

MOMS ON DUTY

Family life for mothers in the military

Lieutenant Harriet Johnson *United States Navy*

Lieutenant Harriet Johnson and I walk towards the ship she is serving aboard. She graciously returns the salutes from dozens of men and women as we tour her world. The USS Makin Island, LHD-8, an Amphibious Assault Ship, is Johnson's home away from home.

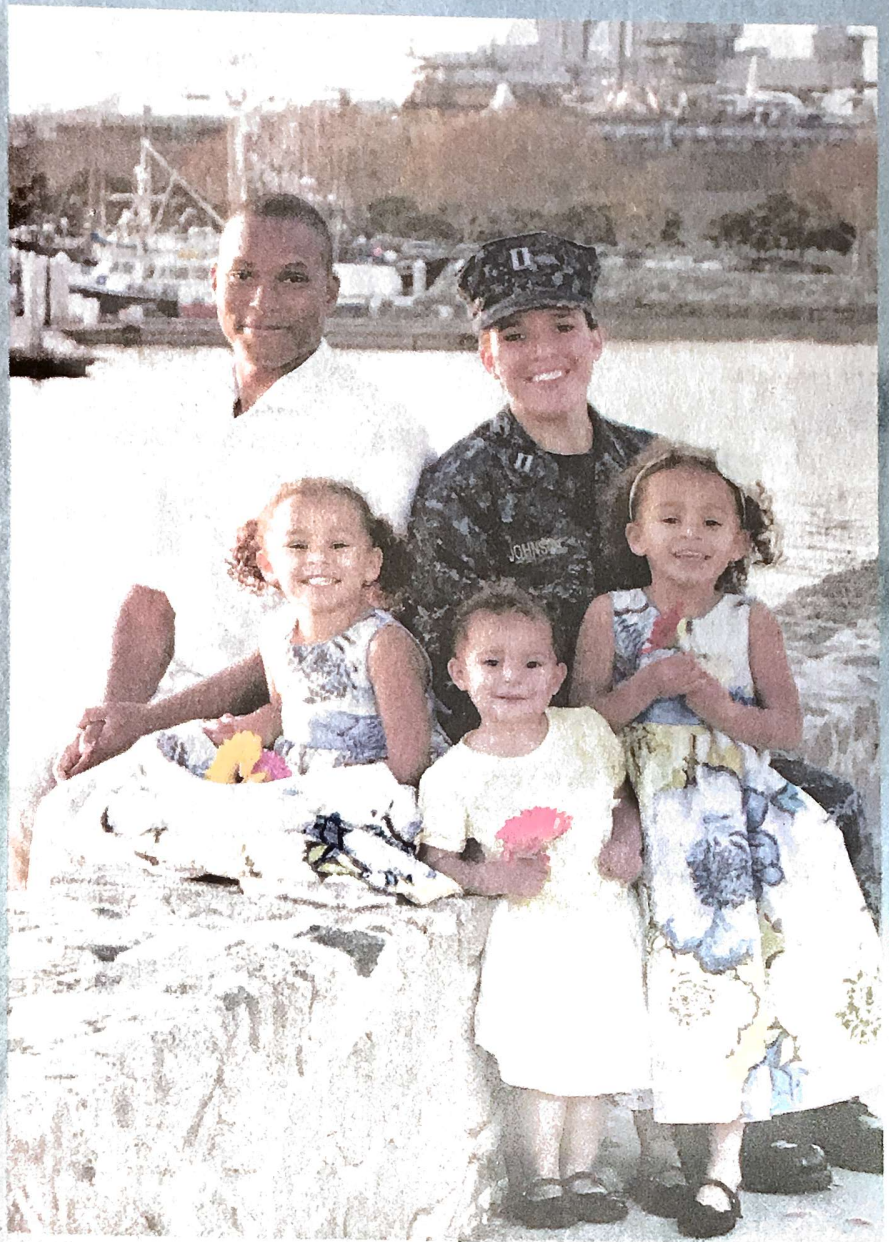
With a child's excitement, I stand in amazement on the flight deck. Johnson is a pilot of "the mighty SH-60B Sikorsky Seahawk." Dressed in her flight suit and poised with confidence, it's easy to imagine this mother of three flying a powerful helicopter.

