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Sat18

Marriage in the Marine Corps and Other Musings on Military Matches

Posted by [Katy](#) on Feb 18, 2012 in [Sarah Plummer](#), [Sarah Plummer](#) | [6 comments](#)



Guest Blogger Sarah Plummer

People think it's easier for single soldiers to go to war. In some ways, I believe it's harder.

I was married once...nearly a decade ago. Like anything in the Marine Corps, even the holy sacrament of marriage can be made into a competition – who gets married the youngest, who gets married the quickest, who remains married the longest, who has the hottest wife or husband, or who has the most children. “Marriage” and “success” were (*apparently?*) synonymous. The ironic thing is, most military marriages don't last.

Several years ago when I began dating a civilian guy, he bluntly asked me, “Have you been divorced?” His father, a former Air Force pilot, told him to ask me this because, in his opinion, all Marines *had* been married and divorced. I hesitated, but replied, “Yes.” The stereotype that a majority of Marines get divorced does exist for a reason. Divorce statistics among the military population are well above the national average.

Usually, I do not volunteer information about my marital history until further along in a relationship. When I am directly asked about it, though, I keep my answer simple. I allow people think I am part of the military statistic. I allow people to think my ex-husband and I just could not “hack it” as a young married couple. I allow people's minds to wander and to assume one of us cheated on the other, one of us abused the other, or one of us lied to or stole from the other. I allow the questioners to fill their heads with whatever assumptions they already have about young, divorced Marines. I do not explain to them that when I committed to my marriage, I had taken it more seriously than most of the other Marines I knew at the time and that before my fiancé and I got married, I evaluated the forthcoming union from all vantage points.

One of the ways I assessed the future marriage was logically. I studied sociology in college and often applied the lessons I learned in the classroom to my personal life. Therefore, I recognized the common education, socio-economic class, and general background my ex-husband and I shared. Intellectually, we grilled each other on what we thought would breed success and why others had failed. Personality-wise, we were both active, outdoorsy, and loved our families. I also gauged the potential success of our relationship on a spiritual and emotional level. We prepared by attending pre-marital counseling with our pastor and appeared to be compatible. We were young, but by anyone's standards, we were a good match. This was a recipe for success, right?

I choose not to reveal the full details of my divorce to everyone when first asked about it because those details are painful to share. One week after we were engaged, I was raped...

by a fellow Marine. My relationship with my then-fiancé took a tumultuous turn. The high we felt a week before nose-dived into confusion that lasted for several months. Eventually, we emerged from the emotional fog, believing we had made it through the roughest patch of our lives and come out mostly whole on the other side. If anyone could do it – marriage – we could. We followed through with our plans to get married four months later.

Two months after our wedding, I finally had an opportunity to report the assault. At this point in time, my ex and I functioned as happy newlyweds, romantically in love with one another, disappointed to be stationed apart from one another, but confident in the strength of our relationship. When I presented the facts of the rape to the Judge Advocate General (JAG) and moved forward with the legal proceedings, the scab was ripped open. The Marine Corps' institutional failure to handle the situation appropriately just poured salt into the wound; it was too much to bear. I was forced to relive the rape every day for two months straight because I was required to tell the JAG, or my ex, the story again and again and again. Even though my ex knew every detail of the story, he incessantly demanded that I retell it. It felt like he didn't believe me. It felt like he insisted I repaint the picture in lurid detail time and time again in the hopes that he'd hear some new detail that would make him *really* believe me that I was raped and I hadn't just made a drunken mistake.

Parts of me began to shut down. I wasn't myself. I was depressed. I was exhausted. I was in physical pain. I had nightmares. I didn't want to be touched. I went from laughing every day to crying every day. I was not Sarah, and my ex had had enough. I asked him to stick with me through those tough months because I knew it wouldn't last forever. I explained to him that I was having a delayed, but textbook, response to rape. That the poor handling of the case by the TBS JAG was exacerbating this grief cycle, but darnit, I was trying my best to suck it up and move on. "Just give me time," I pleaded. A couple months later, he shrugged his shoulders, raised his hands, palms toward me, and muttered the fateful words that begun the final unraveling, "I can't do it anymore."

We were divorced less than a year later.

The rape, the marriage, the reporting of the rape, and my subsequent divorce all happened during my first year as a Commissioned Officer in the Marine Corps. As I progressed through my career and witnessed more and more of my peers and colleagues tie the knot, it bothered me that those with newly minted marriage bands held themselves above those who hadn't taken the plunge (and certainly thought better of themselves than those who had *already* and "failed"). Shortly after my divorce, I remember a fellow female Marine at TBS looking at me with disdain, then speaking of her marriage as if it were a model to emulate based on its existence alone. She had no idea what had caused the death of my dear relationship, yet she openly judged it...and me. Ironically, she, too, was divorced only a few years later and, as far as I know, under no more dire circumstances than the stress and separation the Marine Corps graciously bestows upon *all* of its members. But I could be wrong; one never really knows another's story and I do not intend to judge as I was judged.

