

Personal Experience

SGM Brenda L. Acosta

United States Army Sergeants Major Academy

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As a soldier in the armed services, I always knew there was a chance that our Unit would be called to duty. We trained very diligently and were always preparing for the day that our country would call us in arms. I was assigned to an engineering unit. Our mission was to lay in-land petroleum distribution system. Therefore, we always knew if anything happened around the world our Unit would be an indispensable part of the Army's overall mission. We felt ready! Trained! However, nothing prepares you for the emotional trauma that hits you when your number is called.

The 808th Engineer Company was a cohesive unit. We were 188 strong. We had leadership that respected the lower ranks. I was, somewhat, relieved to hear stories from other NCOs about their emotional blow. As a leader, I was encouraged that I was not alone in my emotional plight. We received an alert on January 2003 to prepare for mobilization to Ft Hood, Texas. The Unit was placed on Orders and moved to Ft. Hood, Texas six days later. The whole event seemed surreal—as if time had stopped. As I gazed into the faces of many soldiers arriving to the Unit that morning, my mind started wandering what would happen to all our families. I realized in all our training, we lack training on our most critical skill, that is, on how to handle the emotional elements of a deployment and the stigma it would bring to both soldier and family.

I was assigned to the 808th Engineer Company as a SFC in an administrative position. I also worked for the Unit, during the week, as the Unit Administrator for the Company. Time passed very quickly from the time the Unit received their alert to the time we made movement from Houston to Ft. Hood where we would begin our validation process and prepare to deploy to Kuwait, Iraq.

Once the Unit arrived at Ft. Hood we hit the ground running. Every moment was consumed with preparing the Unit and ensuring the Soldier's were ready to be successful with their mission. Days and nights seemed to run together and there just wasn't enough time in the day to accomplish everything on the training schedule. The first week at Ft. Hood was total chaos but as weeks passed, things seemed to slow down and the Unit was closer to being validated. Going through the validation process was long and tedious and there wasn't much time to think about home or that we were deploying soon. As things began to slow down and there was down time, I started to feel emotions that I hadn't experienced before. The worst part was that I was terrified of sharing these feelings with other Soldiers. I was a SFC and was expected to be strong and courageous. I was a leader. Therein lied my dilemma! How could I be a strong courageous leader yet be filled with emotion. I was conflicted. I struggled with the perception of being viewed as weak, cry baby, or a Soldier that couldn't handle a deployment. To my fellow Soldiers my reputation was of one being a strong leader that could handle anything. But I found myself becoming an emotional wreck and as time passed, these emotions became more dominate.

During my 18 year military career, I had not experience anything remotely close to a deployment. I was part of a peace time army. We as a country had never been tested as in that dreadful day in 2001. Thus, the emotional stress was overwhelming and very new to me. Although I felt that all my subordinates looked up to me as if I had and was the experienced one in deployments. During this time in my life, I was married with four children. My kids ranged from a senior in high school to a little one in 1st grade. As the Unit and I went through all our stations to prepare for deployment, I noticed the lack of a

station that provided training on how to handle the emotions one would engage and the separation anxiety one can expect to experience during the separation from family and loved ones.

As the days continued to pass, we continued getting ready to deploy. The news on television was about conflict. We prepared religiously. Everyone went through thorough evaluation in order to assure preparedness. As part of the validation process, each Soldier went through an extensive medical review. This review included shots, eye exam, dental exam, blood work, and a brief physical to include all medical history. There were so many briefs you couldn't seem to keep track of them and they all seemed to brief the same thing, not true, but all the briefs ran together. It was as if you were on an assembly line and stopping at each station. Training was number one on the list. Weapons qualification and the gas chamber were just a few, not to mention all the CTT and anything else the mobilization station could think of.

The 808th was part of the first wave that deployed to Iraq for Operation Enduring Freedom in 2003. The mobilization station was in the learning process as well, particularly because we were reservists and not active duty. The unit faced many challenges during our stay at Ft Hood. We were a reserve unit being mobilized for active duty. The Active component was unclear how to manage us and much confusion came from this. This added to the early mornings, late nights, and the never ending frustration. As I went through each station and was validated as an individual Soldier, Iraq seemed to become a reality for me, no longer was it a place in the distance. I would soon deploy and be separated from my family for a very long time. As these thoughts ran through my head, emotions peaked. How could a SFC in the Army have these feelings and how

could I control them so I could perform my mission and be focused on the job at hand? I was a leader and had Soldiers depending on me. These emotions had to go away and the focus needed to be on getting the unit to Iraq.

Unfortunately, the Army in my opinion, missed a vital part of the mobilization/validation process, this was teaching all Soldiers how to prepare for the emotional side of war and deployment. Even though you are a Senior NCO, this doesn't excuse you from these feelings. Yes, some Soldiers can handle separation anxiety and their emotions better than others; however, some are consumed with them. I was one of those Soldiers. We as leaders sometimes are guilty of judging other soldiers that get profiles. They are seen as soldiers that are trying to get over, trying to get out of taking a PT test, it's a stigma that seems to stick with the soldier. Even though the profile is valid, the soldier has medical reasons for why he received the profile, its just part of the norm that we are quick to judge. Even though I wasn't asking for a profile or even had one, I felt I would be placed in the same category. I was terrified that I would quickly become part of the norm, another statistic of a soldier that was trying to get out of deployment, a soldier that was weak. I was very confused and had no insight as to how I would be a good leader when I was an emotional wreck. I seemed to be caught between a rock and hard place. If I confided in a soldier, quickly the story would get out, and the rumors would start. If I sat and did nothing, I wasn't sure how strong I would be for my Soldiers when I wasn't able to handle my own feelings.

