

MARCH 24, 2003

ELIZABETH SMART'S STRANGE ODYSSEY

TIME



WHEN MOM GOES TO WAR

This helicopter pilot and her husband are now based in Kuwait, leaving behind their 14-year-old daughter
A FAMILY TALE

Lieut. Colonel
Laura Richardson

A banner advertisement for Dove Men+Care. On the left, the Dove Men+Care logo is displayed in white on a dark blue background, with a red button below it that says "GET \$1 COUPON >>". To the right, the text "CLINICALLY PROVEN TO FIGHT SKIN DRYNESS" is written in large, bold, blue letters. On the far right, there is an image of a Dove Men+Care product, a deodorant stick, and a bar of soap.[Back to Article](#)[Click to Print](#)

Wednesday, May. 24, 2006

An American Family Goes To War

By NANCY GIBBS; Jim Lacey/Kuwait, Cathy Booth Thomas/Fort Campbell, Rita Healy/Denver, Hilary Hylton/Fort Hood, Constance E. Richards/Asheville and Mark Thompson/Washington

I can just imagine when they get home. They'll be so happy. No cots. Real beds. Real food. A lawn. Rain. And no sand."

Lauren Richardson, 14, knows about the sand on the other side of the world, where her parents are now. It gets everywhere, covers everything; the very desert rises up and leans forward, waiting for what comes next. Just like Lauren.

The kids at Fort Campbell, Ky., home of the 101st Airborne Screaming Eagles, wait for news from Kuwait, and the latest word from their mom or dad. Everyone--children, wives, husbands, parents--keeps cell phones on at all times and answers them without apology, for fear of missing a call someone stood in line for five hours to make. They go to the post store to load up on toilet paper and Twinkies and other survival gear to ship over. Ten-year-olds talk about the status of negotiations with Turkey. Five-year-olds say the prayers of soldiers' families: "Dear God, please protect my dad, and don't let the bad guys kill him."

Soldiers' kids are different from other kids at a moment like this--and Lauren may be more different still. Her mom, her dad and her Uncle Darwin are all in Kuwait, and her Aunt Janis leaves this week. And if the fighting comes, her parents are likely to be the first married battalion commanders ever to fly into battle together. Lieut. Colonel Laura Richardson, 39, commands the 5th Battalion of the 101st aviation brigade, piloting the Black Hawks that ferry troops into battle; her husband, Lieut. Colonel Jim Richardson, 42, leads the 3rd Battalion, the Apaches that provide the protection and the firepower for those same troops. Individually they are rising Army stars; together they are making history in a military that with each passing year becomes more of a family business: more female, more married, more responsible for the children left behind.

Roughly half of today's soldiers are married with children; 8% are single parents, and 10% have a spouse who is also in uniform. (Six percent of male soldiers have a military spouse; 41% of female soldiers do.) This means that the Army trains its soldiers for both war and love, offering secure e-mail channels and guidance on how to stay in

touch, in a Family Deployment Survival Handbook: Keep your spouse's picture in front of you when you write, it says. "Share your feelings as openly as you can without indulging in self-pity ... Let your spouse know how and why you love them. Above all, express yourself clearly so he/she won't have to think, 'I wonder what she/he meant by that?'"

For these military families, being prepared for an emergency means more than having flashlights and water stored in the basement. It means 18-year-old infantrymen who have to decide who gets their stuff if they never come home, and parents agreeing on who gets their children until they do. It is sperm banks offering to give military couples a year's free storage, in case a chemical attack destroys a husband's fertility or an older wife wants to keep trying to have a baby and can't afford to wait a year while her husband is gone. It is a single mom watching her adorable baby girl bond with a caregiver on her post who always wanted a daughter: the baby sitter paints a room in her home pink and smiles when the baby calls her Mama, even when Mother is in the room. It is Laura Richardson's dad, a 68-year-old pediatrician, wondering whether he should get smallpox and anthrax vaccines, so that if his kids were in trouble he could get on a plane and help them. "I thought I could go over if one of my children was horribly maimed or something like that," he says.

