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Lynn Marie Moore

Izzy's Blueberry Wish

A National Guard Deployment Story of Family Resiliency

In 2019 I walked along a Florida beach, worried about my son's upcoming third deployment. Although I laughed when sea gulls stole chips left on a swimmer's blanket, thoughts of saying goodbye shrouded the sun. During previous deployments, I had never cried when I hugged him goodbye. But that day on the beach tears stung my eyes as I recalled the uncertainty and fear that gripped my heart with each deployment.

I wiped away my tears and watched children play in the surf and fill buckets of sand, and I wondered how children cope when their parents are deployed. My son once told me about a fellow officer who skyped with his toddler during a yearlong absence in Iraq. Whenever her father's face appeared on the computer screen, his daughter waved and smiled and blew kisses. She knew her daddy's face and voice, yet when her father returned home and stood in the living room, she didn't run to embrace him. Instead in bewilderment, she turned toward the computer screen.

The soldier's story inspired me to write *Izzy's Blueberry Wish*. By writing the story and researching organizations devoted to assisting military families, I learned that military children face unique challenges, both educational and emotional. Separation from a parent is wrenching, but with family and community support, children also find unwavering courage.

Izzy's Blueberry Wish is fiction. The gravel road Izzy runs down to her home doesn't exist. But Izzy is very much in my heart.

Izzy's Blueberry Wish

I ran down the gravel road, not even stopping to check the blueberry patch before rushing inside.

"Did Daddy call?"

"Not yet, Isabell." Grandma poured me a glass of milk. "He'll call after Martin's soccer practice."

"My tooth came out! See! On the bus ride home, I wiggled and wiggled it."

Grandma laughed when I wagged my tongue. "You look like the garter snake in our garden."

Grandma wrapped my tooth in tissue and put it on the desk to surprise Daddy when he calls. Marty calls our kitchen desk "Control Central" because the desk and the bookshelves are filled with books, school calendars and a message board. Photos too. Next to a picture of Daddy in his army uniform is a globe.

I carried the laptop to the kitchen table. "Oh, Grandma..." I smiled as wide as I could. Grandma laughed, "Your father will know right away you lost a tooth. I'll be back in a jiffy."

Grandma put on her gardening gloves and stepped outside to check on the spring peas. While I waited, I looked through Daddy's book which he read every Halloween. Marty rushed in and gulped milk right from the carton, but I didn't tattle.

"Marty, remember when Daddy helped us carve the jack-o-lantern the day he left?"

"Yep. And he read us the spooky story."

"When he comes home, I'm going to read the spooky story."

"Why? It won't be Halloween. It'll be summer," said Marty.

"'Cause, it was his favorite!"

Marty chanted,

"Oooo, how dark..."

Oooo, how dread..." in a low and rumbly voice, just like

Daddy.

"Izzy, you were such a 'fraidy cat!"

"No. You were!"

"You pulled the covers over your head, so the Ghost-Eye tree wouldn't get you," teased Marty.

"But I was only six, now I'm seven. You jumped too when Daddy moaned 'Oooooo,' and you're ten. Before we video chat, show me again where Daddy is a soldier."

I carried the globe to the kitchen table. Marty and I walked our fingers around the globe to the other side of the world.

I scrunched up my face. "It's so far away, my fingers are tired!"

Ding!

I flipped open the laptop. We saw Daddy sitting up in his bunk. It's nighttime there, so Daddy sometimes looked sleepy.

I leaned in and stuck my face up close. "Daddy! Look!"

"I love your gap-toothed smile, Sweetie."

Marty squeezed in. Daddy and Marty look alike. They both have gray eyes and blond hair. Only Daddy's hair is cut short—really short.

"Hey Dad, I scored a goal in soccer!"

"Way to go! Grandma sent a video last week. You control the ball like a pro."

"Can you make it to our last game?"

"That's the plan. Hmmm, I heard someone is in the first-grade play. I wonder who?"

I bounced in my seat. "Oh, Daddy, it's me. I'm the Town Crier! Wish you were home."

"Me too, Sweetie."

"Nothing's the same without you."

"I'll be home when the wild blueberries are ripe. We'll pick buckets of berries."

"Goody! Yesterday, Grandma made muffins with the berries we picked last summer."

"I can't wait to get home to eat Grandma's famous blueberry muffins," said Daddy.

We blew goodbye kisses. "Love you all. I'll call when I can," he promised.

While Grandma fixed supper, Marty and I sprawled on the living-room carpet with Daddy's well-loved book.

