



Deb Rickert shares the bittersweet experience of being a military parent

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"You made them strong, we'll make them Army Strong." This is an Army recruiting commercial that always gets my attention, as it reflects both a proud yet uncertain parent and a determined young soldier. I have two sons on active duty, so the mix of emotions on the faces of both parent and child hits very close to home for me.

On Sept. 11, 2001, our family was about to become a military family, though I didn't know it then. My eldest son, Dan, a senior in high school, was profoundly impacted by that day. The once wisecracking teenager solemnly watched as his country suffered a devastating attack — and I watched as his innocence slipped away. Soon after 9/11, he scrapped his original college plans and pursued an appointment to the U. S. Military Academy at West Point.

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Before long, we were those parents in the recruiting commercial. We watched with pride as Dan, and then several years later, our second son, David, took oaths to defend and protect the Constitution of the United States. Both of them reflected strength, confidence and a perceived sense of invincibility — they promised to go wherever their country would send them for missions they may not always agree with. Amid that pride, they likely didn't notice their parents' uncertainty and fear for what the future might bring.

That quiet, calm courage inherent in this generation of young Americans inspired me to start Operation Support Our Troops — America. Our mission has been to increase awareness of the needs of our military. Each year, we hold an event called Rockin' For the Troops, a day of celebration and support for our military community featuring music, patriotic displays and family entertainment (this year's headliner is country music star Ronnie Dunn). With the dedication and efforts of our volunteers, the organization has grown to serve the military community across the country.

Because less than 1 percent of the population is currently serving, many people don't understand the day-to-day realities military families face. Sending our children away, knowing they'll face danger, is totally counterintuitive to being a mom or dad. Each time that I — along with many other parents — say goodbye to my children and send them off to war, I am constantly reminded of the line, "You made them strong."

Whenever my sons are deployed and I'm able to speak with them, I am always aware of how strong they sound. Lonely perhaps, and homesick — but always strong. And their strength now helps us through the fear, pain of separation and heartache.

This year's Rockin' For the Troops will be bittersweet for me, with both of my sons deployed at the same time. Regardless of where they are, they will likely call with well wishes and a hearty, "Get it done, Mom!" They will sound strong, and so will I, despite how I may feel inside. Because they have made me strong.

The eighth annual Rockin' For the Troops featuring Ronnie Dunn will be held

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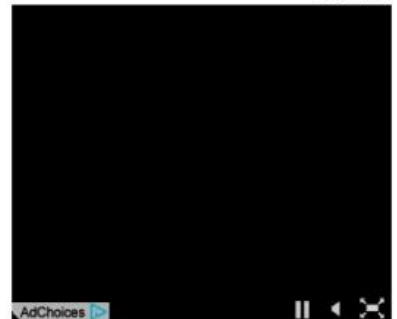


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