

# RALLYING THE TROOPS

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A group of children and a woman are sitting on a grassy area. In the background, there is a water tower with the words "AIR FORCE" and a logo on it. The scene is outdoors with palm trees and a clear sky.

Folgers coffee packets, two cans of nacho cheese soup, ravioli and several packs of Extra peppermint gum fill a large cardboard box in the corner of the Valfre home on MacDill Air Force Base. After six letters addressed to "Daddy" in marker and crayon are added, one more will help make the package complete: a note from a wife who misses her loving husband, Mike.



The Valfre family takes a stroll through MacDill Air Force Base on a Friday afternoon, before heading home to a dinner of hot dogs and macaroni and cheese.

Air Force Tech Sgt. Michael Valfre left for a mission four months ago that will separate him from his family until March or April 2009. His wife, Meg, is pregnant with their seventh child, already named Lily, and is trying to keep the other six in high spirits until his return.

This isn't the first time Meg has had to rally her troops. Last year Mike spent six months in Baghdad, and before that, he was in Korea for a year.

But time marches on. Halloween came and went without Michael doing his usual Freddy Krueger impression, and Thanksgiving dinner was served with all the trimmings, although the turkey

may not have been as tender as when Dad makes it. Lily will enter the world as planned on December 11th, and there will be presents under the tree Christmas day.

This is the Valfre's reality, and the reality for so many other military families.

"I don't think American civilians realize, understand or can even comprehend what the families go through—why we support our spouses and what they do," says Meg. "I lie in bed every night and wonder if he's okay and when he's coming home."

Every day is a struggle. Meg is raising six kids while her husband is fighting on

the other side of the world. "He misses us," Meg says, with tears in her eyes. "And we miss him too."

Meg and Michael met more than 20 years ago while working at a 1950s themed restaurant in Texas called "Thunder Bumpers." She bussed tables and he manned the frying station. It was love at first sight, at least for Meg. She dated his best friend just to get to know the quiet, good-looking guy three years her senior. Needless to say, Mike and his former buddy are no longer friends. But after 18 years of marriage, he's not complaining.

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## SHOW YOUR SUPPORT

Even though the deadline for sending holiday care packages to troops in Iraq and Afghanistan was Dec. 4, there's still time to get gifts to those serving in other parts of the world. According to the U.S. Postal Service, all packages and cards should be shipped no later than Dec. 11. If that's too soon, or you're tight on cash, here are some other options to show you care:

- Go to [AmericaSupportsYou.mil](http://AmericaSupportsYou.mil) and send an online message to our troops for free.
- All year long, local philanthropist Bob Williams sends 250, 68-pound boxes per week to soldiers in need. He's always looking for volunteers and donations. Call (813) 991-9400 or visit [OurTroopsOnline.com](http://OurTroopsOnline.com) for more information.
- To sponsor a local family with a loved one who's deployed during the holiday season, contact the Airmen and Family Readiness Center on MacDill AFB at (813) 828-2721.

◀ Tech. Sgt. Michael Valfre,  
1st JCSE, USAF



Care packages filled with letters and pictures remind Mike of what he'll be coming home to. ▶

"He was just the coolest guy," says Meg. The kids (who range in age from 2 to 14) think their dad is pretty cool too. "He's the best guy you'll ever meet, and he's a hero," says the oldest, James. "And he's funny!" Alexi adds. The others pipe up, "He dances!" "Oh, and he's really nice!"

In the meantime, until Meg receives the official date of her husband's return, they'll take things one day at a time and do what they can to keep Mike's spirits up. Meg knows what mail call means to soldiers away from home, and she'll make sure he always has something to open.

For Mike, it's a treat only surpassed when he's able to call home and hear the tiny voice of his youngest child, London, and the three most important words in the whole world: "I love you." ■



▲ James, now 14, celebrates his dad's return home from Baghdad last year.