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War, Wives and a Near Suicide

By [ALISON BUCKHOLTZ](#)

“If you are reading this, you should know that I am dead,” began the blog of a 27-year-old Army wife named Jessica Harp. “At least I hope I’m dead,” she added. “It would be awful to fail at your own suicide.”

The entry, posted to the blog “(Mis)Adventures of an Army Wife” on April 11, was titled “[A Final Goodbye.](#)” Its broad outlines, though not dramatic conclusion, are recognizable to many in the post-9/11 generation of military spouses. In 4,100 words, Ms. Harp chronicled her husband’s severe depression after his unit’s deployment to Afghanistan in 2009, and her own subsequent depression, for which she sought counseling and medication.

After her husband’s return and their cross-country move to Fort Jackson, S.C., so he could attend an eight-month officers’ course, she was told she could not join the base’s family support group because her husband was only a student there. She tried to put to use her master’s degree in financial counseling, but was told she was unemployable because she would be leaving the area before the year’s end. Her husband’s erratic behavior, coupled with his drinking, convinced her that he was an alcoholic, and she encouraged him to get help.

“The doctor immediately put him on antidepressants and sleeping pills,” she recounts. “And that was it. No counseling. No getting to the root cause of the issue. Just drugs.” She writes that he mixed his prescriptions with alcohol and at times became violent.

As their marriage deteriorated, Ms. Harp realized her husband was involved with another woman. Ms. Harp checked herself into the hospital because of suicidal thoughts, and her husband left her. She felt that the military community, for which she had given up her career and her independence, had abandoned her as well. “I wish he had just died in combat,” she writes. “If he had died, I would have been surrounded with so much support that I wouldn’t have known what to do with it. Instead, he has discarded me on the side of the road like a piece of rubbish, and the Army ‘family’ has shrugged its shoulders and said, ‘Well, he doesn’t want you anymore. There’s nothing we can do about it.’ ”

Ms. Harp’s blog entry moved quickly among military spouses across the country, especially those who write and follow the scores of military spouse blogs that record the frustrations, joys, achievements and advice of those married to service members. Kathleen Harris Causey, who blogs as “[Unlikely Wife](#)” and also contributed to PBS’s “[POV — Regarding War](#)” blog, was an acquaintance of Ms. Harp’s in the blogosphere as well as the real world. Ms. Harp’s final post played on her worst fears.

In the Army, “We are only as good as our husbands,” Ms. Causey said in an interview. “Those of us who want help, we’re looked on as the broken ones.” Ms. Harp’s blog, she continued, “scared

me because it could so easily be me. The Army could say to me, too, ‘You’re just a dependent. That’s all you are.’ ” (The Department of Defense refers to spouses and children of service members as “dependents” in its official documents.)

Like Ms. Harp, Ms. Causey is in her late 20s and married to an Army officer who is serving a yearlong deployment to Afghanistan. Like Ms. Harp, she has found herself to be unemployable, despite her college degree. “What do you do when you go from being a successful person to being a military wife?” she asks.

Ms. Harp has not posted to her blog since April 11, but in response to more than 200 often frantic comments from readers and friends, her parents posted to say that she is alive and is being treated at a hospital. They set up a post office box for cards and letters, but there has been no other update or information about her.

Other bloggers have linked to her post, some commenting on the strain of two wars on military families. “The military needs to start taking our families more seriously, & start realizing that the extremely heavy burdens that they are placing on the families time & time again effect [sic] more than just the Service Member,” wrote the author of the blog [“Left Face.”](#)

But most bloggers and readers simply rally around Ms. Harp, expressing sadness and support rather than anger. “The milspouse world has been rocked by a message from a fellow military wife who decided that her pain was too great,” Karen Francis wrote on the blog [“Milspouse Mutterings.”](#) encouraging her own readers to send cards to Ms. Harp.

I’m one of those military spouses whose world was rocked by Ms. Harp’s note. I don’t know her, though I came across her blog last year, when I was writing a column for [Slate.com](#) about the critical historical role that military spouse blogs are playing in the story of America’s conflicts overseas. I believe that military spouse blogs are archiving our collective experience on the homefront in a way that wasn’t possible when couples wrote conventional letters to each other because deployed service members must travel light, discarding everything they can as they make their way through the war zone. That’s why most compilations of war letters are letters from husbands and sons to wives and parents, not the other way around.

But Ms. Harp’s last post is a war letter, too. And just as the value of compiling traditional war letters is to unite the multitudes who have served while illustrating to others the individual sacrifice that this service exacts, military spouse blogs create community while writing themselves into the larger conversation about the cost of war.

And the cost to families is significant. No statistics exist to indicate that military spouse suicide may be a problem, although the [rising rates of suicide among service members and veterans](#) are documented carefully. According to a Pentagon report released last August, one soldier commits suicide every 36 hours. Last fall, four soldiers at Fort Hood committed suicide in a three-day period; the suicide rate at that base, the site of a November 2009 shooting in which 13 people were killed, was four times the national average. Recently there has been a modest annual decrease in the rate of suicide among active-duty troops, although in the last year, the suicide rate among National Guard and Reserve soldiers has more than doubled.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen have spoken publicly about this, and the military has devoted significant resources to several different suicide prevention campaigns. The independent group [Blue Star Families](#), a military family advocacy organization, along with the Creative Coalition, will start this week a series of celebrity public service announcements on suicide prevention aimed at the entire military family.

Ms. Harp could have potentially benefited from one of these initiatives. Or perhaps not. Her blog presents her perceptions and perspective about how the Army contributed to her marriage's downfall and led to her decision to kill herself. It is a very personal story, and to those who don't know her, there are as many questions as answers. But she opened up a very public conversation about military spouse suffering and suicide. I'm glad she is being treated, and I agree with the visitor to her blog who wrote, "Failing at suicide will become the best thing you'll have ever done for yourself." Adding her war letter to the writings of other post-9/11 military spouses may turn out to be one of the best things she has ever done for them.

Alison Buckholtz is the author of ["Standing By: The Making of an American Military Family in a Time of War"](#) (Tarcher/Penguin, 2009). She writes for several national publications about military families and America's military-civilian divide, and speaks to military, civilian and religious groups around the country about these issues.