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# Echoes of Home

## A Soldier's Fatherhood Journey

*By Sgt. 1st Class Henry T. Gundacker*

10th Support Group

**I**n the quiet hours of the early morning, I often find solace by my window, watching the dawn break over the base—a place that, despite its familiarity, never quite feels like home. My thoughts invariably drift to my two daughters, living with their mother in Arkansas. At 15 and 17, they are blossoming into brilliant young women, and although I'm miles away, my heart swells with pride at their every achievement.

My life in the Army has spanned their entire existence. From their first steps to their teenage years, I've often witnessed their milestones through a digital screen. The nature of my service—constantly moving, deploying, and returning—has dictated the tempo of our relationship. I

chose a life of commitment and sacrifice long before they were born, but it's a choice they never had.

Despite the inevitable distance, I've endeavored to remain as present as possible. Every decision, from answering late-night calls after exhausting days to strategically planning leave around their school events, is made to maintain our bond, ensuring I'm more than just a distant voice on the other end of a call.

Over the years, brief and intense periods comprise our in-person time together. Each summer visit is a race against time, where we try to cram a year's worth of memories into just a few short weeks. We explore parks, museums, and new cities, each adventure carefully



chosen to maximize our time together. During these visits, the weight of every missed day accumulates—each school play, recital, and soccer game I couldn't attend feels like a personal loss.

Yet, we've found unique ways to remain connected. Instead of traditional movie nights, we have a ritual of watching the same YouTube videos simultaneously. We hit play at the same moment, sharing our thoughts and laughter through a flurry of texts. This shared experience helps bridge the physical gap, making the miles between us feel momentarily insignificant.

We've even maintained a Snapchat streak for nearly two years, sending each other a daily picture without fail. This daily snapshot of our lives has become a cherished routine, a lifeline reinforcing our connection and commitment to each other's everyday experiences.

These small yet significant rituals have become the cornerstone of our relationship, ensuring we remain a close-knit family despite the geographical distances.

Reflecting on my career and the sacrifices it has demanded, I sometimes question how my choices have impacted their lives. However, every conversation we share, filled with their understanding and surprising wisdom, reassures me. They've grown resilient and adaptable, qualities shaped by the very life we share. They often joke about creating a map filled with pins for each place I've been stationed, plotting to visit each someday.

My retirement looms on the horizon, and with it, the promise of a different life—a life where proximity to the

people who mean the most to me dictates my days rather than deployments. I look forward to being there for all the small, everyday moments I've missed over the years. Until that day, I hold their voices close, letting their hopes and dreams guide my remaining days in uniform until I can step out of this role and into my most important one—just being Dad.

The journey of a military parent is fraught with challenges and sacrifices but filled with moments of profound connection and growth. As I navigate the remaining years of my service, I remain mindful of the delicate balance between duty to country and commitment to family.

The path has been challenging but paved with immense love and purpose. As I move forward, every lesson learned and every hardship endured informs my resolve to be the father my daughters deserve—a constant presence no longer hindered by distance or duty.

In preparing for the next chapter, I am driven by the anticipation of rediscovering everyday life through the lens of fatherhood outside the uniform. The military has shaped who I am, but my role as a father defines my future.

As I transition from service to civilian life, my focus shifts from a Soldier's global responsibilities to the intimate joys of a family reunited at last. The road has been long and the journey arduous, but the destination—a life filled with the laughter and love of my daughters—is within sight, a beacon guiding me home. ■



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