

Military Relocations

We talk to two military wives about military life and how they cope with constant relocation.

When we talk about relocating to a new property, new town or even a new province or country, no one knows the process better than the military.

Many of us probably don't realize that the families of our military personnel are also subject to relocation. We know that members of the air force, army, navy etc unfortunately by the very nature of their jobs have to travel to different countries in order to serve their country, however their loved ones may also have to relocate in order to be close to where their military family member is based.

Muchmor Media is located very close to CFB Trenton, Canada's largest forces base and so we decided to speak with some military wives to see how they cope with relocation and the separation from their husbands.

In this article we will speak to two wives and get their view on what it is really like to have to move around the country and never really settle in one place. We will also discuss the issues relating to long separations and the effects that has on them and their family.

Jacki Hollywood-Brown is 42 years old and has been a military wife since 1991. Originally from Kingston Ontario, she first met her husband-to-be in 1990 at his graduation from the Royal Military

College. In fact she was his blind date at his graduation ball. The couple have two children, a son aged 13 and a 10 year old daughter.

We first discussed where Jacki and her family had lived over the course of her husbands military career. Between 1990 - 1992 she lived in Guelph, Ontario whilst she finished her M.Sc. but her husband was based in Victoria, British Columbia and Wainwright, Alberta and she moved to Victoria to join him in 1992.

In 1993 they moved to Ste-Foy in Quebec, then in 1995 to Oromocto, New Brunswick where they lived for five years. In 2000 it was back to Quebec, this time to Shannon, then in 2005 they relocated to North York in Ontario. 2006 saw them moving yet again to Quebec, to Montreal on this occasion and then most recently in 2009 to Trenton, Ontario.

The family currently live in military housing at CFB Trenton, but know they will be relocated again in 2011 but have no idea where.

Karen Smith (name changed to retain privacy) is also 42 years old and was born in Oshawa, Ontario. She met her future husband when they were both in high school, but she knew he had ambitions to become a pilot in the Air Force. By the time they married he was enrolled and was married in his uniform with an honour guard.

They have two young sons aged 7 and 9 years and live off-base near Trenton.

Like Jacki, Karen and her family have been relocated several times. In 1994 they were in Greenwood, Nova Scotia, then lived in Cormox, British Columbia between 1994 and 1996. Then it was off to Moose Jaw in Saskatchewan for two years, then back to Greenwood Nova Scotia in 1998. They stayed in Nova Scotia for several years before finally being posted to Trenton in 2008.

After getting this background information Muchmor asked each of them about relocations, separations and the effects on their families. This is how the interviews went.

MM: First of all, where have your husbands been deployed and for how long?

JHB: He did two tours in Croatia, one for 7 months in 1992 and one for 6 months in 1993. In 2002 he was in Bosnia for 6 months and spent 4 months in Haiti in 2004. His last deployment was to Afghanistan for 7 months in 2009.

KS: His first deployments to war have been this year and he's done 2 tours to Afghanistan - previously he went away just to train.

MM: On the subject of relocation. Do you have any say in where you are relocated?

JHB: In a word no. The military member can express preferences but the member is positioned where the current military need is. Other factors that determine postings are rank, trade and performance review.

KS: If a member is requested to relocate somewhere and they resist it can put a black mark on their record and even prevent future promotions.

MM: How much notice do you normally receive before being relocated?

JHB: Usually members start hearing rumors sometime around December/January. Posting messages are issued anywhere from March to May. Members move during the summer months also known as APS - Annual Posting Season. There are some postings that happen outside the APS. The member may not get much notice (we had 1 weeks notice before our move to Oromocto in 1995). There are stipulations that allow the member to move and have the family move at a later date if required.

KS: It varies, but as Jacki says it normally starts with rumors long before it actually happens.

MM: How much does the military help with the relocation?

JHB: There is a huge document explaining all the obligations and benefits of the military member and families. Military members are provided with real estate contacts and are eligible to take a house-hunting trip under certain conditions. However, there are lots of things they don't help with such as finding family doctors, public services etc.