And in thousands of cases, the question years from now will be, "Mommy, what did you do in the war?" Women make up about 15% of active-duty soldiers, up from 11% in the last Gulf War--but numbers don't tell the story of their new role. In a war this time around, women will be flying F-18s, launching Tomahawk missiles and serving in front-line intelligence units. You still will not find women in the infantry or driving a tank, but changes in technology and in the very nature of war have blurred the front lines and the definition of being "in combat."

After the first Gulf War, in which five female service members were killed in action and two taken prisoner, Congress lifted the ban on women serving on combat ships. The Pentagon scrapped the rule that barred women from assignments with a high risk of facing enemy fire. Now women are excluded from only 9% of Army roles (though that represents nearly 30% of active-duty positions); 99% of all occupations and positions in the Air Force are open to women, and in the Navy, women are excluded from only SEAL teams and submarines.

The pressure on families is growing because longer and more frequent deployments make for wrenching choices. As the number of women on active duty reaches 200,000, of a total of 1.4 million, it means that more mothers are likely to discover what it really means to balance job and family under extreme circumstances. The commute is hell, the business trip can last six months or a year, and the note left for the baby sitter includes your power of attorney and your will. Those who have husbands staying behind while they deploy find themselves conducting a crash course in smooth braids and matching clothes. "I gotta tip my hat to women," says Robert Ward, 31, a father of three whose wife has just shipped out to the gulf from Fort Campbell. "I didn't know it was so hard. Really hard."

Hard on the other side too. Military mothers all find their own ways to cope with being away. Some sleep with pictures in their pillowcases. Some have nightmares about their children being in pain or in trouble. Some recorded favorite books or hymns or lullabies before they left, so their kids could remember what Mama sounds

like. Some put up maps in their children's bedrooms, so they will know where Mom is. Laura carries her family pictures in the humvee that takes her across the desert between base camps, and she doesn't have to be prompted to take them out.

Ever since Thanksgiving, at Fort Campbell, as at dozens of other Army posts around the country, rumors about deployment had been racing around--but then the date would be pushed back, pushed back. The Richardsons got to have Christmas. That was a gift. Then more weeks passed, more rumors. It was that kind of winter, of rushing and waiting, counting days and counting blessings. "The hardest thing about any deployment to the gulf will be leaving her," said Laura of her daughter. When Jim and Laura broke the news that they were both heading overseas, Lauren admitted that she was scared: "Mom said, 'We gotta go. But don't worry. Everything's going to be O.K. Everything's going to be O.K.'"

In the Army, where readiness is all, Laura is a pro. Over the years, whenever she and Jim were reassigned, to Alabama or Kansas or Virginia or Texas, Laura would be on the phone with friends at the next post--to find out what the schools were like and what was a good neighborhood and to interview potential baby sitters. And always to search for families that share their traditional values and that could serve as surrogate parents in the event that she and Jim had to ship out at the same time.

That is how Lauren comes to be living in "the hotel" now that her parents are both away. It's actually her friend Callie's house, and they call their bedroom the hotel because it has twin beds side by side. Callie's mother Cecilia, whose husband is also in the gulf, offered to take Lauren in so she could finish eighth grade with the rest of her class, before going off to spend the summer with her grandparents in Colorado. There is no telling when Mom and Dad will be home, but this way Lauren at least gets to stay a little normal a little while longer. "I like sleeping over at a friend's house for a month. It's fun. But it's not home," she says, not finding fault, just stating a fact.

Only about 1 in 20 officers who start out as lieutenants ever gets a battalion command, and never before has a couple gone to war commanding battalions in the same Army unit. But the 101st has a habit of making history: during World War II, it led the way on D-day, dropping in the night before the invasion. In 1991, during Operation Desert Storm, the Screaming Eagles were the "first band in the sand" and fired the first shot.

In the weeks ahead, the Richardsons and the troops they command will probably find themselves in the thick of the fighting. If so, Jim's Apaches will target the Iraqi Republican Guards around Baghdad; Laura's Black Hawks will carry the infantry of the first brigade to the front lines and deep into the enemy's rear areas. There's not much to be worried about in the northern and southern no-fly zones: U.S. and British fighter planes have been plinking away at Iraqi air defenses, to the point that there's not much left. But the defenses around Baghdad have just grown stronger, and Laura reads the intelligence reports with some apprehension.

