

Twice a day I check my e-mail, hoping for a note from my son Joshua. Sometimes a week or two goes by, and I hear nothing. It's not that he's irresponsible about staying in touch. I know he's out with his Army unit, roaming the mountains of Afghanistan, doing his job as a soldier.

Joshua was home on leave for 14 days this summer, and over breakfast he shared with me some of the "situations" (read: firefights) he had been in. These were stories his mother doesn't need to hear. I didn't want to hear them either, but he needed to tell them. So I listened, remembering how I had hugged him goodbye a few days after Christmas and how by New Year's he had called me from his base.

Joshua was "boots on the ground" again in a foreign land, taking his place in the war on terror. Army boot camp had been the first serious goodbye. Then came another heavy one with: his initial deployment overseas. Subsequent deployments have come since, with brief breaks amid them.

Funny how saying goodbye doesn't seem any easier. Friends, family and acquaintances ask how I handle this, knowing he might not come back. But I committed my son to God on the day of his baptism some 23 years ago. Josh has to know that his Heavenly Father is looking out for him. Meanwhile, his earthly father still has other boys who need to be raised.

I still remember the day that Josh, having scored in the 98th percentile on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (parental pride acknowledged) called me with great excitement over all the money and benefits that the recruiters were dangling. Cash, college, military training, world travel, endless adventure -- it seemed that a bottomless treasure chest was his for merely signing on the dotted line.

"Josh," I said after a bit. "Listen to me: Countries raise and keep armies for one reason -- : to fight and win wars. If you don't want to go to war, don't take what they are offering you. If you do take it, and they call you to go to war, don't complain."

He mulled that over for a day or two and, in the end, took the King's shilling (many thousands of them, actually). Then came the day he called to let me know his name was on a list to see the Khyber Pass firsthand.

"Well," I began.

"I know, I know" he interrupted me. "I'm not complaining -- I'm just plain scared."

He has learned about being scared. Improvised explosive devices, snipers, equipment failures -- these have become the warp and woof of his life. But he

hasn't complained; he has done his duty. Judging from the promotions, medals and comments from commanding officers and brothers-in-arms, he does it well.

That is not to say Josh never griped. He was to discover how accurate are the complaints of all enlisted men since before the walls of Troy:

1. The officers are mostly idiots; it's a few sharp master sergeants holding it all together.
2. The food sucks, and that's on better days.
3. The days are long and boring, except for those moments of sheer panic and terror.

Yet as long as he's grouching about those things, I know he's doing fine. Recently I opened some of Josh's mail -- a task he delegated to me. Included in the postman's bounty was a letter from the U.S. Army, notifying Josh that he has been extended for another six months.

It wasn't entirely unexpected; it isn't exactly good news. A lot has been said about the extensions that are now commonplace. To hear many tell it, these extensions border on criminal injustice, sending troops back overseas for three or four tours, or keeping them in the field for periods beyond what was originally intended.

All this merely shows again how short our collective memory is.

During World War II, men were drafted for the war's duration, plus six months. President Harry Truman extended everyone in the service for one year when Korea heated up. Alexander's men were in revolt by the time they reached the Indus river, for they had traveled much farther than ever anticipated. Extensions, like dumb officers, bad food and extensive boredom, are part of military life.

I admire and respect the men and women who wear our nation's uniform. I know something of the stresses and frustrations of family members who are left behind, waiting for a son or father, daughter or mother to come home. But I do not feel sorry for those whose tours are extended.

No one has been drafted into military service in this country for decades. Everyone who is in volunteered for the duty, accepting the benefits offered.

That is not to say that I don't miss my son terribly and pray for him every day. That is not to say that I don't look with apprehension at every unfamiliar car that pulls into my mill yard, looking first to see if it has U.S. government plates.

I just understand that when he raised his hand and was sworn into the Army (with

my blessing), it came with responsibility not only for him, but also for me.

Some serve by going. Some serve by standing and waiting. The ones who serve best do so without complaining.

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