

For an Army family from Port Washington, there could be no better Valentine's Day gift than the return of a loving husband and father of five children

"No, don't have them kiss again," 6-year-old Joseph Sepanic told Ozaukee Press photographer Sam Arendt. "They kiss all the time."

That's something Joseph is getting used to since his father Jason, a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army, arrived home Friday after nine months in Qatar, where he oversaw medical supply operations for southwest Asia.

Kathy Karrels Sepanic has been waiting eagerly for her husband's return and so have their five children, ages 1 to 14. She and the children moved in April to her hometown of Port Washington to be near her family.

The family Skyped and talked on cell phones almost daily, Kathy said, but it's not the same.



Jason was scheduled to arrive Thursday evening, but Kathy learned that morning his flight was delayed and he would arrive at 2:40 p.m. Friday instead.

"It was a very sad Thursday here," she said.

The children — Anna, 14, Jacob, 11, Rebecca, 7, Joseph, who was adopted from China, and John, 1 — made posters welcoming home their father and carried red, white and blue balloons at Gen. Mitchell International Airport in Milwaukee on Friday. They wore T-shirts indicating their father, husband was coming home.

When their father stepped off the plane at 2:20 p.m., a lot of people in the airport clapped.

Joseph was the first to reach and hug his father, but soon the soldier was smothered in hugs and kisses from his wife, children and other relatives.

The family has grown accustomed to moving every few years and to long deployments, but this is the longest Jason has been gone without a mid-tour leave.

Welcome home, Lt.Col. Dad

Written by CAROL POMEDAY
Wednesday, 13 February 2013 17:56

For previous tours of duty, the family had been surrounded by other military families who knew how to care for each other. This tour seemed especially difficult because they didn't have the support of a military community, Kathy said, and the children agreed.

"Army spouses and kids learn to make friends quickly," Kathy said. "In a military community, they know how to help without asking."

Anna said that until she met a close friend after a month or two, it was difficult at Thomas Jefferson Middle School, where she and Jacob are students. Rebecca and Joseph go to Lincoln Elementary School.

"I was used to if there is a new kid, you invite them to join you for lunch. That didn't happen here," Anna said.

The children have gotten to know their grandparents, Ervin and Elaine Karrels, and their aunts, uncles and cousins. Kathy is one of six children, most of whom live in the area.

When they moved to Port, the family was also adjusting from living three years in Italy, where Joseph and Rebecca were in an Italian immersion school, while Anna and Jacob attended an American school on the base.

Jason was a strategist for U.S. Army Africa during the time.

Prior to that, the family lived in the State of Washington, Virginia and Texas and Jason has been to Afghanistan, Iraq, Africa and Korea in addition to Italy and Qatar.

The family grew larger with every move.

Rebecca and Jacob were born in Washington State. Jacob was only two months old when they moved to Fort Lee, Va.

"We were moving out of the house in Washington (State) when 9/11 happened, and we drove past the Pentagon a few days later," Jason said.

"We had friends at the Pentagon," Kathy added.

From 2003 to 2004, Jason was sent to Operation Iraqi Freedom. He was head of a medical battalion attached to the 4th Infantry on the front line.

"I saw good friends die, and I saw a lot of soldiers saved," he said.

Jason had decided to leave the Army when he was offered an opportunity to go to school in Fort Hood near San Antonio, Texas.

He was there for four years, obtaining master's degrees in medical health administration and strategic planning.

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While in Texas, Kathy became pregnant with Rebecca and the couple decided to adopt a child from China.

In January 2008, the couple went to China to bring home 18-month-old Joseph.

In the summer of 2009, with four children in tow, they moved to Italy.

“We got the itch for another kid and John showed up,” Jason said.

The large family stood out wherever they went in Italy and older people would often clap, Jason said.

“A lot of Army families are large,” Kathy said. “With siblings, you have instant friends when moving around.”

Military spouses usually don't work outside the home because of the frequent moves, she said. The family keeps in touch with friends they've met on Army bases via e-mail and Facebook.

Finding a house in Port to rent with five children was difficult. They lived with Kathy's sister until they found their house two days before Jason left. Kathy's family helped her move in without Jason.

“The kids saw the worst of me,” Kathy said. “Not being in a military community was difficult. It took a while to make friends.

“I don't fault anybody here for not knowing what to do. I didn't want to publicize that I was a single mother so I didn't tell a lot of people. Anna and Jacob helped a lot.”

Anna calls herself the second mother.

“I would take John into my bedroom so mom could get a full night's sleep,” she said. “I could tell she was very exhausted and stressed.”

Since he's been home, Jason has gone to Joseph's and Rebecca's basketball practices, Jacob's basketball game and Anna's dance rehearsal. The children are allowed to participate in two activities. The family also went sledding.

Kathy said people who reach out to a spouse whose partner has been deployed helps ease the burden. Making meals, offering to pick up and drop off children for activities or school, inviting the spouse for breakfast or lunch or to join a club will make them feel less alone.

Jason said he didn't intend to be a career soldier when he enlisted in ROTC while in premed studies at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. The couple met at Drake, where Kathy was majoring in elementary education.

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Jason, who was commissioned in 1995, decided to fulfill his Army commitment before applying to medical school.

His first assignment was to Korea, where he was stationed for a year. The couple eloped before he left.

For the first 10 years, the couple frequently debated whether Jason should leave the military.

“They say if you make it 10 years, you’ll stay in for the next 10 years,” Jason said.

“The Army has been good to me. It’s paid for my bachelor’s and two master’s degrees and we’ve had some wonderful experiences. Jacob got to serve Mass at St. Peter’s (Basilica in Rome).”

Jason left Monday for Fort Detrick in Maryland to prepare for his assignment there. He will miss Valentine’s Day, but will return Feb. 16 for a one-month leave. He will then return to Maryland and find housing for his family, who will join him when school is out in June.

After 20 years, when he’s eligible for retirement, Jason said, he and Kathy will evaluate annually whether to stay in.

“In the military, we say the Army has you for 20 years, and then the family has you,” Jason said. “You start making decisions on what’s best for your family.”

Being in Port Washington for nine months gave Kathy a chance to see if she wants to live here when her husband retires.

“I love Port Washington. I love the downtown and the small shops. I don’t even mind the cold now, but I don’t know if I can take winter for four months,” she said.

“The children have gotten a chance to really know their grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, and I’ve made some good friends now.”

Image Information: Lt. Col. Jason Sepanic holding 1-year-old John was hugged by (clockwise from top left) his wife Kathy and children Anna, 14, Jacob, 11, Rebecca, 7, and Joseph, 6.

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