

# The New York Times

## Fashion & Style

### After War, Love Can Be a Battlefield



Dave Kaup for The New York Times

**SHARING** An Army retreat for couples near Fort Leavenworth, Kan.

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#### FORT LEAVENWORTH, Kan.



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**ANGRY AND JOYLESS** The Duntons are looking to reconnect.

IN a measured voice, Maj. Levi Dunton explained to the small circle of Army officers and their spouses what had gone wrong in his marriage since he returned home from Iraq in 2005. He had trouble being involved with his family, he said. He didn't find joy in being a parent to his two boys, 3 and 5 months. Little things made him angry.

Major Dunton said he was not sure whether his year in Iraq, where he was an Apache pilot and commander of 150 soldiers, was responsible for his numb state. Others, he wanted to make clear, had it a lot worse. To the other soldiers, this was a familiar litany of guilt, emotional distance and marital discombobulation; they were silent or simply nodded their heads.

Like Major Dunton, they seemed uneasy with all this talk, all this sharing, all this connecting to the wife in front of strangers.

Even as he spoke, Major Dunton, who fidgeted and played with his wedding ring, rarely made eye contact with Heather, his wife of 10 years and a former helicopter pilot herself.

Ms. Dunton, however, seemed relieved, liberated even, to be given a chance to reach out to her husband. She put her hand around his knee and said she was convinced that the war had wormed its way into their marriage.

"He used to tell jokes and funny stories and now he doesn't do that anymore," she said later. "I could tell he was different right away, but I thought it would pass."

Not long ago, the Army, too, might have waited for it to pass — particularly for someone as seemingly steady and committed to his wife as Major Dunton. But that was before this war, with its 15-month deployments, before 2004 when divorce rates spiked among the officer corps and before recruitment and retention became a military preoccupation.

These days the Army is fighting a problem as complex and unpredictable as any war: disintegrating marriages. And so, the Duntons, like 18 other couples, gathered for a weekend retreat in late March, part of an Army pilot program to address marital stress after soldiers return from long tours in Iraq. The retreat is part of a new front in the Army's "Strong Bonds" programs, which are for families and couples and run by its chaplains. Many of the earlier programs dealt with fundamentals such as "how not to marry a jerk" and how to have open communication.

What was missing, said Col. Glen Bloomstrom, the command chaplain at Fort Leavenworth who championed the retreat, was a way to address the stress that war places on marriages — where stress often first manifests itself and where it can take the greatest toll.

Most couples at the retreat — in all but one, the men were the soldiers — had been married 10 years or more, which means they had tied the knot in peacetime. Back then, the worst thing that could happen, many wives explained, was a posting to South Korea, where spouses are not included. Now, these couples must handle the separation that comes not only from long periods away, but also from spouses trying to connect with their partners' combat experiences — something the men do not easily know how to share. Or want to share.

To build the bridge from love to war and back, Chaplain Bloomstrom turned to Sue Johnson, director of the Ottawa Couple and Family Institute and a developer of Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy, one of the few marriage therapies with empirical data showing that it helps. Ms. Johnson, the daughter of a British Navy commando, teaches couples to address the emotions that underpin their fights, which is usually the need for more love and reassurance of love.

In her new book, "Hold Me Tight" (Little, Brown), Ms. Johnson writes of the work Israeli researchers have done with soldiers who were prisoners of war and experienced torture and solitary confinement. Those fastest to recover were in secure, happy marriages. The men

told of coping by writing letters in their minds to their partners about returning home.

To develop those kinds of bonds, she counsels “nonjudgmental” conversations in which spouses can frankly discuss fears and needs. She even reads a few sample dialogues out loud where men say things like “I am afraid.”

It can be a mushy message for a group of seen-it-all veterans. When Kathryn Rheem, a therapist assisting Ms. Johnson, talked about the “echoes of war” — the pain and isolation of returning from war, afraid to tell partners what really happened for fear of losing love — a soldier interrupted to say, “Ma’am, aren’t you overhyping this thing?”

But the wives protested. Amy, the wife of a Special Forces veteran who asked that her last name be withheld to protect the privacy of her marriage, was weeping. “I am listening and thinking there is five years of my marriage I need to catch up on,” she said.

With her blond hair cut into a stylish chin-length bob, and wide blue eyes, she looked too young to be war weary, and she admitted that military culture had been a shock. She had asked her husband about Iraq but he protested that she should know he could not give details.

“They are very private,” she said of her husband and his Special Forces buddies, adding that the wives “only know what’s going on if they get together and have a couple of beers, and we eavesdrop.”