Marty read aloud and ran his finger under the sentences. I murmured words I knew.

Marty helped me sound out *dread*. "It rhymes with red," he said.

Next, he sounded out */dum/*.

I read the sentence: *Here's your dumb hat!*
Over and over, I sang, "*Here's your dumb hat!*" until Grandma asked me to behave.

Daddy left months and months ago. He missed Thanksgiving and Christmas. He sent a funny valentine. It was a postcard of a camel! Grandma said Daddy was a citizen soldier. I didn't know what that meant only that I missed him more each day. He missed the Easter Egg Hunt. I was sad when he missed my birthday last week. And he missed the school play.

But Grandma and Marty were there—right up front. When I saw them, I marched out and cried, "Hear ye! Hear ye!" at the top of my voice. On the ride home, Marty said I was so loud, he thought Daddy heard me.

The day after the play, my school held field-day races. I couldn't wait to tell Grandma my news. I burst into the kitchen yelling, "I won. I won the race!"

"High five!" Grandma and I jogged in place.

"I swung my arms, 'cause then you run faster."

"You and Marty remind me of your father. He loves to run." Grandma planted a kiss on my forehead.

I had so much to tell Daddy that I wished he would hurry up and call. Marty was reading a graphic novel, so I practiced reading the spooky story. Some words were easy to remember because I saw a picture in my head, like *haunted* and *ghost*. Some words were hard. I practiced printing *couldn't* on my white board in red, yellow and blue markers.

Daddy didn't call that night like he had promised. Sometimes he couldn't, but every time I wondered why, my tummy hurt.

"Isabell, your supper is getting cold."

I pushed my macaroni and cheese around the plate.

Grandma cradled my face in her hands. "Honey, how can I help?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Well, I could use the help of a good cleaner-upper," said Grandma, carrying our plates to the sink.

"No," I muttered.

"Izzy!" Marty hissed. "You promised to listen to Grams. That's why Dad gave you his Regimental pin."

"Who cares!" I kicked the table leg and spilled my milk.

When Marty took the garbage out, I snuck into his room and stole his dumb old army cap. Before he returned, I curled up in Daddy's chair to read. I stumbled on a bunch of words, but I didn't dare ask Marty for help. I heard him rummaging in his room...

"IZZY!"

I hid behind the sofa.

Grandma loomed over me with her arms crossed. "Isabell Emerson, what did you do with your brother's cap?"

"Nothin'."

That night, I tossed and turned, listening to my brother cry. I remembered the Regimental pin Daddy gave me and knew what to do. I pulled Marty's cap from my toy chest and tiptoed

down the hall. His sobs hurt my heart. I touched his shoulder and held out his army cap. "I'm sorry."

He sat up, his shoulders heaving, clutching the cap. "He feels closer when I wear his cap."

Three days dragged by, and Daddy didn't call. A sick feeling knotted my tummy. I crumbled the picture I drew of me winning the race and tossed it on the kitchen floor. Grandma didn't scold me, but she looked sad when she pulled me close.

"Grandma, what if Daddy never comes home?"

"Oh, Isabell, he will. Your daddy misses you and Marty."

"I wish he was home. I wish the blueberries were ripe. He promised to be home then." Grandma put down her coffee cup and lifted me onto her lap. "I'm too big to sit on your lap," I sobbed.

"You are just right," she said hugging me for a long, long time.

Grandma's hugs always help me feel better. I smoothed out the picture. Then I used a marker to draw me wearing a big gold medal around my neck!

"Grandma...Daddy said he missed blueberry muffins."

"We can fix that," said Grandma. "Please get the blueberries from the freezer, and we'll make some for his package."

Soon, the sweet smell of blueberry muffins filled the kitchen. "It smells like summer," I said peeking into the oven. With all my heart, I wished the sweet smell would swirl around...

...to the other side of the world where Daddy is a soldier.

I heard a *DING!* "I hope it's Daddy!" I flew across the kitchen to the desk. His smiling face appeared on the screen. "Daddy, why didn't you call?" I covered my face and rocked back and forth.

"Sweetie, I'm so sorry. Please don't cry. I'm okay. A huge sandstorm hit the base and knocked out the generators."

I wiped my nose on my sleeve.

"I'm sorry I missed your birthday. Do the cowboy boots fit?"

"Yep! The best present, ever! Daddy, I said my part real loud...and I ran faster than the wind... I can read big words now... and..."

Daddy laughed. "Have you checked for blueberries?"

