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Married Couples Deal With Dual Deployment

By Scott Schonauer, Stars and Stripes

NAVAL STATION ROTA, Spain — As a dual-military couple, Lt. Ken Oakes and Lt. Cmdr. Carey Oakes have always planned for the worst: the remote possibility both get deployed.

Their biggest concern was what to do if they had to leave behind their 8-year-old daughter, but they never thought it would happen.

Until it did, earlier this year.

In February, he was deployed to Rota to help set up Fleet Hospital Eight, a temporary medical facility to treat casualties from the war in Iraq. About a month later, she joined him in southern Spain, leaving daughter Caitlyn May with his mother at their home in Bremerton, Wash.

When Carey Oakes found out she had to leave, she picked up Caitlyn from day care, went home and broke the painful news.

“I came home and told his mom and Caitlyn together,” Carey said. “And I broke down and cried ... I just said, ‘I had to go. There was nobody left to go.’”

The Oakeses are one of two married couples deployed to the fleet hospital.

When military couples deploy at the same time, they often have to deal with the same types of problems single military members face when they leave. They have to make sure someone pays the bills, takes care of the lawn and — in some cases — takes care of a child.

Ken Oakes said that when he heard that his wife would be joining him in Spain, he couldn't believe it. Many people had told him that it was unlikely both would be deployed. But when the fleet hospital increased the number of beds from 116 to 500, they needed Carey Oakes in Spain, also.

“I kind of had mixed emotions at the time because I really was happy that she was home taking care of our daughter and our house and everything,” he said. “But I was kind of excited that she was coming out here, too.”

Having his mother at their home taking care of Caitlyn helped immensely, Carey Oakes said. Other dual-military couples, however, must scramble to find a friend or relative to take care of a child.

Fortunately, Caitlyn took the news well, considering it was the first time it has happened.

“She's pretty resilient,” Ken Oakes said.

“She's always the one who has a smile on her face, when I'm crying and leaving, to say, ‘I'll see you soon. It won't be long,’” Carey Oakes said. “She's awesome.”

The good part was that she had her husband to cope with the open-ended deployment. During the first month of the war, the Oakeses saw some gruesome injuries that they will never forget, from soldiers coming in with missing limbs to

others with horrible gunshot wounds. Both administer anesthesia to patients going into surgery.

When their jobs got stressful, they always had each other to lean on and talk about it. That's one of the positives of having dual-military couples deployed to the same area.

"We talk every day about this kind of stuff," Ken Oakes said.

Petty Officer 2nd Class Nathan Hagman and his wife, Petty Officer 2nd Class Lisa Hagman, were deployed together in Rota for nearly three months.

When the hospital downsized to 100 beds about a month ago, the Navy sent Lisa Hagman back home.

The couple worked in different departments of the hospital and sometimes worked different shifts. They bought walkie-talkies to keep in touch with each other or deliver a quick message.

"Being together made it so much easier," Lisa Hagman said.

However, being deployed together does have its drawbacks. Married couples are forbidden to hold hands or show any public affection at the hospital or in the compound where the doctors and nurses live on base.

Couples also do not sleep in the same quarters.

While dealing with such rules can be difficult sometimes, and being away from their daughter is tough, the Oakeses said they are grateful that they are deployed in the same location. One of them could have been deployed to Iraq and the other could have been sent to Kuwait or some place else.

"We know we don't have things that bad," Carey Oakes said. "There's definitely people who have it worse."