THE soldier, Ms. Rheem said, is trained to endure extremes. When it comes to problems in the marriage, “He is saying, ‘We are not really at the worst-case scenario,’ ” Ms. Rheem said. “For the spouse, it is like: ‘Yes, we are. To you, it is a small thing, because it is not life, or death, or bleeding. But if we don’t talk about these things now, it may feel like we are bleeding. I’m bleeding.’ ”

This split perspective within marriages — and soldiers’ understandable wariness of being labeled as troubled — makes this

retreat a delicate effort. To entice volunteers, the Army called the sessions not counseling or therapy, but “marriage education.” The retreat was held at the nearby Great Wolf Lodge, which had family luxuries like an indoor water park. The Army also paid for baby-sitting for most of the two days and part of Saturday night as well. Some couples joked that they had signed up just for that.

The soldiers also know the retreat has the blessing of Fort Leavenworth’s commanding officer, Lt. Gen. William B. Caldwell IV, just back from Iraq to his own wife and three small children. A decade ago, the three-star general went through a divorce, and thereafter, he said, he gave soldiers in his command planning marriage the book “The Five Love Languages,” a best seller on discovering the way to give your mate what he or she needs. A kind of precautionary measure, like the retreat.

The soldiers at this retreat are much more stable than any newlywed. They are career military; they have been promoted to officer training at Fort Leavenworth, a prestigious midcareer posting, and none are in the category of soldier likely to commit suicide, disappear or beat their wife. Or even to divorce, for that matter.

But these days, the Army is covering all its bases. Divorce rates for its personnel have been on the rise since 2003, the first year of war, when they were 2.9 percent. In 2004, divorce rates in the Army soared to 3.9 percent, propelled by a sharp rise in divorce among the usually much more stable officers corps. That rate has dropped, according to Army demographics, to 1.9 percent for officers and 3.5 percent for the entire Army in fiscal year 2007 — which represents roughly 8,700 divorces in total. Female soldiers are the exception; they divorce at a rate of about 9 percent.

YET even with divorce rates stabilizing, the Army says it remains worried about the effects of combat on its core soldiers, the ones who are supposed to be lifers. Internal studies show that couples are

deeply stressed by the war and contemplating divorce at a much higher rate.

After the first day of the retreat, a group of wives gathered in the hotel hallway, sitting on the carpet, pouring red wine into plastic glasses, and children wandered back and forth smelling of chlorine. They discussed other echoes of war that stress their marriages: civilian friends and family who cannot understand their husbands' choice to re-enlist and shower them with unwanted pity; husbands who leave when children are born and show up a year later only to disappear again; and watching other military couples divorce at what seems like an astonishing clip. The men, they noted, almost all remarry right away — usually to someone younger.

It is why, they said, this retreat was needed. This stuff doesn't get aired enough with the men.

During the retreat, it was easy to see why. While some soldiers seemed truly engaged in the process, others seemed only to endure it. For a few others, it seemed like the Army had finally asked too much. Not only must they go to war, but now, after everything, they are expected to emote.

Maj. Guy Wetzel returned home last November from a 15-month deployment in Baghdad as a brigade intelligence officer, and things at home have not been going smoothly, they said.

“He always wants to raise his voice and thinks I will listen more,” said Melissa Wetzel, his wife. “And for me, I don't. I am like: ‘Speak to me like a human, not like you are telling your soldier what to do. I am your spouse, not someone working under you.’ ”

“And my question is,” Maj. Wetzel said, visibly bristling, “Why do I have to lower my type of understanding down to where you are? Why can't you come to my type of understanding?”

As the sessions continued, the couple painfully confessed that the war had intruded on their bedroom as well. He cannot sleep without noise, so at night they separate, they later elaborated. She stays in the bedroom and he lulls himself to sleep in front of the television in another room.

Ms. Johnson said couples can change their behavior. She told a story of a man at a party who saw his wife flirting with someone else and blew up. Instead, she suggested, the man could have told his wife what he was really thinking, which is that he wished she would relate to him that way. Major Wetzel was indignant.

“Why is it the soldier who always has to give?” he asked.

“Oh, no,” Ms. Johnson assured him, “Everyone should have to give.”

Afterward, the Wetzels said the retreat had helped, because it created time for them to talk. But when asked what was next, the soldier did not talk about counseling.

“What we need is a way to get this out to the troops,” Major Wetzel said. “In terms of combat stress, they are the ones who really need it.”