"This year is going to be an epic year for me. I will either promote and continue, or not," says Johnson. "But I would love to go back to flying."

Growing up, Johnson had no ties to military life, but a career guidance test revealed an aptitude for a military officer. She eventually joined ROTC, taking her military classes at the M.I.T. ROTC unit, and graduating from Tufts University with an art history degree. She then applied to the Navy's aviation program.

Johnson married her college sweetheart, Kevin, who understood how his wife's military career might affect a family.

"He was incredibly on board," Johnson says. "He's given up a job twice for the Navy now."



Kevin and Harriet with (L to R) Paige, Lillian and Rebekah

Johnson began having children in her 20s. The twins Paige and Rebekah, now 4, came along first. Soon after, their third daughter Lillian (1) arrived. Most female officers have children much later after they've already established their careers.

"I've always known I wanted to be a mom," says Johnson. "It's been a given in my life."

The Navy allows a mother to defer deployment until her child is 1 year old. Johnson has deployed twice since having children to gain the operational experience that a junior officer needs.

"The Navy is striving for cultural change to ensure that a woman having a child during normal birthing years is not detrimental to a career," says Johnson.

Johnson was on "shore tour" for both births and took advantage of the command's lactation room to breastfeed her youngest, but deployment is also part of the package.

"I live vicariously through my husband when he tells me about what the girls have done," she says.

Homecomings are of course wonderful, but pose their own challenges.

"They are used to the way dad does things, so you have to make sure you work together as a team," she says.

Sitting in Johnson's stateroom surrounded by photos of her family, and her children's artwork, the thought of being away from my own children tugs at my heart. I ask what she would like civilian mothers to know.

"I'd love your prayers just like anybody else," Johnson begins. "It's not a hard life, just a different life. We're doing the very best we can to provide for our families. It works out for me and who I am."



Paige and Harriet

Gunnery Sergeant Melissa Matranga *United States Marine Corps*

When Gunnery Sergeant Melissa Matranga showed up at a U.S. Marine Corps recruiter office 17 years ago she didn't need convincing.

"Show me where I need to sign," she recalls saying.

Matranga had friends in the Marines and liked their camaraderie and teamwork. Matranga says that serving in foreign countries and working in tough conditions brings people closer together. As a single mother, this solidarity became significant to Matranga and her daughter, Mariposa, now 9 (shown below).



"The way I look at the Marine Corps is as a family. A lot of the relationships are more tight knit than your family is," says Matranga.

Matranga found out she was pregnant days before leaving Japan to come to MCAS Miramar. She continued to work right up until delivery as a career counselor helping Marines through their life transitions.

"The day that I went into labor I was more concerned about taking care of the Marine who was sitting in front of me," she says. "I thought I had time."

Matranga had a fair amount of time to take care of her daughter and bond, but knows that it's hard for any parent to return to work.

"I don't think it would matter if they gave you six months," she says. "You're always going to be heartbroken when you leave your child for the first time."

Matranga's sister took care of Mariposa during deployment. Mariposa finished her school year and then spent the summer with a friend in Chicago.

"We are a force of readiness and we have to be prepared at any given time," Matranga says of the required family care plan.

Matranga brought along her daughter's Hello Kitty toy on deployment and took photos of her and the doll wherever she went.

"Hello Kitty was a Marine in Afghanistan too," she says with a chuckle.

