

Married to the navy

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The conversation started like all the rest - small talk about each other's day, banter about what would be good for dinner - as he changed from his uniform to civilian clothes.

He emptied his pockets as we talked, casually tossing assorted items onto the bed: loose change, a golf tee, a used tissue and a piece of paper that somehow remained neatly folded, just one corner bent from handling.

I paused from folding laundry and glanced down at the bed. It took me a minute before my eyes focused on what he'd tossed aside.

Staring back at me from the top of the page were the words, "Last Will and Testament." They stopped my heart, but I carried on with our conversation, not wanting him to know I could barely breathe.

That's what every good navy wife does. She smiles and carries on.

She carries on when he's swept off to sea for a month-long training exercise. She carries on when the phone rings at 3 a.m. and he's recalled because of a bomb threat on board. She carries on when he can't be home for Christmas or New Year's Eve because he'll be with his ship in Dili, East Timor, or some other port she will only see on a map.

But this time it was different. This time he was sailing away for 195 days, from April until the end of October. This time he would be in harm's way. This time he was going to the Persian Gulf.

For 28 years we have lived and breathed the navy together. There is no escaping it.

With almost 3,000 sailors based in Victoria, there is barely a day that passes when you don't run into a familiar face in line at the bank, squeezing melons at the grocery store, heading to the same movie. And the ensuing conversation between sailors ultimately focuses on two things: the ship and hockey. Wives smile and wait for it to end and then they carry on.

But navy life isn't all sacrifice and separation.

We missed celebrating the millennium New Year's together, but a week later, thanks to financial help from the military's Home Leave Travel Assistance, I was jetting off to Sydney, Australia.

For 10 days we wandered the cobbled streets of The Rocks. We cruised the harbour on tours, gawking at the homes of the rich and famous.

We strolled hand in hand down the sticky white sand beaches as the sun set, drowning the already glorious city in a rich golden glow. The time was short but it was time spent together.

The times we've spent apart are when things inevitably seem to go wrong. The hot water tank explodes, the car refuses to move, the house goes dark when you plug in the coffee pot, a loved one passes away unexpectedly.

No matter the amount of tears shed or curses uttered, that ship is not coming home. Your husband cannot help. You learn early on to be independent. You master the screwdriver and the hammer and you find a multitude of new uses for a roll of duct tape.

Good things happen too, and they always seem to happen when the ship is in some foreign port thousands of miles from home. Your nephew makes the ball team, you win tickets to a play you've both wanted to see, you turn a corner and witness a jaw-dropping sunset.

You learn to draw on inner strength and enjoy these things for both of you.

You learn to write him descriptive e-mails and send parcels filled with clippings from local papers, photographs of that sunset and heart-shaped chocolate-chip cookies, his favourite. You invite a girlfriend to the play and enjoy time spent with a friend. You compromise and carry on.

So, as the next departure date approached and the excitement of the ship's round-the-world voyage grew, my 28 years as a navy wife told me to smile and pretend to be excited too, knowing that once again I would need to draw on my independence and inner strength to get me through almost seven more months alone.

I will reacquaint myself with that hammer; I will replenish my supply of duct tape; I will plant the garden and trim the hedges; I will make dinner and lose myself in a good movie every now and then.

And, as I wait patiently for his ship to reappear on the horizon, I will do what every good navy wife does best. I will smile and carry on.

Penny Rogers lives in Victoria.