

# The Forever War on the Homefront

## Heather Aliano

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Our military has been at war for 20 years. My husband has served for all 20 of them. We began our military family journey with optimism, pride, and a fighting spirit, but none of us truly knew what it would be like to serve in a wartime military. It's only after enduring the worst of a never-ending war, the constant demand to push harder, and the stigma attached to not always being in fighting form that our enthusiasm has been weakened. The last 20 years of war have taken our country's most patriotic public servants and ground them down into dust.

While there is much talk today about the tragic end of the war in Afghanistan and turning the page, the demand on our troops is far from over. There is no clear end in sight, and with threats that persist around the world, there will be hard decisions to be made at all levels of leadership. Military families have lived with the direct impact of "forever wars" for 20 years and will continue to do so for a lifetime. War is not something you can take off and hang up like an old hat. It takes up residence within you.

## War Has Become a Constant Companion in Our Home

Three years ago, my husband, an active-duty airman, returned home from a six-month deployment. I stood at the airport, six children in tow, dressed to the nines with colorful signs in hand despite the midnight arrival time. The flight was delayed, and we were the only people in the terminal for a long time. Shortly before the plane landed, two other airmen arrived to stand with us (and take those cheerful homecoming photos everyone loves to see). That was his welcome committee—an anxious wife, six overtired children, and two airmen he barely knew.

I had known this deployment felt different – his calls home were stilted, and he often sounded tired. I didn't realize that this chapter of the war was not over for him when he stepped off the plane. It came home, too, and the tug-o-war battle between wartime trauma and the challenge of resuming a "normal" life was brewing within him.

A week or two after homecoming, we met up with some of the civilian friends I had made while he was gone for a celebratory lunch. As politicians, they had their thoughts and philosophies around war, the defense budget, and the use of violence rather than diplomacy. They asked the standard questions and made the standard assumptions.

*Have you killed anyone? You knew what you were signing up for. Why would you do it?*

At that moment, he just shrugged his shoulders and said, "Well, that's the job." When we got back into the car, settling into the new silence that accompanied his new personality, he turned to me and shared that his performance review from the deployment credited him for more than 3,200 kills.

I don't remember how I reacted at the moment. I am sure I tried to keep an air of cool indifference. In my mind, I was reeling. 3,200 – that's more people than houses in my neighborhood. 3,200 is more people than were killed on September 11th. 3,200 works out to be more than 500 kills a month. Three thousand two hundred people dead wasn't, and still isn't, fathomable to me.

The answers to the questions are also standard. "That's the job. We did not know what we signed up for. Sometimes I don't understand why we do it."

## **"We Didn't Know What We Signed Up For"**

My husband enlisted in the military in September 2001, before the World Trade Center attack. Secure Families Initiative succinctly explains how everything changed for us that week: three days after the 9/11 attacks, Congress voted nearly unanimously to give President George W. Bush far-reaching powers to wage war against the perpetrators of those attacks. Because Congress didn't yet know who the perpetrators were, the language was left intentionally vague. No geographic boundaries or sunset provisions were included. This resolution, the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF), a subsequent war authorization

to invade Iraq, and expansive interpretations of each, opened the doors to ongoing military action in countries around the globe against numerous enemies not named in the original authorizations, without further Congressional approval, or the knowledge and support from the American people. In the last 20 years, they have been used to justify force in at least 41 operations in 19 countries across the Middle East and Africa.

In the aftermath of 9/11, my husband was asked again and again, “*Are you still going to go?*” But of course he was still going to go. He made a commitment, was itching to get out of the small town he lived in his entire life, and didn’t really feel like he had much of an option otherwise. Early on, the job was fun. He had friends and loved the camaraderie among service members. He volunteered for extra duty, collecting a shelf full of metal eagles as awards and bolstering his performance reviews. He was promoted quickly, finished his degree, and was commissioned as an officer. All the while, he participated in the war, leaving our family more than 22 times – over 850 days – to serve in 15 countries across six continents.

## **A Highlight Reel of Death**

After his last deployment, the one with 3,200 kills, he was not the same young, idealistic airman that left. Everything after that deployment became filtered through a lens of trauma. War just never left him. He developed intense anxiety, leading to heart palpitations and many trips to the emergency room when he thought perhaps he was having a heart attack or maybe a stroke. His anxiety led his hands to itch and itch and scratch until his legs were covered in bloody scabs. His intense emotions led to the end of our adoption journey, when the anxiety caused us to tell our social workers that they needed to find another adoptive family for our sweet babies. He’d tell stories of the deaths he watched, the times where he saw people commit terrible acts before they were “eliminated,” and he’d reach for a drink to numb those emotions. I’ve spent more nights than I can count worried that the reactivity, the paranoia, feeling of inadequacy, and uncertainty are becoming too much for him to handle. I fear that war will still take him in the end, even though he got off that plane safe and physically whole.

When he finally went to ask for help, he told the counselor that he didn’t understand how he could possibly have PTSD if he wasn’t the one on the ground who actually committed these acts. He was safe the whole time, sitting in a dark room, surrounded by what equates to the Sports Center of war. He got to see all of the highlights. There

wasn't time between kills to breathe fresh air, or walk out the tension. He didn't pull the trigger 3,200 times, but he watched each target, following them, witnessing their crimes, and making it possible for the mission to succeed.

He participated in war, and troops all over our country are participating in war every day, without ever leaving home. Maybe American civilians don't know we continue to be at war – at least before the withdrawal from Afghanistan this summer, and even then not beyond that battlefield – because war itself has changed. Technological advances allow our military to fly drones rather than engage on foot, monitor war activities in safe rooms, mount cyber attacks rather than ground attacks, and make decisions on action more quickly than ever before as information is fed back to leadership without a time delay. All of these things are supposed to make war “better”, with some even claiming they will reduce PTSD and harm to our troops. However, a new report from Brown University's Cost of War Project puts a magnifying glass on this issue. “An estimated 7,057 service members have died during military operations since 9/11, while suicides among active duty personnel and veterans of those conflicts have reached 30,177 – that's more than four times as many.” Significantly, the researchers found this trend was true regardless of whether troops had seen or engaged with combat on the ground.

Many pundits and political leaders are framing the withdrawal from Afghanistan as a messy “end” to a forever war. Those people – many of whom have never put on a uniform or witnessed the aftermath of war in their own home – are more optimistic than I am. I do not see an “end” to the forever war, abroad or at home. Not only because the latest news of Taliban control of most of Afghanistan will almost certainly exacerbate feelings of despair by those who sacrificed so much in that country, but even beyond Afghanistan, many service members don't expect the demand for their time, energy, and sacrifice to “sundown” along with that mission. As Afghanistan ends, other endless conflicts rage on in other parts of the world.

## Ending the War at Home

We have an opportunity to continue this conversation and make meaningful change, but we will only be able to do that if we can overcome the divisiveness that permeates our national security and diplomacy efforts to work with people who think, vote, and believe differently than us. As I learned from the One America Movement, our toxicity makes it impossible to make progress on the issues that

matter. We cannot wait any longer for our public servants to come together and make meaningful changes to how we engage in war and care for our families on the homefront, or to address the visible and invisible wounds they will carry with them for the rest of their lives.

What do I hope we take away from the ongoing tragedies we're witnessing in Afghanistan? To never again paint revenge with a broad brush, neglect the physical and mental health of our service members and their families, and send our service members into harm's way toward futile ends again and again until they break. My family is proud of our service, and if given the chance to do it all over, I am sure my husband would sign his name on the dotted line even knowing what was in store for him. But future generations deserve better. We have to realize war is fought not just overseas, but is ever present for our military families on the homefront.