

Army wife and mother battles war

With her husband, son and daughter serving in Iraq, Marlene Schaffer wants the fight to end  
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JULIE SULLIVAN

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An army travels on its stomach. So Chop! Marlene Schaffer attacks vegetables as she grills T-bone steaks for her husband's farewell party. Chop! She shreds lettuce for chicken Caesar salads for a midweek meal.

With her husband Howard Schaffer's deployment this morning, the Beaverton woman has now sent her daughter, her son and her spouse to Iraq. As a military wife, she is an expert at frenzied packing and farewell dinners, but the white-knuckled grip on her vegetable knife betrays a growing anger.

Howard Schaffer, 45, is joining President Bush's surge in one of its most dangerous front-line jobs. As a lieutenant colonel in the Army Reserve, he will work as a civil affairs officer, bridging the gap between combat troops and local Iraqis. He leaves behind his civilian job as the property manager of Portland's Mark O. Hatfield, Gus Solomon and Pioneer Courthouses. But he also leaves behind a wife whose patience with the war has evaporated.

Read the bumper stickers on the family rigs: "My son is in the U.S. Army," "My daughter is serving in the U.S. Army," and "Proud Spouse," are plastered alongside "Exactly what are conservatives conserving?" and "War is Shell & Exxon Mobil & Halliburton & Conoco Phillips and . . ."

Marlene Schaffer, 59, has joined an anti-war organization and wears anti-war T-shirts to her husband's military events.

"Howard just shakes his head and says, 'Mar . . .' But I want people to get a different perspective. I support my troops, but I don't support the war because I don't see the sense of the war."

"I see it as a very complex situation," Howard Schaffer says. "But I'm hoping that things will change in Iraq, and I'll be a part of that."

Alongside every 1,000 combat infantry troops serving in Iraq and Afghanistan are a handful of civil-affairs personnel. About 94 percent are civilian-soldiers drawn from the Army Reserve, such as Howard Schaffer. Educated and trained in cross-cultural communication, they are usually experts in public administration, public safety, welfare and economics. They serve as the human link between the grunts breaking down doors and the locals on the other side of the doors.

At least 34 Army Reserve civil-affairs personnel have been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan, including Staff Sgt. Robert Paul of The Dalles, who died in Afghanistan in 2006.

"They are absolutely critical to the mission," says Tina M. Beller, a spokeswoman with the U.S. Army's civil affairs office. "But they are also at the tip of the spear, subject to all the dangers of every soldier who goes outside the wire."

Lt. Col. Schaffer served 10 months in Afghanistan in 2004. He worked on small teams, living in remote villages, hiring local contractors and negotiating reconstruction projects such as building schools and medical clinics. Teams can carry from \$200,000 to \$1 million in U.S. cash to pay for such work.

Looking back, he says, "we made mistakes," such as installing Western-style desks in classrooms when the Afghans preferred to use mats on the floor. But despite such setbacks, he left with a sense of accomplishment, having improved people's basic living conditions by cleaning up garbage, assisting local police and building a library, public sewer and wells. That success was in his mind when he decided to volunteer for another mission.

Meanwhile, Marlene struggled with the impact of the war on their family. Her oldest daughter, Maureen Regan, who is a single mother, is serving as a combat nurse at an Iraqi prison in Baghdad. Howard and Marlene are raising her daughter, Zoe, 4. Marlene retired from her job at Nike in part to devote more time to taking care of Zoe. She now sells insurance.

Her son, David Regan, is a combat engineer preparing for a second tour in Iraq. His first tour gave her plenty of cause for worry. Some of his comrades were killed or wounded, and he saw the decapitated head of an Iraqi friend hanging on a wall.

A lifelong Republican, Marlene became a nonpartisan voter the day she heard President Bush say the next administration would also be dealing with the war. She's discouraged by what she sees as a growing sense of entitlement by Americans who think someone else will fight their battles and who won't conserve the imported oil she regards as one cause of the war.

In May, she discovered Military Families Speak Out-Oregon chapter, whose members shared her concern for troops but still wanted to end the war.

Howard didn't object. But a month later, he volunteered to be one of 10 replacements to join the 358th Civil Affairs Brigade in Iraq. "I still wanted to answer the call," he said. After 23 years in the military, he loves the camaraderie. And "I'm optimistic" about reaching Iraqis in a way that could change the outcome of the war.

His wife's reaction was "not fit for publication," Marlene Schaffer says. "But we're a military family, and we do what we need to do."

The Schaffers met at a church softball game in California 18 years ago when she was a divorced military wife with three daughters and a son and he was a computer analyst who was just entering building management. They moved to Portland in 1991 for his job with the U.S. General Services Administration, and in 2001 he became the senior manager of the federal courthouses. Marlene worked at Nike writing information technology contracts and retail trend analysis.

Even after he volunteered to deploy again, Howard has tried to reach out to the families in the anti-war group to help parents understand their military relatives. He accompanied Marlene to meetings.

"I wanted them to know that when you're a soldier, you don't have a choice. You're focused on trying to do the job, and if someone says this is happening in Congress, soldiers don't have the ability to even express their political opinion."

A deployment changes your priorities, he says. "You come back to the civilian world, and there's maybe some drama, and you think, 'This is so trivial.' It doesn't faze you as much anymore. It's just not as important once you've seen caskets and that chapel with weapon, boots and helmet."

Marlene takes a different approach. She appeared at a Army Reserve change-of-command ceremony wearing a T-shirt carrying the message "Support our troops -- bring them home NOW."

She says Howard, ever the diplomat, has always supported her having her own opinions. "People think we're strange," she says. "But it works for us."

As his deployment neared, Howard Schaffer made to-do lists for the house and cars. He packed his battle fatigues, which, unlike those of most soldiers, bear his name in English and Arabic. As a member of the 364th Brigade in Portland, his unit's expertise is Japan, Korea and Thailand. But he learned to read Farsi and Arabic. A strong tennis player, he put his rackets, along with the bass guitar he plays every Saturday evening at Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Beaverton, in storage. Marlene put new security locks on the doors and taught Zoe to call emergency phone numbers.

As they sat down for one of the last meals they would share before Howard deployed, they paged through copies of Army Times featuring "faces of the fallen." "Are they dead, Nanna?" Zoe asked.

"Yes," Marlene said somberly.

After dinner, the couple walks as they do almost every night at a nearby park to play with Zoe.

"I try to stay busy so I don't think," Marlene says. "We all want to believe that everything will be OK, but we don't know. I'll have three of them over there. What if they don't come home? How do I deal with that?"

Julie Sullivan: 503-221-8068, [juliesullivan@news.oregonian.com](mailto:juliesullivan@news.oregonian.com)