



# EVERY SOLDIER HAS A PERSONAL STORY

By Ann Meredith and Ron Granieri February 2, 2021  
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**Ron Granieri:** Welcome to A Better Peace, the War Room podcast. I'm **Ron Granieri**, Professor of History at the Department of National Security and Strategy at the U.S. Army War College and Podcast Editor of the War Room. It's a pleasure to have you with us. Every one of the nearly half million soldiers in the U.S. Army has a personal story. Since the introduction of the All-volunteer Force in 1973, individual appeals have shaped the recruiting message. After spending decades encouraging recruits to "Be All You Can Be," the Army experimented with "An Army of One" to emphasize the soldier's individual journey though abandoned that slogan in favor of the more ambiguous "Army Strong" within a few years before attempting again to appeal directly to the individual with the slogan, "What's Your Warrior?" The force has evolved as well as those individual recruits have included more women in more roles and the Army family has come to include a great many dual career Army families, enriching yet complicating the lives of soldiers and the life of the force. Respecting individual experiences within an organization that naturally requires regimentation and uniformity remains challenging. Individual success stories and struggles as well as scandals such as what has recently happened at Fort Hood, remind us how far the Army has come, but also how far it has yet to go in respecting the equal rights and dignity of all soldiers. Generalizing about the experiences of any soldier or of all soldiers in the Army is risky, but studying individual experiences nonetheless has value. So today, on A Better Peace, we welcome **Lieutenant Colonel Ann Meredith** of the U.S. Army War College, Class of 2021, who is herself a member of a dual career Army family to discuss her experiences over the past two decades and her thoughts about the future. A native of Wisconsin, LTC Meredith was commissioned as an MP officer with a B.A. in History from the University of Wisconsin in 1999. She has led at all levels with extensive experience supporting combat operations as an MP for the last 21 years, including commanding an MP company in combat in Afghanistan and most recently as command of the 97<sup>th</sup> MP Battalion at Fort Riley, Kansas. She also was part of the reconstruction of the Iraqi Police Force in 2003, 2004. She is married to an armor officer and fellow War College student and has two small children, so she has a lot to tell us and we are delighted to have her with us today. Welcome to A Better Peace, Lieutenant Colonel Ann Meredith.

**Ann Meredith:** Thank you, I'm excited to be here.

**RG:** So Ann, how did you find your way to the Army?

**AM:** So that's a really good question, Ron. I went to the University of Wisconsin as you stated and there, I was supposed to play softball. And so the ROTC courses, the student counselor said hey, these courses in ROTC are perfect timing to fit around practices. And basically, there were some ROTC classes that all the athletes took, so I joined that. And then I broke both my arms and didn't play softball anymore. But I really enjoyed the courses, so I kept taking these ROTC courses for the next two years, even though I was not a cadet.

**RG:** Woah.

**AM:** It was just fun. I thought it was a break from history. You got to run around in the woods. It was interesting. So I started taking the classes and then I decided, oh this is cool. I can do this and I can get a scholarship for it and I enjoy it. I was not a good cadet. The rest of them, they had lived their whole lives to become army officers and I just kind of fell into it. So then I end up getting commissioned into the Army and enjoyed it quite a bit. Initially, I had an educational delay. I was going to go to the University of Iowa for law school and about two weeks prior to going to the University of Iowa, I was called by HRC (Human Resources Command) and told that they had under assessed MPs that year and so we need you to report to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri in June or whatever it was. So, I have stumbled my way into the Army. None of it was intentional and I will tell you and I tell everybody this, I have been getting out of the Army since the day I joined the Army and for some reason I am still here because I really enjoy it. I enjoy soldiers.

**RG:** And you are still here and you are now at the Army War College. I have two questions. One is how did you end up choosing the MP career path? But then how has it been moving from positions overseas and positions in the states over the past 21 years?

**AM:** It's been great. So I chose the MP career path with no knowledge really of what it was. I thought it could be a dog handler and that's just the honest truth. Come to find out, officers aren't dog handlers and I figured that out right away. But the Army told me, you will be an MP, so I became an MP and then following being a platoon leader at Fort Riley, Kansas as well, Combat Support Platoon leader, I moved over into Germany and had been a Combat Support MP my entire career with one exception. Right after I had a baby, they put me over in the third MP Group, which is CID or Criminal Investigation Division and so I did that, a little bit of law enforcement for about 9 months. But other than that, I have been strictly Combat Support MP in all assignments, whether deployed or in Europe or here CONUS.

**RG:** Interesting, and when you did CID, did you just move from one office to another at a particular post or were you reassigned altogether?

**AM:** That's a good question. That worked out really well. My husband was at Fort Stewart, Georgia as an operations officer in an armor battalion, and I was able to go to Hunter Army Airfield which is only about 20 miles away. So we lived in between and so I was at Fort Stewart, Georgia so then they said, hey, we'll just reassign you to CID. They are different commands so it is an actual reassignment, but I didn't have to move or anything because it's just right down the road. So it worked out well. It really supported me as a new mother. My husband deployed, my daughter was 10 days old and my son was 13 months old and my husband was deployed and so they allowed me—and I've been supported this way my entire career, they put me in a job that really supported my family, especially while my husband was gone and that was much appreciated.