It just seemed preposterous to me that some relationships were given more validity than others. I knew of more than a handful of cases where Lieutenants met at TBS and were married by the time their MOS school was over in order to offer each other some sort of emotional guarantee before they went off to war. These less-than-a-year-old relationships were looked upon as more of a relationship than those of people who had been together for years simply because they had an official label. It disgusted me to know the cycle would just keep repeating itself as I talked to Marine friends – male and female alike – who rushed to

figure out if they should marry their current dating partner. They knew being married made you appear more grown up, responsible, and as a new officer (where you were often younger than your enlisted Marines), this was yet another plus on the pro/con list for getting hitched.

Though few and far between, I know of some couples in the Marine Corps who have been together for years without getting married yet. I admire them because they've resisted the institutional force *and* good old-fashioned peer pressure telling them to do so; and those who resist often do so for all the right reasons. I wish I'd known a couple like that to talk to before my ex and I got married. I remember thinking, "Being married will help keep us together when we are apart." (Gimme a break, I was 22 at the time!) When instead (and what I now advise to others) I should've taken a step back and thought, "If it's going to work out, it's going to work out regardless of if we're married. If we stay together through the PCS's, deployments, and various other crap, then we'll stay together whether or not there's a license saying so." If you take marriage seriously, of course it's more than just a piece of paper, but what I'm driving at is the point that if you take your *relationship* seriously – married or single – that will result in success; the attitude, not the label, determines "altitude."

As far as deploying as a single person or a married one, on my deployments, I noticed a lot of married people couldn't wait to get away – whether it was because they craved the Corps so much or couldn't stand their family was irrelevant. What mattered when I first started contemplating this topic years ago was that they were relieved to be anywhere other than "home" and/or were particularly happy living in a war zone. I was single, yet I still yearned for home as deeply as anyone else; I intensely missed my family and every dear friend I had while I was deployed. One of the worst parts of "going to war" was the simple fact that I was *away*; it wouldn't have mattered if I was in a combat zone or vacationing in Europe. Being in Iraq meant being removed from everyone else's lives and hovering in suspended animation while their worlds kept turning and mine was *Groundhog Day*.

I empathized with the Marines who'd left spouses at home, though. I felt for them then, and I feel for them now when I think of being separated from someone you chose you marry. Moreover, I really felt badly for Marines with children. I knew I couldn't imagine the pain they felt from that separation. But for many of the young Marines, "spouses" were little more than that than by title alone and more of serious girlfriends in reality (sometimes not even that). Yes, technically, they were *married*; but Marines I knew, male and female, entered into early marriages in order to provide a sense of the relationship being secure. Also, and I think sometimes most importantly for some couples, marriage made the relationship valid in the eyes of the Marine Corps. And when you have the DEPLOYMENT black cloud constantly looming above you, you will grasp onto *anything* that seems solid. So I knew many of the nuptials were sure to leave one or both of the partners wanting before the deployment was over, and simple immaturity coupled with prolonged distance was usually the culprit.

Many of the unmarried and married Marines in the Squadron solicited me for relationship advice during deployments. I particularly related to one handsome Corporal. He was more like a college buddy than most of the other Marines. I knew his union was doomed before we returned to the States. What he told me about his young bride sounded familiar and his aspirations reminded me a lot of my ex. He genuinely loved her and wanted things to work, but felt compelled to marry quickly based on the circumstances. His relationship was one of the few that I perceived to be genuine, and so I felt deeply disappointed for him knowing it

would probably end in separation soon after his return. Sadly, we think we're doing our partner a service by legally joining them to us, but when things sour, it makes the split that much harder.

I wish the Marine Corps honored the inherent value of *committed partnerships*. I wonder now with the repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell how same-sex couples will feel. I wonder if they will flock to states that legalized same-sex marriage to get that stamp of approval. I wonder if either group – the committed unmarried couples or steadfast same-sex partners – realize how much they have in common. I wonder if now that the gay and lesbian couples can come out, it will inadvertently help the dual sex couples.

Those of you for whom the shotgun-style wedding works, grows, and lasts – bless you. I know your year by year ticking off of marriage achievement is something you wear like a badge of honor, and I am truly am happy for your “success.” (I'm afraid this sounds sarcastic, but it's not). For those of you who really tried to make something doomed for failure work, I commend you. For those of you abusing the system to get benefits and favor, shame on you. For those of you too confused to know the difference, I wish there was more sound guidance available or an institution that didn't prematurely push the bonds of yet another on you. I wish the military institution didn't force people into one institution whilst already fully enveloped by another...

According to the military machine, being married equates with being successful.

Capt. Sarah Plummer, USMCR is the prior Deputy Director of Geospatial Intelligence for MCIA and is a military Olympic athlete as a Reservist on the Women's Soccer team. Her blog is at MarineChick.com.