This is her first time in a war zone; Laura says she is bothered less by the prospect of antiaircraft batteries than by the thought of facing a chemical attack. "There are things I can actively do to avoid or destroy an Iraqi air-defense site," she says. "There is not much I can do about a WMD [weapon of mass destruction] except sit there and take

it." She carries 15 infantrymen aboard each of her battalion's 30 Black Hawks. Flying protective cover for the troops on the ground, Jim's 24 Apaches are killing machines: each carries Hellfire antitank missiles, rockets and a 30-mm gun. They are equipped to fight day or night, and when 24 of them are put together, they have enough firepower to annihilate most of an armored division. Ask Jim if he worries about what Laura will face in battle, and he says, "Not very much. She is surrounded by 305 people who will do everything they can to watch out for her." Besides, he adds, with tender confidence, "she has me watching her back going in and coming out."

They met in 1986 at Fort Rucker, where Army chopper pilots go to learn to fly. "Jimbo," to his friends, was a Myrtle Beach, S.C., surfer boy and rescue volunteer who finally got his act together in college: he joined the ROTC, graduated from the University of South Carolina at Columbia and set off to learn to fly. When he encountered Laura in a hallway during training, Jim says he immediately knew she was the one. She took a bit longer, which is to say, it wasn't until the end of her first week that she wrote to her grandmother and said she had met the man she was going to marry. First, she says, "I had to get past his dumb good-ole-boy act, but when I saw there was a lot more under the veneer, I fell for him." Being a psychology major in college probably helped.

For her part, Laura was always ready to fly high. She was the one who rode the roller coaster seven, eight times, until her parents were sick; she kept going. "She loved that free fall," her father Dr. Jan Strickland says. "She just really wanted to be a pilot even then." As if she wasn't already gung-ho enough, he hung big white plastic boards all over the house, on the walls, on the doors, in the bedrooms, on the stairs, each containing some motivational saying, along the lines of:

Straight from the bow truth is driven, they fail and they alone who have not striven.

The whole family was fantastically fit; the house had six treadmills side by side in the workout room and an indoor pool complete with lane dividers that helped son Darwin qualify for the Olympic trials and made Laura an All-American. The parents never missed a swim meet. There were daily family runs 365 days a year, meaning, before presents could be opened on Christmas morning.

Of the four Strickland children only Elaine, 35, had to drop out of ROTC, and that was because of asthma; she is now a nurse in Boulder, Colo. Meanwhile, in addition to Laura, there is Darwin, 30, a JAG officer who has already shipped out from El Paso, Texas. Sister Janis, 32, who got a military scholarship to medical school, is likely to fly to the gulf this week, after last-minute practice in treating blown-off legs and catastrophic burns and the effects of poison gas. She advised Laura on medicines to carry with her and is aware that the day could come when she has to treat her sister. Therein lies some comfort for the Strickland parents in having three kids deployed at once. Mother Suzanne never turns off the news. "I think the best thing is for them all to be together," says her husband. "They will help each other. They would give their lives for the other one."

Jim's parents say that Laura's discipline rubbed off on him. Getting married was the best thing Jim ever did, adds his father James Richardson, a retired general in the South Carolina Coast Guard. "Because both of them are in helicopters, they can understand what the other is going through." Jim credits their mutual success to friendly

competition: "The reason she is moving up so fast is that she got to see all of my mistakes and has been able to avoid them," he says with a smile. He has four years' seniority over her and insists that she will never outrank him, since he will retire before that ever happens. Jim also vows that he will never let his wife beat him in any physical-training event, a hard promise to keep: when they were in Korea, Laura's unit had a yearly Iron Man Contest, and after 5-ft. 4-in. Laura beat dozens of men to win the contest, the event was renamed the Iron Person Contest. "She has so much stamina, but at the same time she's very feminine," observes Jim's mother June of her daughter-in-law. "She is little but mighty."

Jim and Laura have found many pleasures in military life, but they give up many that most families take for granted--like a family vacation. They were standing at the airport baggage claim for a long-planned trip to Disney World when Laura got a call summoning her directly to Washington, to be interviewed by Vice President Al Gore. She was assigned to be his military aide, and the vacation has yet to be rescheduled.