**RG:** Well and this is what I'm curious about. We worry a lot in the Army for good reason about the impact of deployments on families. I'm wondering, your experience is especially complex because it's not a matter of one spouse being in the military and the other one being a civilian, but actually both of you being in the Army and trying to manage the deployment of one of the two members of the couple. Have you felt like your experience is typical of other dual career families and do you think you have a sense of how different your experience has been from that of, say, families where one spouse is deployed and the other one is a civilian?

**AM:** I think that it's all very different. So I have a few other dual military families at the same rank. They have had equally as challenging experiences but very different, and it's just based off of their branch. I have been extremely lucky the MP core is very good at integrating women and we've been doing it forever. The MP core is very, very supportive of women in all roles and they have taken really good care of me. I would say, my peers that are both dual military, do not have as good of an experience as I have had, and I've seen them struggle quite a bit and I really count my blessings when I look at the leaders that supported my family and my career and helped me make the best decisions for all of it and then, really just helped us out quite a bit. And I would then go on to say the experience of the civilian married to an army officer who is deployed, I can't speak on that, but what I can tell you is, my husband and I did not get married until 9 ½ years ago or 10 years ago, and the last deployment he was on I was with a lot of other spouses and these women had been married to their husbands for 20 years and have basically been with them since 9/11, and when I looked at how much they have gone through over this long career, how much they're home alone with their children and their careers and whatever it is, I sometimes think that's way harder for them. I get that support from my unit, from the Army and these ladies, man, they've been doing it for 20 years and I don't know if I could do it. I really don't. Their kids are 17 years old and their fathers' have been fighting a war all over the world the entire time. So, I think they're all very challenging. I think they're all very different. And it's

very hard to compare between dual military couples just based off goals, career tracks, you know, who's deploying more, so it's interesting. But we do talk quite a bit. I'm in a bunch of little chat rooms with them and always sharing you know, hey, what do you do with this? How do we do that? What do you think of this place? Or is this guy a good leader and support dual military families? Because there are some people out there who do not support us.

**RG:** And would you say that can be a function of the specific commander or the specific post or the specific place of assignment?

**AM:** From working at a human resources command, I really got to see it first-hand of who gets supported and who doesn't. I think it is branch-related and I think it is leader-related. So that's kind of what we talk about. Like hey, you know this guy is not really supportive of, you know, maybe it's just women and maybe it's dual military women. Or you know there's a whole bunch, but we do chat about it and we really do try to help each other. But I will say none of us have anywhere near the same experience, and it ebbs and flows. So right now, John and I have been together for about 2 years, but prior to that, John was gone for almost four years straight. When my daughter turned four, he had only slept in the same house as her for 40 nights.

**RG:** Is that right? And he was in Iraq and in Afghanistan?

**AM:** And Korea and Poland, everywhere. But I was lucky to stay home, and my people really supported me and said her husband's gone, those kids deserve to have a parent home, so we're not going to send Ann. While that could hurt my career sometimes, it takes care of the family and that's what's really important.

**RG:** Since you raised the question, I want to push a little bit on that. You have made it to Lieutenant Colonel promotable and you are at the War College, so from an outsider perspective, I'd say your career has chugged along very nicely. But have you felt as though there were moments where you had to make choices that could potentially slow down your career or hurt your career?

**AM:** Oh absolutely. I was told specifically by my branch when I made the choice. I was a pregnant major and I was done with what I had to do as a major, my KD time as a major and my husband was going to Fort Stewart, Georgia and the only job there for me was this kind of weird job, and they said if you take that, you're ruining your career. You'll never be a battalion commander. And so I said, well, I would like to live with my husband for the first time. I am pregnant. And we had never lived together at this point. It had been three years. We'd been married three years or something. And so I said, I'll do it. And then I get a battalion command and, okay, I guess it didn't ruin your career.

**RG:** I hope you send whoever told you that you'd never have battalion command a card every Christmas or something to remind them.

**AM:** Well then, the same thing happened though coming out of battalion command. Somebody told me that well you have to go join, you have to go to D.C. if you want to be a brigade commander, you'll never make brigade commander blah blah blah. And so I said, well again, my children, their father has been gone for four years, my children need to be with their father and some people helped us to get to the same location at HRC and then now, I just was selected to be a brigade commander. So what I would tell people is, do what's right for you and your family. Have fun, take care of people and work hard and you know what, it'll all workout.