I see myself as a good leader, with a passion for the Army. My number one goal is to take care of Soldiers, mentor them, and be the best leader I can be. During our time at Ft Hood, I felt isolated and felt I had no one to talk to. I was very embarrassed to even

mention I had these feelings and that they were so overwhelming, it started to interfere with me being a good leader. Soldiers tend to have the perception that their leaders are fearless and they are the experts in everything because they are senior NCOs, particularly the junior enlisted. Here I was a senior NCO, never deployed, and basically felt I was having an emotional breakdown and felt I could not speak to anyone for fear they would look at me different. No longer would I be the leader they thought, I would appear to them to be weak. This thought frightened me, but the emotions and anxiety I was feeling was awful and I knew eventually I would break.

Finally, the unit leaves Ft Hood and arrives in Kuwait with Iraq just a mere distance away. Trying to explain my emotions is almost impossible. Anyone that has ever experienced what I am speaking about knows the feeling. You are almost in doubt of your own feelings. I am a very strong person in nature and the thought of being weak was unacceptable. This overwhelming sense of separation, emptiness, and not knowing how to deal with these feelings was a lot to handle. Who do I talk to, should I feel this way or am I just being a whimp?

This was the first time in my 20 years in the military that I was totally lost as a leader and as a person. I had never experienced this before and didn't know how to handle. I was supposed to be strong; I am the SFC that has been in the military for 20 years. Soldiers come to me to cry on my shoulder, look for comfort and advice, not the other way around. As each day passed in Kuwait, the feelings seemed to dominate me, for the first time I felt helpless and was lost on how to control what I was experiencing. For several weeks I literally thought I was losing it, it was absolutely the worst experience of my life. I finally decided I had to speak to someone, no matter what

consequences I may face, or the rumors that might follow, I was determined to speak to someone. I decided to speak to the Chaplain. Once I was able to speak to the Chaplain and he told me what I was feeling was perfectly normal, it was as if a ton of bricks was lifted. There was nothing wrong with me as a leader or a person; I was just experiencing separation anxiety. I was so relieved, and at this point was able to speak to someone that I knew would not speak to anyone else about what I had confined in him about. This made me even feel better, I would not be looked at as a weak leader, or a leader trying to get out of deployment. I had suffered the entire time at Ft Hood and several weeks into deployment in Iraq for fear I would be singled out as the dead beat Soldier.

Our assignment was to write about a personal experience in the military.

Although, I didn't have an exciting or tactical experience to write about, I felt the need to share this experience because I know there are many senior NCOs that experience the same thing, but don't speak about it. We are taught from basic and all through our military career to be strong leaders, lead by setting the example and emotions are set to the side until the mission is over. This puts leaders, particularly senior leaders, in a difficult position. For fear of being judged as a weak leader or a leader trying to look for an excuse to get out of deployment, you say nothing and bottle all these emotions up. The fact is, these emotions and the anxiety you are feeling are natural. Not every Soldier will experience this, but I am willing to bet, it effect's more then less. Senior leaders are looked at as the experienced Soldiers in the Army, the Soldiers that have all the right answers. Junior enlisted look up to the Senior NCOs to lead them and mentor them. In their eyes, senior leaders don't cry and nothing gets to them, to the contrary, senior leaders are human as well. We experience the same emotions and anxieties that everyone

else does, we just don't let anyone know or see that we do. So, it's ok to be a Senior NCO and miss your family, have feelings that you never experienced before, and speak to a Chaplain or another Senior Leader about your feelings. I love the Army; I am now a SGM in hopes of becoming a CSM soon. During my validation process, if I had someone telling me I would experience these feelings and that it would be perfectly normal, I probably would have known how to handle these emotions. In fact, I would have spoke to someone a lot sooner and saved myself all the pain I was feeling inside. All Soldiers should attend a class on the emotions, feelings, and state of mind you will experience during your deployment. This would allow Soldiers to recognize early on that what they were feeling was not that they were weak, crazy, or having a melt down. That these feelings were perfectly normal and they should speak to their Chaplain or confide in a friend or their battle buddy to help them through the rough times. No deployment is pleasant and being separated from your loved ones is a sacrifice we are all aware of when we join the military. But how to handle being separated from our families and loved ones is not something I think the Army teaches or prepares the Soldier for enough. Being tactically prepared for war is one aspect of the process; however, you must be emotionally sound as well. This is where I personally think the Army falls short in preparing their Soldiers. I know we have this idea and perception that being a Soldier means you are a lean, mean, fighting machine. TV shows and propaganda reveals this; however, all Soldiers are showed as being fighters, tactically sound, and no emotions.

The Army today is spread all over the world fighting the war on terrorism. More so now then ever, the Army must prepare their Soldiers emotionally and tactically. They both go hand and hand. Soldiers, especially senior leaders, can not be in fear of their

emotions and seeking help should be routine. In my 22 year military career, I had never experienced such emotional pain and sorrow. I was so overwhelmed by being separated from my family, I was in denial of my own feelings, in a state of disbelief that I was quickly turning into a weak senior NCO so I thought; however, the truth was I just wasn't prepared by the Army on what to expect and how I would feel. I don't regret my deployment. In fact, it made me a stronger person, a more experienced NCO and prepared to handle the challenge that a deployment brings. I understand now that it is ok to feel this way and it is no way a reflection on you as a leader. If called again to defend my country or rescue another, I am ready!