

BLOOD BROTHERS

"There's always somebody missing," he said. "Mock and Montenegro. Nobody really says it, but it's on everybody's mind. They're not here."

No more war stories

Sgt. Jake Richardson walked into the gym hoping his wife would be there. She had promised to buy the tickets to Germany from Arizona. They'd married at the end of 2005 so he could bring her to Germany before he deployed.

"She was really nice," he said. "Real patient with a sweet attitude. She was a little bit shy at first." They dated for eight months. "She wanted to be here with me." But the day she arrived in Germany, he found out he was deploying. They had a long talk about how hard it would be.

Soon, they found out she was pregnant, and he went home on leave for the birth of their daughter, Sedona, in April.

But when he returned to Iraq, things changed. He called home and the phone had been shut off. His bank account had been emptied out. She moved back to Arizona, leaving him to pay for two apartments. When he contacted his chain of command and legal services, they left him on his own, saying he could not return home to fix the situation. And, like most soldiers, he had given his wife a power of attorney.

She wasn't at the gym.

"I thought she was trying to surprise me," he said. "I just don't want to accept this." When he asked what was going on, he said she told him she didn't want to talk about it.

When he arrived at his apartment, it was empty. Totally empty. All his photographs, all his clothing, all the wedding gifts and dishes — the whole little world they'd built together was gone.

"I have two pairs of pants," Richardson said. At night, instead of celebrating his return home, he stares at the photos he had with him in Iraq of his wife and his little girl, and he tries to figure out what he's going to do next.

Staff Sgt. Robin Johnson, 29, jumps up as his wife Jeana comes in the front door of his apartment with the stroller. When he left from R&R just after she was born, his daughter Mia weighed six pounds. Now she crawls to him. He plays with their son, Sean, 2, on the floor and beams at his wife, who understands where he's been. They met on his last deployment in Samarra, when she was a medic and he was a self-described schmuck.

She worked at the aide station,

one of several female soldiers who would go out on patrol with the infantry guys, and he didn't think she could hold her own.

"They told me I had to go get the medic. When I saw it was her, I

was pissed," Johnson said, grinning. "The whole time I refused to talk to her." He spent the whole patrol "sulking because I had to work with a female." They were engaged four months later. Now, she watch-

es carefully for signs of PTSD, and he continues to try to watch out for 2nd Platoon.

"The biggest thing is really staying close with each other," he said. "No one can handle it

by themselves."

Every time he sees someone who was at Apache — at the gym, walking past the PX — he calls

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