A Day in the Life of a Military Mom

By Jessica Stockton Clancy

Photo courtesy of Phil Savage.

It's a warm April afternoon at Fort A.P. Hill in Caroline County, Virginia, and Captain Montgomery of the Maryland National Guard surveys an ammunition shed. The sparse 8 x 8' wooden structure contains shelves of ammo and fired rounds. But this 5-year veteran of the Guard is seeking electricity, not bullets, needed to power a key piece of equipment. Fellow soldiers are asked to leave once an outlet is located, and Captain Montgomery's assistant stands guard outside the rickety door until the mission is completed.

Why the pressing need for electricity? To power Montgomery's breast pump.

"I call it my 'mommy mission,'" she says with a wide smile.

Rebekah Montgomery, an active duty chaplain in the Guard and mom to 9-month-old Genevieve, has no problem doing whatever is necessary to balance her responsibilities as mother and as National Guard soldier. One weekend a month—and two weeks a year—Montgomery leaves home to travel for drill weekends and visit different units in Maryland as part of her service counseling soldiers, assessing morale and running field services. Montgomery pumps in advance in order to leave milk with her parents and husband, and she is resourceful in the field, pumping in unusual places to keep her milk supply up while separated from Genevieve.

It's the beginning of a drill weekend, and a convoy of 12 military vehicles moves slowly southbound through Virginia. This is Montgomery's first weekend away since giving birth, and it's been hours since she nursed her daughter so her discomfort is growing. She awaits the convoy's first stop at a McDonald's, but she fails to find an electrical outlet there. Next stop: a local Target. Clad in her Army combat uniform and carrying her pump and bottles in a gear bag, she jumps out of a Humvee. Fortunately, this time she finds an outlet in the restroom. Later that weekend, Montgomery sits in her field jacket in the mobile cafeteria, back turned to the room, pumping as her fellow soldiers are being served their meals. "I'm not self-conscious at all," says Montgomery. One-handed, she flips through the photos of Genevieve that she keeps with her in a plastic bag. "To get my mind, heart and body somewhere else in order to pump," she says. But it's unlikely her colleagues will share this challenge; only 12 percent of Guard soldiers are women and even fewer are chaplains. "I have yet to see another woman pump in the field, but I know others do," she says.

During her normal workweek, Montgomery leaves home at 5:45 a.m. and

commutes from Bethesda to Baltimore to work for the head chaplain for the state of Maryland. Montgomery works in what is known as Mobilization Cycle Support, helping soldiers who are getting ready for deployment, those who are returning and those recovering from emotional, spiritual or physical challenges. On most days she will spend hours speaking with, and listening to, soldiers and their family members. "It's the best job," she says. "I'm paid to talk to people and build relationships."

A LEAP OF FAITH

Montgomery, the daughter of an artist and a Korean War vet, first felt called to serve after the events of 9/11. After completing master's degrees in both divinity and mental health counseling, part of her ordainment required she work in a hospital trauma unit. "That's where I found my calling," she says. "Being in the intense ministry situations really felt like a good fit for me." She joined the Guard in 2003 in what she refers to as "a leap of faith."

For many reasons, Montgomery now refers to that leap as a "fortuitous unfolding." She and her husband, 1st Lt. Travis Montgomery, met in 2004 when they both were mobilized to Florida during a series of hurricanes. They were married in February 2005 and that summer both were deployed to Afghanistan for a 17-month tour of duty. Was she concerned for her safety? "Actually, I was chomping at the bit to go," says Montgomery. "I thrive in that sort of environment."

Montgomery traveled around Afghanistan, visiting 40 different camps to counsel soldiers of all faiths. Her efforts there earned her a bronze star, a rare honor for someone of her rank. "It was very humbling to get that sort of recognition," she says. While deployed she often attracted crowds of locals who were stunned at the sight of a woman in a military uniform. Montgomery, a black belt in karate, used her down time to teach both karate and yoga classes to her fellow soldiers. "It allowed me to interact with people in a different way," she says. "I'm told I'm very tough!"

BABY ON BOARD

Within months after returning home from their tour, Montgomery and her husband learned they were expecting. Her experience as a counselor, a teacher and an emotional support to others has made the journey into motherhood a natural progression.

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CONTINUED ON PAGE 88

A Day in the Life of a Military Mom

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 87

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Montgomery's uniform has been replaced by blue jeans and a comfortable shirt. With her boots in the closet, she enjoys the simplicity of bare feet and the time spent with her family. Montgomery dotes on Genevieve, lending her steady hands as her daughter pulls herself up on wobbly legs. During breaks from her new milestones, Genevieve nurses while Montgomery strokes her hair. When asked the most important thing she'd like to pass on to her daughter, she says, "Kindness. That's something I got from my mother."

Montgomery's service reminds her of the need to remain flexible in work—and in life. "Sometimes everything gets messed up and you just have to make the best of it," she says. Montgomery admits feeling more qualified to counsel female soldiers who are separated from their children now that she too is a mom. "I don't think you can understand being a parent until you are one," she says. Her family's unconditional willingness to care for Genevieve is the reason she can pursue the work she loves. "Without them," she says, "I might be in a different situation in terms of doubting my commitment."

At 4 a.m. on a cold morning last spring, Genevieve got a taste of her mother's commitment. Montgomery filled her water container, pulled her rucksack onto her back and then strapped Genevieve, clad in a puffy pink snowsuit, onto her chest. Along with her fellow soldiers, they did a six-mile "ruck march" (a type of training hike). "I just love that she will be exposed to this different world," says Montgomery.

The plan is to raise Genevieve in Bethesda, where she will attend the same schools as Montgomery did and where Montgomery first learned an appreciation for other cultures. "We had Iranian neighbors, French, Swiss, Indian … I think growing up in such a diverse environment is important for her," she says.

Next to Genevieve's crib lies a rug from Afghanistan. A simple reminder of the conditions Montgomery and her husband observed that have shifted their perception of their own daily challenges. "In Afghanistan kids have nothing," says Montgomery. "Education is not guaranteed, neither is water nor electricity. That makes you very appreciative."

With her positive attitude and a joy for life, Montgomery shrugs off any differences between herself and other parents. "I'm like many women who are trying to balance all their responsibilities," she says. "You just do what you need to do—and you do it with a smile on your face."

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