

Young Lives, Big Stories Contest

In my normal life, around 5:30 a.m., I would hear Dad putting on his flight suit for work. He'd come to my room, give me a kiss, and tell me to get ready for school, which I never did. Later Mom would get me up and soon I'd be out the door. At school I'd think of Dad at the Peoria National Guard facility, and I'd wonder if his big Chinook helicopter would fly over my school today.

After school Mom picked up my sister Grace and I from the babysitters to head home and get ready for soccer, dance, music, or swimming. Often dinner was without Dad because he was working. Sometimes when his evening flight brought him near our neighborhood, the helicopter noise caused quite a commotion. Mom, Grace, and I would run outside and wave like crazy! Eventually our neighbors learned it wasn't a disaster, but just their local guardsman. Later Dad would come home, tuck me in, and I would know he was home safely.

Dad was deployed for a year twice before – in 2008 and 2012. My biggest memory of those times is his surprise homecoming at the 2013 Holiday Spectacular when I was 7. Dad, Grace and I had been in that Christmas show for several years, but when he was gone, we carried on. During the show's finale, my friend pointed and said, "Look who it is!" and there was my dad coming up on the stage in his uniform. I ran into his arms and hugged him as hard as I could. My only memory of "deployment" was just those few moments of the happiest reunion I've ever known.

Then things changed again! Last year when Dad found out that his unit would be deployed to Afghanistan again I was in 4th grade. As we looked at the calendar and I realized that he would be gone for my whole 5th grade school year, my birthday, and even Christmas I was so sad I was in tears. We packed a lot of meaningful activities into our summer, but this time I realized what was about to happen. We made good memories on our trips with family and friends but soon it was time for the Deployment Ceremony. Six helicopters lifted off in formation and flew toward Texas where Dad and his buddies would prepare to leave the USA. We were lucky to go visit Dad in Texas just before he left for many months away.

Now it's just about 66 more days until we expect to see Dad walking through our front door. I'm proud of his service, and so happy that we have been able to face time often and send many care packages, but nothing will be better than the big hug I'm waiting for. So...What does it mean to be a military child?...is a question I understand more fully now. When Dad serves, the whole family serves, and I am proud to do my part to support my soldier.