KS: Yes, they do help with all the packing, loading, moving etc. They also offer reimbursement for things like food when on house hunting trips and the first few days of the move. A lot is still up to you though, especially if like us you choose to live off-base.

MM: What is the typical length of time at each location?

JHB: The typical length of time at each location is dependent upon the military's need for certain trades in certain places. Some members have spent their entire career on one base, others have moved every 2-3 years.

KS: Three years, unless you are on a course or switch professions, which my husband did from navigator to pilot.

MM: Do you have a choice to buy your own home or live in military housing?

JHB: Members have a choice. However, at some bases and stations, the military housing is limited. Also, many bases only have smaller homes that may not accommodate large families. For postings less than one year in duration, military members are not permitted to purchase a home and if they do, they will lose certain benefits on their next move.

KS: Yes, you have the choice. We lived in military housing until we had children. It was convenient at that time, but having a family made it more practical to purchase our own home.

MM: Are there benefits to military housing over private purchase?

JHB: Financially there is no real difference. Rents for RHUs (residential housing units) is set by the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation and so is very similar to renting privately or paying a mortgage. The difference is that there are no contracts to sign and you can move in and out at any time, so you don't have to worry about the housing market, selling conditions etc.

Living in an RHU has some disadvantages. You may not be able to run your home business in your RHU especially if you expect clients to come to your "home office". Also, you cannot deduct your RHU rent from your business income. You cannot modify the RHU in any way - even painting the walls is not permitted unless there are exceptional circumstances.

One benefit I love is the fact we are surrounded by other military families who know your situation.

KS: Living in a RHU is great if you are not going to be posted at a location for very long. It is also great if you don't want the hassle of having to buy and sell. You are not at the mercy of the real estate markets.

MM: Do you have any choice in the type of military housing?

JHB: Depending on the availability of RHUs on the base, there may be some choices available. For example, families with 3 children get priority for 4

bedroom RHUs. It is rare that a couple with no children would get a 4 bedroom RHU.

At one time there were designated homes for designated ranks (e.g. a unit's commanding officer's home) but that is not the case anymore.

KS: Not really, when we moved, we just drove around the military area looking for our allocated address.

MM: How much flexibility is there with relocations?

JHB: Not much. The member is given a COS date (change of strength) which is when his records officially transfer from the losing unit to the gaining unit. The transfer of the member's family is usually done as close to the COS date as possible unless there are extraneous circumstances such as a move during the school year or if a family member has special needs. Also, the member can opt to go IR (imposed restriction) meaning the member moves to the new location and the family does not. The member must supply good reasons for applying for IR. The member would have rations and quarters at the new location but I believe there are also restrictions on this.

KS: They ask you to list three choices, and usually give you your last one! Unless someone likes you, or maybe doesn't like you!

MM: Is your husband normally with you when you move?

JHB: According to the CFAOs (Canadian Forces Administrative Orders) and DAODs (Defence Administrative Orders and Directives), the member is supposed to be present for the move.

Personally, my husband has only been with me, at the house, during one move and that was because he had a dislocated shoulder.

KS: So far he has been with me, yes. We had to fly the cat a few times, while we drove and have each driven a car to the new destination before.

MM: Do you feel you have enough support as a wife from both the military and your family etc?

JHB: I've always been an independent person and I've always been happy with the support and communications that I have received from the Canadian Forces. There are many ways the CF through the CMP has improved its services to members and their families over the years. It is very different now (more supportive & communicative) than it was when we first got married.

KS: Not really, you kind of find out things on your own such as the free babysitting I only just found out about. If you live off-base, it's harder to find out what's going on. Now that I have some contacts at the resource centre, I seem to know a bit more.

MM: Are you in close contact with family members?

JHB: It hasn't been easy staying in contact with distant relatives but we are in contact with parents and siblings frequently. The electronic age has certainly made things easier, email, Facebook, etc. My family is still in the Kingston area. My husband's sisters are in BC and his brother is in Nunavut. His parents are moving from Abuja to Aklavic this summer.

KS: Yes, especially now that we are back in Ontario where our families are. My husband switched aircraft so we could get back to Ontario to be near family. This was a good and a bad move, as now he keeps being sent overseas.