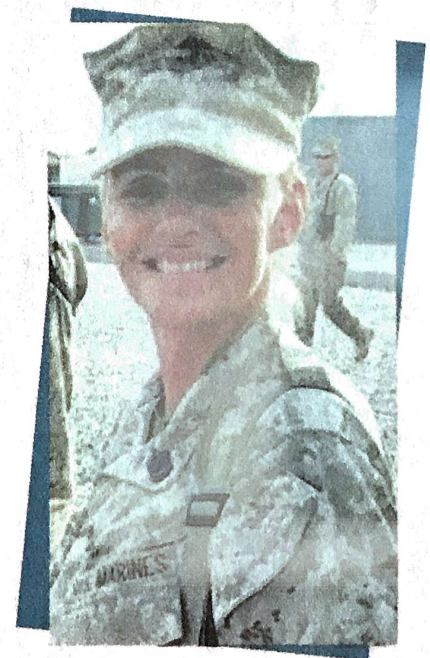
Sitting with Matranga outside a café, I notice her strong presence clashes with the ease of the afternoon. She conveys a mixture of humility and a sense of purpose. I wonder how this capable Marine and loving mother emotionally handles deployment.

"It was my time," says Matranga. "I'm happy to do it. It is part of my job. That is what I joined the Marine Corps for—to serve my country. Coming back was difficult. A lot of people who we went over with just didn't come back."

Matranga pauses a long moment and I feel the weight of her memories. I am at once overwhelmed with appreciation for those who give the ultimate sacrifice for our country.

"Reunions are the best," Matranga says, switching gears. "It's the best feeling to come home. I can't even explain the feeling."

I can only imagine.



Matranga in uniform



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U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Pyoung K. Yi/Released



**Congratulations to Rose Sanchez
 Senior Enlisted Woman of the Year**

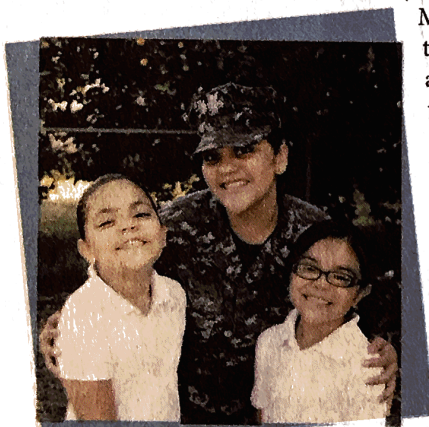
Awarded by the Navy League, this honor recognizes Women in the Military and their accomplishments throughout the year.

Hospital Corpsman 1st Class Rose T. Sanchez receives a certificate naming her 2013 San Diego Naval Services Senior Enlisted Woman of the Year from Ed Langmaid, President of San Diego Council, Navy League of the United States, and Wendy Sickora, Director of Partner Education Services.

HM1 (SW) Rose Sanchez
 Directorate of Nursing Services
 DLPO Critical Care Nursing Dept.
 Diversity LPO, CSADD Video Chairman

“Receiving this award was very humbling, because all the women that were nominated had done great things. It was a complete shock to me; I remember not being able to believe it!

I am a Hospital Corpsman in the Navy stationed at Naval Medical Center, San Diego and my daughters Breyanah, 9, and Delainy, 8, are proud that I am their mom and they love to show me off in uniform.



Breyanah, Rose and Delainy

My goal has always been to be the best example I can be and to accomplish as much as I can so they can accomplish so much more in their future than I did. They are my support system. Although they are young, their words touch me more than anyone else in this world.

Every day, I mentor and guide more than 100 sailors, giving them tools to build them from the bottom up. I have overcome a lot being in the military, but I have also grown and learned from

every experience—because of that I can relate to others very well.

The hardest part of being in the military is being away, especially as a single parent. I have always been tough skinned but I never knew being a mom would soften me the way it has. Staying connected is one of the things that helps with coping while away. My advice to the other military moms out there is to ensure that no matter what is going on around you, the connection between you and your loved ones is not lost be it with letters, through Skype or face time and Facebook. We have to remember that it’s just as important to remain supportive on our end as it is on theirs.”



