal Growth Retreats, Marriage Enrichment Retreats and Family Enrichment Retreats, which occur quarterly. The Family Enrichment Retreat scheduled for July 24 to 26 will focus specifically on IA families. Any family member of an IA Sailor, even those who are deployed at the time, can attend. The minimum age is 8. For information about workshops and retreats, call the Spiritual Fitness Center Mid-Atlantic at 444-1091 or 444-7654.

Another IA retreat, the Returning Warrior Workshop (RWW), is new to Navy Region Mid-Atlantic Reserve Component Command, which sponsored the weekend retreat in Norfolk in January for Sailors who had recently completed an IA tour. RWW retreats are sponsored in various cities around the country throughout the year. RWWs are designed to aid the adjustment and reintegration process for IA Sailors in a relaxing, stress-free environment away from the responsibilities and distractions of home.

Facilitated discussion groups constructively address feelings of stress, isolation and other psychological and physical disorders and injuries that family, friends and co-workers may not understand.

Topics covered in the workshops include Code of the Warrior/Warrior Transition, Telling Your Story, Difference in Crisis Relief and Well-Being: Spiritual Balance, Why I Want to Go Back, Couples Coming Together, Getting Together with Families, Stress Management, Operational Stress Control, Transformational Growth and Veterans Benefits.

Builder 3rd Class Sarah McCoy, who is stationed at the Navy Operational Support Center in Greensboro, N.C., attended the RWW because she wanted to pass the information to Seabees attached to her unit who have been called up to serve as IAs.

"Many of our reservists need this whether they think they do or not," McCoy said. McCoy recommends every IA Sailor attend an IA workshop or retreat after returning — and with an open mind.

"Some have such gung-ho attitudes that they don't want to sit down and reflect on how the deployment may have affected them," McCoy said. "Then what can occur is an incident at home can bring back something that happened during the deployment, and if they can't admit they need help dealing with the situation, it can become problematic."

The workshop is open to active duty and reserve IA Sailors and their spouses or significant others who supported them through their IA deployment. They are most appropriate for Sailors

who have completed their IA tour within the last 60 to 200 days.

The next RWW scheduled for the Norfolk area is April 18 to 19. Sailors can get a full list of scheduled RWWs and contact information to register for each event at www.ia.navy.mil/rww_dates.doc.

Through Fleet and Family Support Center, IA Sailors and family members can attend the Returning from Non-Traditional Deployments workshop, which explains potential physical and emotional effects of hazardous duty on Sailors and their family members, and identifies the resources that provide help for military families.

"We focus on the realities of the deployment of the Sailor and help the family understand what emotional or physical changes there have been, and discuss combat stress reactions, PTSD and depression," said Ted Cremer, life skills educator at the Norfolk FFSC who facilitates the Returning from Non-Traditional Deployments workshop. "Sometimes there may be a physical injury or sometimes the Sailor and the family need to be made aware of the resources that are available to help them in the reintegration process."

One of the biggest struggles IA Sailors and their families may have is reconciling the time that has passed.

"When the IA Sailor leaves, they and their family have a snap shot of each other," Cremer said. "Twelve to 15 months later, it may be hard to come to grips with the idea that things have been happening as they live and change, and how to mesh their lives together again. The combat experience for some may change what is and what is not urgent to them after dealing with life and death situations. Cremer recommends IA Sailors and their families attend the workshop at least six to eight weeks after return to give them time to assess where they are in the reintegration process and better relate to the topics discussed."

Reintegration for IA Sailors and their families is often an emotionally-charged process based on various expectations — realistic or otherwise. The need for accurate and timely return and reunion information and education is critical, as well as that all aspects of Return, Reunion and Reintegration are carefully coordinated.

It may never be easy for Sailors and family members to endure the hardships of a deployment.

Ultimately, it is the proper preparation and care received throughout the IA Continuum by each Sailor and their family that can make the IA deployment one of the most rewarding and memorable experiences of a Navy career.

Return, Reunion and Reintegration (3R) Resources:

U.S. Fleet Forces Command IA/IA Family Support Website
www.ia.navy.mil

Expeditionary Combat Readiness Center
www.ecrc.navy.mil
462-4744

IA Helpdesk: ecrc.hq@navy.mil

Emergency assistance:
763-8639

IA Family Helpdesk:
ecrc.fs.ct@navy.mil

Family Hotline: (877) 364-4302

Direct Family Line: 763-8639

Deployment Health Clinical Center Walter Reed Army Medical Center
www.pdhealth.mil
(800) 796-9699

Warrior Care
www.warriorcare.mil

Deployment Health Center Naval Medical Center Portsmouth 953-1922
Branch Health Clinic Oceana 953-3838
www-nmcpbc.med.navy.mil/Postdep/index.htm

Mental Health Resources Online
www-nmcpbc.med.navy.mil

Spiritual Fitness Division Mid-Atlantic
For information about IA workshops and retreats, call 444-1091 or visit www.cnrma.navy.mil/staff/credo.htm.

Returning Warrior Workshop
www.ia.navy.mil/rww_dates.doc

Returning from Non-Traditional Deployments workshop
www.ffscnorva.navy.mil/ia-resources.html

Military OneSource Wounded Warrior Resource Center
www.militaryonesource.com
(800) 342-9647
wwrc@militaryonesource.com

Veterans Affairs
www.va.gov
Suicide Hotline:
(800) 373-TALK (8255)
Vet Center locator:
www.va.gov/directory or www.vetcenter.va.gov
(800) 905-4675

National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
www.ncptsd.va.gov

Navy Safe Harbor Command
Provides non-medical care management of severely wounded, ill or injured Sailors and their families. www.npc.navy.mil/CommandSupport/SafeHarbor
(877) 746-8563
safeharbor@navy.mil

Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center
www.dvbic.org

Operation HomeFront
www.operationhomefront.net



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