"Every day! Some berries are green, but more and more are blue!"

"That's a good sign. Remember, I'll be home when the berries are ripe."

Two weeks after the Fourth of July picnic, Marty raced me to the blueberry patch.

"Rooasted! I win," he shouted.

"So, what! I'm gonna pick more berries than you." I squatted in the grass. "The berries are big and ripe! Daddy will be home soon!" I looked up and smiled. Sunshine warmed my face. While dragonflies darted around us, I raked plump berries into my palm. "Yum, yum, yum."

Marty sat on a tree stump and popped blueberries into his mouth. "Are you ready to read the spooky story?"

"Yep." In a low rumbly voice I chanted,

“Oooo, how dark...”

Oooo, how dread...”

Marty jumped, pretending to be scared.

“Let’s look for our berry buckets. Race you back!” I shouted.

Before Grandma could say “Rise and shine, my morning glory,” I was out of bed and dressed—ready to see Daddy!

“Here we are.” Grandma pulled into the parade ground.

Flags flanked the road. Motorcyclists escorted buses. They roared their engines in celebration. I waved a flag and pranced in my new cowboy boots. Marty waved his army cap. Soldiers stood in formation. The crowd quieted. A soldier blew a bugle. Men and women soldiers dashed into the field. Fathers held babies for the first time. Mothers knelt and hugged their children. Big people swirled around me. I couldn’t see Daddy anywhere.

“Where is he?”

I jumped and jumped like I was on our trampoline trying to see him. Above the laughter and cries, I heard our names.

“There’s Daddy!” I cried. Marty took my hand and we rushed toward him.

I threw my arms around his neck. “Daddy, Daddy, Daddy.” He twirled me around, then set me down. He opened his arms to Marty.

Marty stood at attention. He saluted Daddy before jumping into his arms. Grandma stepped forward. Her smile wobbled as she put her hand on Daddy’s cheek.

On the ride home, Daddy sat between us. I rested my head against his shoulder.

“We have two surprises for you.”

“Two surprises?”

Marty winked at me as I held up Daddy’s well-loved spooky book.

“I’m gonna read to you—the whole story!”

“The whole story?”

“Uh-huh, all the big words too. Marty helped me.”

Daddy tussled Marty’s hair. His smile wobbled just like Grandma’s when he hugged me.

“**And**” I added, “The blueberries are ripe.”

Marty chimed in, “It’s a bumper crop too!”

Daddy chuckled. “We’ll pick buckets and buckets tomorrow.”

I hugged him tighter. “My blueberry wish came true.”

Staying Connected: Staying Close

Finding ways to stay connected was just as vital in 1944 when my father said goodbye to my mother and their one-year-old daughter as it was for the father who skyped with his child. To comfort my sister, my mother, who was pregnant with me, gave Karen a 9x10 photo of our father dressed in his navy uniform. She carried the precious photo everywhere, even slept with the photo. By the time he returned home, the photo was tattered, smudged with peanut butter, and covered in slubbed kisses, but she knew her daddy.

Today, when a parent leaves for military service, they have more options to stay connected than they did 76 years ago. The need to feel connected, however, hasn't changed and perhaps the need is even greater today.

After 9/11, when the United States entered two wars to fight global terrorism, service members and their children shouldered the burdens of war (Forgrave, *Star Tribune*, 2020). In *Effects of Military Deployment on Children*, Amy Morin states "Two million children have been exposed to a wartime deployment of a military parent in the past 10 years" (2017). The sheer number of children living through a parent's deployment prompted organizations to institute programs to support children. The belief that children also serve undergirds their missions.

Saying goodbye hurts. Toddlers may not understand why a deployed parent isn't there to tuck them into bed. School-age children and teenagers may worry Mom or Dad will be injured or killed. Taking on greater responsibilities at home can also add to teenagers' angst. How well children cope during a parent's absence is affected by how well their parents or caregivers handle deployment challenges (American Academy of Pediatrics; Thompson, Baptist, Miller, Henry, 2017). The necessity of seeking help to relieve anxiety is captured by flight attendants urging adults to put on their own oxygen mask first before assisting children. (American Academy of Pediatrics).

An analysis of a qualitative study of 24 youths suggested that the teenagers' interactions with their non-deployed parent or guardian strongly influenced their behavior (Thompson, Baptist, Miller, Henry, 2017). Most young people interviewed for the study reported they acted in ways to help their parents and siblings.

