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Autobiography & Memoir

A Year of Absence: Six women's stories of courage, hope, and love
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Elva Resa/Elva Resa Publishing
978-0-9657483-1-5
(October 31, 2005)

When army wife Beth reads on the Internet about the death of any soldier in Iraq, her initial fear is that one might be her husband, Doug. When it isn't, she feels relieved, then guilty: "The fallen soldiers might not have been her husband or any of her neighbors' husbands, but they were *someone's* husband, father, son, or brother. How terrible to feel relief at their deaths!"

Beth's mixed emotions are a microcosm of life on the U.S. Army base at Baumholder, Germany, from April 2003 to August 2004, when her spouse was deployed to Iraq shortly after the war began. Her story of their time apart and the parallel lives of five other women—Teresa, Jena, Tasha, Kristina, and Diane—are intimate snapshots taken during a stressful and difficult time.

The author, also an army wife whose husband was gone during the same deployment, wrote the book to better understand what was going through the minds of families left behind at "The Rock." Because of its heavy stone buildings, that's the nickname given to Baumholder, a base since 1951 and home to the largest concentration of solders (13,000) outside the United States.

Redmond uses bi-weekly interviews with the women—whom she met through army-sponsored and supportive networks called Family Readiness Groups—as the basis for the diary-like treatment she gives their stories. She examines how the couples and families arrived at this point in their lives, the sturdiness and shakiness of the various marriages, how faced with being on their own for more than a year is both exhilarating and apprehensive, and how children and family back in the States fit in the equation. The extreme danger their spouses face daily is a constant reminder of the limbo in which they live.

When Diane calls home to let her parents know that Thomas is okay after eight soldiers were killed in a deadly attack one day, she is surprised to learn that the incident rated only a line at the bottom of the TV, because on the base, “We live, eat, and breathe Iraq.”

All these women are anticipating the return of their husbands when they hear that the deployment has been extended another three months. “I was living for April First,” says a disappointed Tasha, explaining that “she had kept that date in her mind as the day when she could start to breathe again.”

The author gives a peek into a world not known to most readers during a current time that can only be imagined by most readers. Later, Beth likens the deployment to childbirth—it hurt a lot at the time, but now she can barely remember what the pain felt like.

Robin Farrell Edmunds