MM: How do you personally cope with your husband's deployments?

JHB: I try to focus on all the positives about the deployment, as funny as it sounds, things like not having to readjust the rearview mirrors in the car, less laundry, less cooking... Sometimes all it takes is the small things to get you through. Just one day at a time.

KS: We are lucky they are only 8-10 weeks at a time but this year he will miss Christmas for the first time so that will be hard. The boys are in school full time so it's easier for me than if they were younger and I was a single parent. I have started to go to the base, once a week to a program for deployed spouses and kids, which helps.

I try to not feel too sorry for myself when he's gone. He has it much worse over there, with the danger and the heat and the stress and loneliness. Sure he has time to read a book, but he'd rather be home with us.

MM: Has your husband ever been wounded in action?

JHB: He dislocated a shoulder parachuting in 2009.

KS: No, thank goodness.

MM: Thinking of your children. How do they cope with their father being away?

JHB: They know their father is doing his job. It is a bit stressful but email helps and so do the phone calls. We have a routine that we do when Daddy isn't home (eat fish, eat in front of the TV from time to time).

KS: My youngest didn't sleep in his own bed the whole first deployment. He was better with the second one but there have been a few teary nights, even now, when he thinks about his dad going away again. We don't talk about it too much beforehand. I inform their teachers so they can keep an eye out for odd behaviour but I think they've done okay.

MM: How do they cope with relocations?

JHB: They are just at the age where their friends are becoming more important. My son has a Facebook account that he uses to keep in touch with his friends. My daughter relies on email and postal

Essential supplies arrive in Kandahar, Afghanistan.

Photo by Sergeant Carole Morissette

The trailer unloaded from a United States of America C-17 aircraft and will later be moved to its rightful location. Canadian Forces Personnel Support Agency (CFPSA) and the Canadian Forces are working in conjunction with Tim Horton's to improve the well being of the Canadian troops while stationed in Afghanistan.



mail. When we move often we connect people we knew on previous postings and that always helps.

KS: This is their first move, after spending their whole life in Nova Scotia. The good thing is that our families are here so that made it better. They did adapt okay but it takes a while.

MM: Do they understand the severity of his situation?

JHB: Yes. They understand that there is risk in everything - a truck can hit you on the 401. They understand that Daddy is trained in what he does and he doesn't take unnecessary risks.

KS: They don't watch the news, but likely know about the Canadian soldiers being brought back who have died. We don't really talk about it but I am glad he's a pilot and not in the army.

MM: How openly do you talk to your children about military life in general and its implications?

JHB: We do talk openly about military life and it's various aspects - the advantages and disadvantages - age appropriate of course.

KS: One of my boys thinks he wants to be a pilot but at this point, we haven't had deep discussions about military life. It's been a difficult career for my spouse with constant testing and stresses and I don't know if he'd recommend it for the boys. At least he'd have some advice to pass on if they did join. I would not encourage them to join the army, for sure.

MM: Do they have regular contact with their father whilst he is away?

JHB: Modern technology has made things much easier that's for sure. We can email and keep pretty

much up to date with him. We also have a webcam and the children can see their Daddy on the computer and know he is safe and well.

KS: Yes, by video chat. Even with the eight hour time change it works okay. My spouse is diligent about it though.

MM: Any final words?

JHB: If you have kids it is a good idea to make sure you know which vaccinations they have or haven't had. Each province is different as far as when they vaccinate and by moving from one province to another your child might miss a vaccine or be in danger of receiving one twice. I keep a record of who has had what and when, so that when I get notified by the school of an impending vaccination I know if it is required. Likewise if we move to a different province and the children of their age group have already received certain vaccines that my children haven't, I can arrange with a doctor for it to be done.

KS: I realize now, at this age, that I don't have my childhood friends any more, like a lot of people do.

We have been gone from Ontario for 14 years and are now an hour from where we grew up. Some of my friends still play baseball and golf together and I am sad I no longer have that.

It is hard to meet friends at my age and often people forget to welcome newcomers as they have their own set of friends.

When the boys complained about missing their friends, I told them I missed my friends too and didn't have any new friends yet either. It was harder than I thought in that way.