Lisa French, a service member and mom, reported that on the whole children do adapt well to a parent's deployment. While serving in the military, French and her family moved frequently. Her son admitted, "Moving is hard, but I meet new friends and culture all over the world. It's fun!" (2018). When supported by community resources, rich traditions and celebrations, most children do rise above difficult circumstances.

True, some days are bumpy and filled with intense sadness and fear—even anger. It's those days when Mom or Dad or Grandma must put on their oxygen mask first, so they can help their child or grandchild cope with a rollercoaster of feelings.

Sesame Street for Military Families understood the emotional rollercoaster, common to children whose parents are deployed. With an increase of deployments, Sesame Street met the need in 2006 with Talk, Listen, Connect, an initiative that gave families child-friendly tools to foster resilience during times of separation and upheaval in daily life. Sesame Street Muppets encouraged parents and children to **Talk** about worries and concerns, to **Listen** to each other, and to seek ways to **Connect** while Mom or Dad are serving their country.

One example of easing the sadness of separation is to establish favorite new sayings—*see you later alligator* or Elmo's favorite, *bye-bye pizza pie*. Friendly fist bumps or blowing kisses can lessen feelings of sadness when saying goodbye. In one video, before Elmo's dad left for military service, Elmo gave his beloved stuffed horse to his father while he served overseas. A photo album of happy memories or a necklace or bracelet to wear are examples of saying, "I love you. And I'm coming home." In *Izzy's Blueberry Wish*, Marty found solace in wearing his father's army cap. Another kid-friendly tool is to

establish a new bedtime ritual. In *Night Catch*, a deployed father and young son play a make-believe game of catch with the North Star (Ehrmantraut, 2014).

Playing a make-believe game with a parent or kissing Mommy's photo or hugging a stuffed animal softens the sadness during long separation. Yet, children still yearn for Mom or Dad to read them a bedtime story. In the past, deployed parents were unable to continue the rich tradition of reading to their children.

Betty Mohlenbrock, a reading specialist and founder of United Through Reading, understood how shared reading cultivates a love of reading and maintains positive emotional connections. When a parent cannot share books with a child, an essential bond is often severed. When Mohlenbrock's husband was deployed to Vietnam, he was no longer able to read to their daughter. Upon his return, his little girl didn't know her father. United Through Reading (UTR) was founded in 1989, so that other military parents could continue to read stories to their children. Military members can record a story at more than 200 UTR recording stations on their mobile phones or with a free reading app and maintain the benefits of shared reading, no matter the distance.

Beyond the strong emotional bonds that instill resiliency, children who participate in reading aloud experiences learn critical print concepts. Their ability to correctly recognize words is heightened. Reading aloud cultivates a love of reading which strengthens future educational outcomes. Their listening skills are enhanced through stories. The power of reading expands young people's worldviews and sparks their imaginations.

Whenever a parent or guardian deploys, their children also serve. Children are resilient, not because they are children, but because of a network of faith leaders, educators and organizations dedicated to supporting military families in America's all-volunteer force in the active, National Guard, and Reserve components.

Annotated Bibliography

American Red Cross On-line Workshops.

During the Civil War, Clara Barton, angel on the battlefield, redirected her volunteerism of collecting bandages to administering soldiers in the field. In 1881, based on Europe's organization, Barton officially formed the American Red Cross. For nearly 140 years, the American Red Cross has helped United States military men and women, and their families prepare for and respond to the challenges of military service. Their Family Readiness programs are designed to address the stresses that families undergo before, during and after deployment. *Connecting with Kids Workshop*, for example, teaches adults to build on their personal strengths to help children through the various phases of a parent's deployment.

Effects of deployment on children and families. (2019). American Academy of Pediatrics. Healthychildren.org.

The author lists possible symptoms of stress that children, ranging in age from babies to adolescents, may feel when a parent is deployed. An indication that children are not coping well may result in sleep problems, physical complaints, regressive behavior or undue sadness. The author lists numerous suggestions to alleviate stress.

Forgrave, Reid. Photos by Renee Jones Schneider. January 12, 2020. *Family of 'Army Man' is put to the test*. Star Tribune.

The family of a soldier in the 34th Expeditionary Combat Aviation serving a yearlong deployment to the Middle East talk about their heartache of saying goodbye and their fears. Forgrave's interview with family members provides readers with insights of how one family finds strength and ways to stay connected.

French, Lisa. 2018. *Staff Perspective: Through the eyes of a military child*. Uniformed Services University. Center for Deployment Psychology.

