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Sunday, May 14, 2006

Nation

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ARMY MOTHER OVERSEAS

Help on the home front

Grandparents raise child as mom serves

By Jan A. Igoe

The Sun News



RANDALL HILL/The Sun News

Ryan Dion, 6, holds an older military portrait of his mom, Melissa Dion, while he plays in his room at his grandparents' home Wednesday in Myrtle Beach. Stationed in Camp Bucca in Iraq on her second deployment, Dion depends on the help of her parents, Carol and Alfred Dion, to help raise Ryan during her deployments.

- [See the Mother's Day video Ryan sent to his mom](#)

It's OK to tell 6-year-old Ryan Dion that his mother wears combat boots. He knows she's an Army medic on her second deployment in Iraq. His newest school photo and latest crayon masterpieces were mailed early last week, along with dozens of homemade chocolate chip cookies, in time to arrive on the other side of the world for Mother's Day.

Some 7,400 military moms deployed in hostile territory won't see fresh flowers and breakfast in bed today. But Sgt. Melissa Dion, a professional soldier who's been in the Army for 13 years, doesn't complain.

As a single mom stationed at Camp Bucca in Iraq, she's just grateful that her parents, Carol and Alfred Dion of Forestbrook, will care for Ryan while she cares for thousands of prisoners.

"If I didn't have my parents to watch my child, I would have to give up the job I love," Melissa wrote in an e-mail. Military families, friends and spouses accept the gut-wrenching choices that come with the territory.

"We are just an ordinary family doing what we have to," said Carol Dion, 50. "I thank God every night that there are people like [Melissa] willing to give their lives so I can continue mine without a second thought."

The only argument she gets from her daughter is who has the tougher job.

"My mom thinks I'm the hero, but she's wrong," Melissa wrote. "The true heroes are the soldiers' families back at home taking care of everything. I have one job, and that's to treat the sick and wounded. When my parents are done with work, they have to make supper, do homework with my son, give him his bath, clean up after dinner, then go to bed and start all over the next day. They also have to deal with a 6-year-old who wants to know when Mommy is going to call or write."

Military life is natural for Ryan, a kindergartner at Forestbrook Elementary School, who's been living with his grandparents since January.

It's what he knows. Born in Fort Campbell, Ky., the 105,000-acre home of the Screaming Eagles 101st Airborne Division, he spent three years in Alaska but "matured" at Fort Bragg, N.C. He loves karate and wants to be part of special operations forces or Airborne Rangers someday. The first time his mother spent a year overseas, he was 4.

"I have a shirt, and it has a map. It says Camp Bucca," Ryan said, putting down his toy soldiers. "My mom's a medic, and right now, she's at the prison. My Mema prints pictures [from Mom], and I take them to school. Some people are not my Mom."

They're other people in Iraq."

Before her deployment, Melissa and Ryan made talking stuffed animals for each other. From her bear, Ryan's voice says, "I love you. I miss you." Ryan chose a monkey he sleeps with every night. His mom's voice tells him she loves him, misses him, and "clean your room."

Carol Dion, who is Mema to Ryan, Commander-in-Chief to her husband and Proudarmymom on e-mail, rushes to her daughter's defense whenever her commitment is questioned.

"I have heard people say to Melissa, 'How can you go to Iraq and leave your son?' Yet they would never think of saying that to a man," Dion said. "This is what she has trained for. This is what she does. You can say what you want about [our military], and they will defend to the death your right to say it. They don't want to be heroes, they just want people at home to help out the families they left behind and give them the respect they justly deserve."

Carol Dion has gotten that respect from her employers, John Cassidy and Scott Creech, owners of Duplicates Ink in Conway, "We want to support our folks who make this freedom we have possible," Cassidy said. "I was surprised they send single moms over there, but I guess the military doesn't discriminate."

Every few months, Duplicates prints a newsletter from Camp Bucca for family members of the Fort Bragg medical unit deployed there. Ryan's job is to help fold, seal, label and stamp them.

"The soldiers work long hours with little time to contact the folks back home," Carol Dion said. "So the commander's newsletter is a welcome sight for a lot of families."

Since the Abu Ghraib fiasco, prison operations and communication have been carefully monitored. "A few bad apples have made it very difficult for everybody else," Carol Dion said. Phone calls are shorter - and less frequent.

Goodies from home

She tries not to worry or watch too much news on TV. But no matter how consoling Melissa Dion's e-mails are - because shots *missed* her convoy or she wasn't injured during a riot - that stoic soldier is still Carol Dion's baby.

"I think people forget how much work goes into a soldier deploying to defend their country. We just don't grab our bags and go," Melissa Dion said. "We have to get our children taken care of, our house closed up and figure out how [to pay] our bills. ... The credit card company does not care that I'm defending their freedom to charge me late fees."

Carol and Alfred Dion handle their own obligations plus their daughter's affairs. Like clockwork, they mail packages of snacks and goodies to their daughter every Monday, who shares them with soldiers who don't get any mail. Some soldiers rely on the Dions' care packages as much as Melissa Dion does.

Overseas shipping costs about \$1 per pound, so Carol Dion is happy to get help. Linda and Welland Burnside of Murrells Inlet buy post-holiday candy for the troops. Ryan and his grandmother shop the dollar stores and plow through Sunday circulars for bargains on whatever the soldiers need. "I take donations for everybody. I even had a very nice lady from Ocean Isle, N.C., send me \$35 now and then to help pay postage," she said.

Melissa Dion may be home in December. Or January.

"I cry every time I hear about someone else's child being blown apart with a roadside bomb and then thank God it wasn't mine," Carol Dion said. "I came from what is supposed to be the most patriotic state in the nation - Massachusetts - yet I have found the people here to be the most patriotic, supportive, giving and caring people I've ever met. The Northerners may call Southerners rednecks, but if that means you stand up for your beliefs and help your neighbors, then call me a redneck."

Call Carol Dion at Duplicates Ink in Conway for ideas at 248-2574.

www.anysoldier.com | This site helps about 100,000 deployed active duty soldiers and reservists via letters and care packages.

www.nmam.org | Find ideas to show support for troops during May, National Military Appreciation Month. U.S. military bases around the world will celebrate Armed Forces Day Monday.


www.americasupportsyouth.mil | This is the official U.S. Department of Defense Web site encouraging support of U.S. troops around the world.

Contact JAN A. IGOE at jigoe@thesunnews.com or 626-0366.

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