EXPERIENCING NAVAL LIFE: WEEKENDING

LOTTIE'S STORY

I've been with my Royal Marine for nearly 20 years, throughout his entire career (we met in school) and we now have our own home, two wonderful boys and a dog.

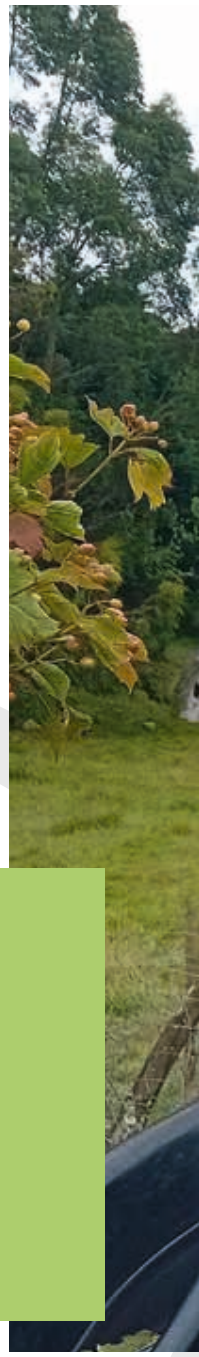
Just over a year ago, my husband's career took on a new direction when he applied for and was accepted to join Royal Navy Family and People Support (RN FPS) as a Defence Specialist Welfare Caseworker. A role in which he excels, and we are all so very proud! Since then, we have been a "weekending" family.

Having been through many deployments over the years, I naively thought that this set up would be easier. At least he would be home most weekends, right? However, it soon became clear that this was a massive readjustment, and I found it very tough to settle into a routine.

Firstly, it was difficult for my husband to keep up with 'family admin': the routines, the systems in place, where each child needed to be and when - this made me resentful as I felt almost like a single parent. I thought, if I can remember this stuff, why can't he? I found my mental load almost unbearable as I was having to remember his important dates on top of my own. I felt I couldn't ask for help around the house when he was home because he had been away all week and not seen the children. Or I felt it was solely my responsibility as I was the stay-at-home mum. On the other hand, my husband found it tricky to switch between single living and then coming back to a house full of noise, chores and activities. He needed to rest and reset alongside needing to study after a long week, but that's tough to do with a 5 and 3 year old who just want their Daddy's attention.

Secondly, my eldest really struggled for the first 12 months with saying goodbye. Tears upon tears upon tears, and as a Mum, you just want to make it better. But I couldn't, as the only thing he wanted was Daddy. It got to the point that he would get upset if Daddy was just popping out as he thought he was leaving for work again. This was also incredibly hard for my husband, having to drive away as he had no real choice. We have used lots of resources from RN FPS, including online Lego parties and Easter crafts. The Naval Children's Charity (NCC) offer free resource packs to help support children, which have been amazing and I have since recommended them to many friends. Some books we read almost daily are *The Invisible String*, *Sometimes Daddy's Gone Away With Work* and *Benny The Badger And The Big Far Away*. We also utilise free swimming available to naval children and family days provided to show the boys that Daddy's work can be exciting and fun and they can get lots out of it!

It took a long time to find our 'new normal' and for all of us to feel settled in our family set-up, but what really helped was communication. Without sounding cheesy, it's what we both needed to do in a safe place. Calmly, without judgement explain our own feelings and remember that we are a team and need to work alongside each other, not against. Also, don't let things build up. Don't be afraid to say if something is bothering us because the other may be too tired, or too stressed or we don't want to burden. Say it there and then and deal with it.



MY TOP TIPS!

- Communicate frequently with each other about how you are feeling.
- Make use of the amazing (and often free) resources available through various charities.
- Allow yourself to feel every emotion- it's all normal!
- Plan one little thing for when they are back home to help keep the kids positive, even just something simple like planning some family baking.

NAT'S STORY

On paper, weekending sounds tempting. Better than a six or seven-month deployment, right? Shorter gaps, more hellos, more hugs - easier.

But paper doesn't live here.

In real life, weekending can feel like living on a never-ending roundabout. Just as you find your balance, the week resets. Again. And again. And again. Every Sunday feels like a mini deployment in disguise. Bags packed, doors closed. Another goodbye before you've quite finished saying hello.

By Wednesday, the house has settled into its familiar rhythm- mornings are rushed, evenings are loud. Homework battles are waged at the kitchen table.

"Have you done your reading?"

"No, you can't eat just beige food."

"Yes, bedtime means bedtime."

I become the keeper of the boring-but-essential things: the structure, routine, the rules. I am 'Bad Cop', armed with fruit, veg, and a strict stance on reasonable bedtimes. Then… the weekend arrives. The door opens. **Dad's home.**

Suddenly the house feels lighter, louder in a different way. There's laughter instead of reminders, treats instead of timetables. We squeeze a full week of family time into two days, because we *have to*. Trips out, movie nights, late bedtimes. Fun Dad mode activated. **I watch it all happen, loving it - and finding it hard all at the same time. Because to the kids, fun has a face. And that face isn't always mine.**

They associate Dad with adventures and excitement. Me with packed lunches, spelling practice, and "have you brushed your teeth properly?" And while I know deep down that the boring stuff is the glue that holds it all together, some days it still stings.

Weekending is quiet strength. It's showing up every day without applause. It's being consistent when no one's watching. It's holding down the fort, week in, week out, for what feels like forever.