Jim worked at the Pentagon while Laura was in the White House. She was always at Gore's side, carrying the briefcase with the nuclear-launch codes. "Only the very best are entrusted with the so-called nuclear football," says Gore. "She has a total dedication to excellence in everything she does." It was Laura's first assignment that involved working with other women, and it taught her something about herself. "I had got used to dealing with men all the time, and it made me very direct and even abrupt," she admits. "I found that I can be just as effective without having to change how I truly am."

So it's no surprise that her troops now call her Mom and have figured out that the way to improve her mood is to ply her with Skittles. Only about 10% of the meals ready to eat (MREs) contain Laura's favorite treat, so her staff hoards them for use whenever they have to deliver bad news. She has been impressed at how comfortable her camp has been. "Much nicer than the cesspool they have put Jim in," she notes. She shares a tent with 65 of her troops, discovering to her surprise how loudly some men snore. They all sleep in their uniforms or stripped down to T shirts; there are separate showers and latrines for men and women. For the first two weeks at Laura's Camp Victory there were no dining facilities, and the food was all trucked in. But one night last week the new mess hall opened with a celebratory dinner of suspicious-looking lobster tail and baked potatoes. "It's cold," Laura says, "but it's lobster and a lot better than what we have been eating"--and far better than what lies ahead.

Jim has an edge in knowing what to expect, having already done a tour through the war on terrorism's other front: Afghanistan. He remembers the frustration he felt last March when he walked into the Emergency Operations Center at Fort Campbell and listened in on a battle occurring at that moment across the world: the early stages of Operation Anaconda. The soldiers of the division's 3rd Brigade had walked into a hornet's nest and clearly did not have the firepower they needed. By the end of the day, the division commander had ordered Jim and the rest of his battalion to pack their aircraft and head to Afghanistan. Ninety-six hours later, all his aircraft had been taken apart, loaded onto cargo planes and shipped out. The added firepower quickly turned the tide of the battle. "The al-Qaeda were used to seeing Apaches one or two at a time," Jim recalls. "Now they were facing an entire battalion of 24 aircraft. There was no place they could hide or regroup."

The fighting was vicious. One of Jim's Apaches was brought down by enemy fire; both pilots were too badly injured to get out, and the chopper was likely to explode. Unable to land nearby, Jim had his helicopter hover over the crash site. He then jumped to the ground, injuring his back but not badly enough to prevent him from pulling both pilots from the downed helicopter and staying with them until a medical evacuation team arrived.

Only months after finishing that tour, Jim was deployed again, this time to Kuwait. He has had weeks to get his men and his aircraft ready, whereas Laura's battalion is still assembling aircraft and preparing to move to a newly built camp closer to the action but farther away from hot meals and telephones. Signs that the battle is approaching multiply by the day: the electrified fence along the border has tank doorways cut through it. The U.N. border observers are pulling out, and civilian officials are pulling back. At the various base camps, soldiers can wait in line at the PX for two hours just to buy razor blades and batteries. Wild dogs roam the perimeter of the camps, keeping the rats at bay. And the sandstorms are like a shroud that stings; taking a shower is a waste of time since you're filthy again in five minutes.

As life becomes harder at the front, it becomes harder at home as well. It's not that Lauren misses the conversations with her parents over dinner. She just wishes they were home so she could annoy and ignore them, as a 14-year-old should. "If Mom and Dad were back, I'd get home from school before them. I'd do my homework, go on the computer, talk on the phone nonstop and turn my stereo up real loud," she says. She likes Top 40 R. and B. Her parents do not.

And if they were home, she could stop thinking about them all the time. The calls are reassuring, but Lauren's leg begins to tap up and down when the subject of war comes up. "Nothing's going to happen. Mom's always on top of things and cheerful. Dad worked at the Pentagon, Mom at the White House. Nothing's going to happen." And her leg keeps tapping, up and down. --Reported by Jim Lacey/Kuwait, Cathy Booth Thomas/Fort Campbell, Rita Healy/Denver, Hilary Hylton/Fort Hood, Constance E. Richards/Asheville and Mark Thompson/Washington

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