6 Visitor Comments

1.

emily December 13, 2012

well i must say this piece was beautifully written. I am one of those young marine wives you refered to in the divorce statistic. unfortunately my husband and i have been away from each other waiting on separation papers. He became a different person after we got married unfortunately and things turned quickly worse. He has been talking to a girl for four months of our marriage and now unfortunately is dating her even though as a marine hes not supposed to. He is one those marines i think married me for the money because he wanted a slave not a wife. I did laundry, dishes, cleaned, looked after both of our dogs. I tried to be a good wife but he wanted to go to strip clubs and drink every weekend. So unfortunately as he put it, he wants his freedom back. I was very impressed by your article and agree with it as well. A lot of the things you said were very true. He went on one detachment but has not been on a deployment yet. While he was on that det, he was a different person because when he came home i didnt know who he was anymore. I havent been through a rape like you have but i have been in a car wreck and unfortunately most of my memory is gone. He wasnt willing to stick by me through the ptsd and tbi. He also had a girl he called his little sister and needless to say shes married to another marine but my husband spends more time with her than he ever did with me. There are nights they would go out alone and leave me at the

house by myself. I accused him of cheating and he swore he never did but now he has a girlfriend so i am on the fence about believing he never cheated. He also liked to watch her and another girl makeout which i find disrespectful but whatever. just wanted to say i really enjoyed reading your article it really put things into perspective for me. so thanks

[Reply](#)

2.

vicky August 30, 2012

I'd like to start off by saying thank you for sharing your experience. Also I need to talk to a psychologist, because I feel I cant talk about my feelings to my family. Your article made me more knowledgeable towards how those type of relationships work. But I also am feeling a bitter taste in my mouth of the thought of me and my significant other not working out. We have known each other for over 14 years, lived in the same street and gone to the same school and he has cared and loved me since the first day he met me, he told me himself which I thought was wonderful...im scared of loosing that but most of all im scared how all this changes can affect our 3 year old daughter who also cries sometimes because she misses her father. We have a three year old daughter together. I'm currently in college and living at his mothers house. I don't have a good relationship with my mother the closest i'm to is my father so I lack emotional support from them. My significant others mother offers full emotional support but its just not the same, there are days I feel I can deal with getting used to this long distance relationship and days I break down in tears and wonder if I will some how grow a thick layer of skin and endure the pain, he is only doing four years but that is a long time for me, I feel like I lost my best friend. We are both currently 23 years old. We love each other very much but im conflicted of getting married under this type of circumstances. I also fear he will fall in love with someone in the marines this feelings are eating me up. I also fear he will never be the person I fell in love for, I fear he will become someone else completely different. His first letter arrived on Monday, as soon as I started reading it I couldn't stop the tears. I love him and we both want to get married later on. Im trying my best to be a strong mother and also do good in my community college but this sadness overcomes me from time to time.

[Reply](#)

3.

emmanu May 18, 2012

Its really sad ... missing my friend

[Reply](#)

4.

[Sarah](#) March 14, 2012

Kelly and Dui, thank you so much for your thoughtful responses. It is great to get feedback and to know that the piece resonates with other female veterans out there. I love that between the three of us, we represent three different services – Marines, Army, and Air Force – and we find common ground as women, as veterans, and as people with hearts 😊 Ladies, I am proud of both of you and honored to share your friendship. With love, Sarah

[Reply](#)

5.
Dui March 1, 2012

Sarah,

First, congratulations, this piece is so fluid and well-written.

I am 36 and have never been married. After 15 years of service in the USAF, I agree with you on how the military equates marriage with success and being single as easy. Sometimes I feel awkward in social setting because everyone is or has been there (married) and I have not. I came very close a few times to getting married fast because of a "soon to happen" deployment or permanent change of station (PCS), but something inside always stopped me. Now that I look back, I am glad I did not hurry to get married because, although I loved my boyfriends at the time, I realize that they were not the right one for me. I have survived the peer pressure and came on the other side with optimism and relief that I have plenty of love stories and very little baggage. Moreover, over the years I have learned to love myself more and more and to be very comfortable with myself. I am sure I will get married one day, but not because I need a spouse to help me with my military career or because of fear of separation... I hope one day to get married for the right reasons: love, good communication and compatibility.

[Reply](#)

6.
[Kelly](#) March 1, 2012

Sarah, kudos for talking about a topic that isn't often discussed. I, too, married a decade ago to a fellow servicemember. He was my best friend, and I loved him, but we rushed to get married for many of the reasons you discussed, and the fact that the Iraq war was imminent. Six years and four deployments later, we had spent only 17 months under the same roof. The goals and values that we shared at 21 had taken on different trajectories during our time apart. He realized that deploying and combat were the most important things to him; I simply wanted to be "home." I've worked hard over the past 4 years to not let the ending of my marriage prevent me from pursuing love and a lasting commitment...but what I've really learned is that focusing more on myself and learning to love me (as silly as that may sound), has made me happiest of all.

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