Based on her experiences serving in the military, French reports that most children adapt well to military life. French's 8-year-old son admits saying goodbye to friends is hard but moving to new countries and making new friends is fun.

Morin, Amy, LCSW. Medically reviewed by Cathy Snyder, MD. (2020). *Effects of military deployment on children*.

Morin outlines three phases of deployment: pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment. Each phase can cause hardships for families and children. Although every child will react differently, age plays a role in how they will react. Young children may change their eating and sleeping patterns. School-age children may complain of stomach aches or headaches or revert to baby talk. Teens who worry about a deployed parent's well-being while handling greater responsibilities may do poorly academically.

Reading and Resiliency: Making Literacy a Military Community Priority. unitedthroughreading.org. San Diego, CA. March 25, 2021.

United Through Reading is a non-profit 501(3) organization founded thirty years ago. Its mission is to keep military families connected through story time. In October 2020, UTR launched eBooks mobile reading app with Houghton Mifflin Harcourt to make the story time routine even easier.

Sergeant Woods, Michelle. *Soldier's Best Friend*. redcross.org.

To boost morale, American Red Cross volunteers travel to volatile parts of the world with calm and friendly Red Cross dogs. Sergeant Woods describes the joy she felt petting and hugging a Red Cross dog while serving overseas.

Talk, Listen, Connect. Sesame Street Workshop's Military Families Initiative.

First developed in 2006 and extended in 2010, Sesame Street outreach programs help military families, and their young children cope with challenges of deployment. The child-friendly programs encourage resiliency.

Thompson, David, Joyce Baptist, Bryant Miller, Una Henry. *Children of the U.S. National Guard. Youth and Society*. Nov. 2017, vol 49 issue 8.

The authors interviewed 24 youths of previously deployed National Guard parents. The youths' behavior during deployment was influenced by their non-deployed parent. Most youths report reacting in ways intended to help their families. ISSN 0044-118X.

Picture Book Recommendations for Children and Their Families

Biden, Dr. Jill. Don't Forget, God Bless Our Troops. 2012. Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.

Five-year-old Natalie finds positive ways she and younger brother, Hunter, cope throughout their father's yearlong deployment to Iraq. The author includes valuable resources on how citizens can support the service of military members and their families. ISBN 978-1-4424-5735-5. 2012.

Ehrmantraut, Brenda. *Night Catch*. illustrated by Vicki Wehrman. 2014. Elva Resa Publishing, St. Paul, Minnesota.

To ease the loneliness of separation, a deployed father and son play a make-believe game of catch with the North Star. "Back and forth our star will fly racing through the nighttime sky."
ISBN 978-1-934617-28-1.

Hoppey, Tim. *The Good Fire Helmet*. Illustrated by Lori McElrath-Eslick. 2010. Alma Little is an imprint by Elva Resa Publishing, St. Paul, Minnesota.

Six-year-old Christian believes that his father's old fire helmet makes him brave. Tommy, his ten-year-old brother, no longer believes in the fire helmet. Tommy finds courage within himself. ISBN 978-1-934617-06-9.

Martin, Bill Jr. and John Archambault. *The Ghost-Eye Tree*. 1985. Square Fish Books-Macmillan Publishers. ISBN 0805009477.

A brother and sister set out one dark night on an errand. Themes of finding courage and sibling banter and humor enrich the story. Martin's rhyming language adds to reader's enjoyment.

The Ghost-Eye Tree is the book Izzy learns to read to surprise her father when he returns home (*Izzy's Blueberry Wish*).

Military Life: Stories and Poems for Children. 2010. Elva Resa Publishing, St. Paul, MN.

The collection of stories and poems help children understand that despite the uncertainty and emotional struggle when parents are deployed, they will discover ways to stay connected until the day they are together. ISBN-13:978-1-934617-09-0.

Redman, Mary. *The Wishing Tree*. Illustrated by Christina Rodriguez. 2008/ 2018. Elva Resa Publishing, St. Paul, Minnesota.

While her father is away on a long deployment, Amanda creates a positive way to cope with sadness and worry. Each day she writes a prayer or a wish to hang on a special tree.

ISBN 978-1-934617-41-0.

Williams, Dorinda Silver. *Home Again*. Illustrated by Brenda Gilliam. 2009. ZERO TO THREE. National Center for Infants and Toddlers.

Home Again follows four toddlers as they reunite with their parents. In this rhyming book, readers understand how babies and toddlers may show joy or shyness or puzzlement when reunited with a deployed parent.

ISBN 978-1-934019-30-6.