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Petty Officer First Class Lisa Stein United States Navy

Petty Officer Lisa Stein tells me about one unforgettable homecoming. Her ship had docked in Florida for a Tiger Cruise, an opportunity for friends and family to come on board and ride the ship to Virginia. Her face lights up with memories of the excitement she felt with seeing her son Cody after six months.

"It was phenomenal," Stein says. "I was up on the bridge and I could call him. He had a clown wig on so I could see him and I could wave to him."



Lisa greets son Cody

Stein had also deployed when Cody was 2 years old but says it became harder to leave when he was older. During deployments her son's father, her mother and her grandmother pulled together.

"I had people on shifts coming in for support," says Stein.

Stein hadn't been thinking about motherhood when she joined the Navy at the age of 25. Her brother was in the Air Force and suggested she join the service. She had been in the work force since high school and hadn't been encouraged to go college.

"I had no idea about the military at all," says Stein. "I joined for my education. I got a college fund. My intention was to join for four years and to get out and go to college."

It wasn't until the 1980s that it became the norm for women to remain in the military through and after pregnancies. Maternity uniforms were then added to the line.

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“When my grandfather found out I was pregnant, he questioned what I was going to do,” Stein recalls. “I had a good pregnancy. My command was very supportive. It’s always about balance and a schedule. And I was breastfeeding. They had a room for me where I could go and pump, and for lunch I could go home.”

Stein recently went on board for the first time here in San Diego to work from ship. She handles pay and records, and when anyone wants to transfer, reenlist or retire, she organizes all of the paper work. On one deployment, in addition to career guidance, she was chosen to be command fitness leader and led the entire command, including the Admiral, in fitness three times a week.

Stein’s husband was in the German Navy and was stationed in Washington D.C. when the couple met on vacation in Jamaica. Less than a month after they tied the knot, Stein deployed.

“It was very difficult to leave my son and my husband,” she says.

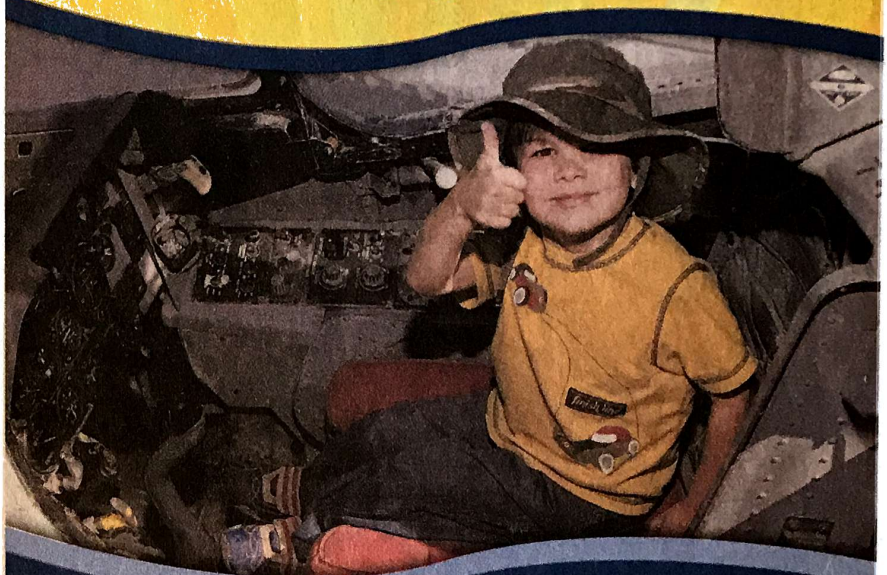


Phone calls, email and Skype were essential. These days they are all together in San Diego and the family will once again adjust to a new place for the Navy. Stein’s positive energy will surely ease the transition.

As the saying goes, “Home is where the Navy sends us.” ♦

Laura Pardo writes from South Park and sincerely thanks all the women who shared their stories.

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