

November 12, 2009

To the Maryland Chapter of NADRA "Deck for a Soldier Program, care of Ray Steward,

While we usually find it easy to express ourselves, this message leaves us at a loss for words that can capture all of the meaning, sincerity and emotion that we want to express. As parents of a soldier it has given us a totally unexpected experience of having a child go into harm's way in the defense of our great country.

Our experience began in the early summer of 2003 when our son Joe was deployed to Afghanistan just two weeks out of basic training as a member of the 290th Military Police Company of the Army National Guard. Due to the war on terror and current events at the time we were pretty certain that he would be deployed. He knew it also and as a matter of fact, his motivation for joining was the attacks of September 11, 2001. At the time Joe was 19 years old and had never left home for any reason. He was going with a group of soldiers that he had barely met to a hostile area of the world where even those they were there to assist viewed them as the enemy and occupiers.

We learned a lot about how to use the internet to study every facet of the war, geography of Afghanistan, weather and Google satellite images of areas that we thought he would be. We could tell you each day what the temperature was in the area of Afghanistan that he was serving in. We were obsessed with the discovery of as much information as possible, and we were pretty successful. We actually located the camp he was assigned to and found satellite images of it. The point of all this was that in fact we knew very little of what he was doing and this lack of knowing only enhanced our anxiety during that year.

Well as it turned out, he had what would be called a relatively good tour. There were missile and rocket attacks, searching of tunnels and caves and the concerns of driving in convoys in and around the capital of Kabul. The bottom line is that he came home safely. The most vivid memory of that return was him coming home into the yard and immediately kneeling down to stroke the thick green grass.

A few years passed, which for us was like a countdown because we were getting hints that he would be deployed again. In October of 2007 he was deployed to Iraq. Things were a little different this time. He was older, more mature, just starting a new job as a Baltimore County Police Officer, married and now expecting a daughter. The other difference was that he was now a sergeant in charge of a squad. He was responsible for the well being of others.

The most significant event of this deployment was the birth of his beautiful daughter Madison while he was away. We experienced being with his wife during the birth and immediately initiating a webcam connection so Joe could see his wife Anastasia and his new daughter. Fellow soldiers could be seen on the webcam squeezing in front of the images to see Madison. Joe was concerned that his daughter would only know him as a "computer screen". Of course that did not happen. We saturated her memory with every conceivable image of daddy so that the adjustment would be easier when he returned home, and it was a success. She absolutely knew him and reacted with excitement when he held her for the first time.

This is just a brief snap-shot of the experience of the deployment of our son from a parent's perspective. There was however another pervasive thought. That was whether the sacrifice our soldiers were making were really ever appreciated by the citizens on whose behalf they were serving. We questioned the

wisdom of our leaders, the cost/benefit of what they were doing, the seemingly oblivious attitude of the American public to the risks and costs in terms of injury, death and absence from home of soldier.

Even though friends and family would inquire about how Joe was doing, send packages to him, or as one particular friend did, call each week just to see how we were all doing, we still felt that what they were doing was not really appreciated by the majority of the country.

We had this feeling consistently up until we met each of you from NADRA. When we heard that Joe and Anastasia were selected for the "Deck for a Soldier" we were stunned that perfect strangers cared so much. We were overwhelmed by the sincerity of each builder, craftsman and supplier. The deck was something Joe had talked about for a while but ran out of time to build prior to his deployment. We told him that while he was away he could help pass the time by working on a design. Well, he was a little too busy to complete any firm plans.

Then we met Ray Steward who made the first visit to come up with a plan and explain what would be happening in the next couple of weeks. While it was not one that Joe initially had in mind, it was the best plan. We kind of stepped back and let you all simply "take care of it", and take care of it you did. The end result was a beautiful solid deck built with precision and great pride by all involved. You took care to include precautions for Madison by including a gate and expanding her play area.

Beyond the physical presence of a deck you did much more. You gave great satisfaction and comfort to parents of a soldier in knowing that what our son and the son's and daughter's of thousands more sacrificed was, and is indeed appreciated and respected. No words can truly express the impact on our lives and the difference each of you made in our ability to enhance this experience of being a soldier's parent. I've referred to it as a top ten in the list of positive life experiences and memories that each of you created for us.

We are profoundly grateful for your concern, appreciation, patriotism, and for being a significant part of our lives. We are blessed to have been able to meet and get to know each of you and will always remember you when we reflect on this entire experience.

God Bless each of you, our soldiers and the United States of America,

Dennis and Barbara Robinson

Proud parents of Staff Sergeant Joseph Robinson
(Joseph is the 2009 Recipient of NADRA's MD Chapter Deck for a Soldier® Award)