

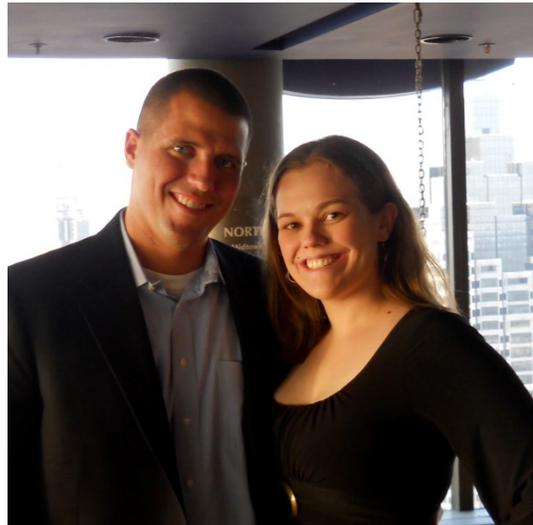
One Tough No-Brainer

By Thea Pitzen

Shore Tour. These words have represented “the dream” for as long as I have known my husband. So it caught me completely off-guard when I struggled with the decision to accompany my husband on this tour rather than endure another geographic split.

From the day we met, we were geographically split – me, a law student in Atlanta, and him, completing Naval Flight Officer primary flight training in Pensacola. Just a few months into our relationship, I graduated from law school, took the Georgia Bar Exam for which I was already registered, and began the federal clerkship I had already accepted. My husband, meanwhile, PCS’ed to Jacksonville, Florida, and we continued to rack up the highway and airline miles almost every weekend. By the end of that year, he had received his wings, I was enjoying my clerkship with pending job offers in Atlanta and New York, and... we got engaged. And so began a series of twists and turns in my career that, even three-plus years later, I suspect has just begun. I turned down those pending offers and contemplated what the future might hold.

My husband and I married in the summer of 2010, but remained geographically split. He had received orders to remain in Jacksonville, and I was completing my clerkship. One month after our wedding, I sat for the Florida Bar Exam, and two months later, I relocated to Jacksonville. For the first time in our relationship, my husband and I did not have to say goodbye on Sunday afternoon or wonder if one of our schedules would prevent us from seeing each other that week or that month. It felt like winning the lottery. It was wonderful but short-lived, as less than three months later, my husband deployed.



Meanwhile, however, I had been fortunate enough to land a job as an associate practicing business litigation at the Florida law firm of Gunster, Yoakley & Stewart, P.A. My job kept me busy during (and after!) that first deployment and afforded me many opportunities to advance and develop my career as an attorney. When my husband returned home, I took a couple of days off to be with him, and then returned to the busy life I had happily settled into at the Firm. Eleven months later, he deployed again.

During his second deployment, my husband learned that his next orders would be to Virginia for the long anticipated shore tour. This was what we had been waiting for: orders that would allow us to live in the same place for more than mere months, to eat dinners together and perhaps even to finally celebrate an anniversary together. I always thought that the choice to leave my job and accompany him on that tour would be the easiest I ever made. I could not have been more wrong.

I spent many sleepless, gut-wrenching nights debating a second geographical split in our still relatively young marriage. In the four years my husband and I had known each other, we had physically spent only thirteen months together. We had dreamed of settling into married life and starting a family during his shore tour, enjoying the time before the cycle of deployments would begin again. But then, there was my also relatively young career. And there was the Firm that had become much more than a job. It was the place and the people who took a chance on me, fresh off my clerkship with no ties to the Jacksonville area other than a military spouse. It was the place and the people who supported me through two deployments, two wedding anniversaries spent alone, two tearful goodbyes, and two joyous homecomings.

And it was the place and the people I knew would continue to allow great personal and professional growth if I stayed.

Ultimately, I decided to accompany my husband to Virginia. The day that I gave my notice at the Firm was the first day the partners there saw me cry. True to form, they could not have been more supportive of my decision. I feel fortunate to have maintained a relationship with the Firm since my departure by staying in touch with my colleagues and performing some work on a contract basis. I am confident that I made the right decision for my family, especially in light of the fact that this tour may be our only uninterrupted time together during my husband's military career.

Although I am happy with my decision, I will never forget how difficult it was to make. And I know it is one that I will likely face time and time again in the years to come, as will many of my fellow military spouse attorneys. But my experience with Gunster, Yoakley & Stewart also gave me hope, because it showed me that there are people, and firms, willing to take my crazy military life in stride and embrace me as a professional.

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