**RG:** That's great advice, of course. Do you find that younger women officers seek you out for advice?

**AM:** They do, but I'm very wary of it sometimes because, Ron, you know me a little bit, I'm very open and transparent, I'm not going to just say what they want to hear. So I will tell them, if you want my advice, I will tell you, it's not all roses. This is a very hard life. You need to prepare yourself and I have young lieutenants come to me and they are recently married and they're having babies, and they're like, oh, how did you do it? I didn't do it when I was a lieutenant and a captain in Afghanistan and Iraq I was single. I didn't have to worry about a husband and a family. So I don't know if I could have done that. I don't know if I would have made it to major at that point, trying to take care of all that at the same time. And just being young and inexperienced, that makes a difference.

**RG:** Sure. So did you and your husband meet when you were stationed in the same location? How does one meet and get married once an army officer?

**AM:** Well, it's very hard. Part of this, it was very hard. Especially as a single army officer everywhere, I didn't get stationed at the greatest places for meeting people. Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, you know it's not really happening. But I love Fort Leonard Wood, it's my favorite Army post. We met at CGSC at ILE at Fort Leavenworth. We were both there as students.

**RG:** And so that was when you would have been majors by that point?

**AM:** Yes, we were junior majors, just pinned major.

**RG:** And now you're at the War College at the same time as well. How's that working out for the two of you? Full disclosure, Ann is in my seminar at the War College, so I should say that and her husband, John, is my advisee for his research project, so I've heard some of this before. You

don't have to comment on the quality of the instruction, but I am curious what it's like to both be students at the same time.

**AM:** It's really challenging, but we're figuring it out, and that's what we've always had to do. We have to kind of figure out our schedule, our path. We have to come up with systems to manage everything. I think if it wasn't in the middle of a pandemic, it would be fine. We would be okay. The problems we have right now, we have children at home that we're doing schoolwork for them, and so there are times where it's just impossible to do our own work. Yesterday William had eight hours of work and he is seven, so he needs quite a bit of help on it. So if the kids were in school Monday through Friday, we would be doing great and I think we could handle it and there would be some consternation, but that's natural with anybody with two careers, military or not. But the pandemic is making it extremely challenging. John and I are working through it obviously. We kind of upfront invested in me and so I got majority of my research project done. I've already taken 2 electives and the goal is now, it's kind of his turn, he really needs to buckle down on his SRP and I will take on more of the role of teaching the kids and stuff. We're figuring out, it's just a lot. But the good news is because of the pandemic we got nowhere to go so, not a lot going on.

**RG:** So we're recording this in January. How did you handle holidays? Did you go anywhere?

**AM:** We did actually. We basically self-quarantined for about 2 ½ weeks and then we went to my family's house in Iowa and only hung out with them, just my mom and dad and my brother. And we were there for a week and then we came back. We felt we did that as safely as we could. My family, they live on a farm in Iowa so they're very safe to begin with. But they also did some extra precautions to make sure that we didn't get sick while we were there. And so far, we've been home now for over 2 weeks, and no one has come up sick, so that's good. And my parents are relatively old, so we wanted to protect them from that perspective too.

**RG:** So we've already touched on this a little bit, it's hard to say what a typical army experience would be, so I won't ask you if your experiences have been typical, but I am curious, at what points did people tell you what you should expect and did you find out that things were not the way that you expected them to be?

**AM:** Do you mean for my mentorship perspective?

**RG:** From mentorship perspective assuming that mentors are always doing the best they can. But what things have you discovered that people may have tried to give you advice, but they turned out to be different than you expected?

**AM:** That's a really good question. I don't really think I have an answer to that. Most of the advice I have gotten from mentors that have my best interest in mind have been pretty spot on and I have had some challenges and gone back to them and said, hey, I don't know what to do, and they've really, instead of telling me what to expect or what to do, they have really just started the conversation to let me come to the conclusions of what to expect or what to do. So it's more on me. I will tell you the best mentorship I got and the person shall remain nameless was after battalion command, I was sat down by a very senior general who has always supported my husband and I. He was very clear. He said, you are now going to be a colonel and you're going to go toward to the War College. At this point you may have to make some decisions. Your family has been able to be supported up until right now. But at this point, we might need to do something that is not in the best interests of your family and you need to get mentally prepared to make hard decisions, be it get out of the Army, be it you have deploy away from your children for a year, whatever it might be. He wasn't threatening and he wasn't aggressive about it or doomsday about it, but he just wanted me to be aware that this could be coming around the corner and if you need help making these decisions, you can always call me. And I've called him two or three times, and again, he doesn't tell me what to expect. He just says, okay Ann, and he makes me talk through the kind of pros and cons and lets me come to my own conclusions. So I don't really think that I've ever had someone tell me something, and it turned out different, except for, you'll never be a battalion commander.

**RG:** But that's a good kind.

**AM:** But those weren't mentors, those were just peers and stuff saying that you won't make it, you have to be this, you have to be that.

**RG:** It is hard, as we keep saying, it's hard to generalize and you've painted a picture where Army procedures, while complicated because the Army is a hard life, but at least it's been possible for you to build the kind of life that you wanted so far. Are there any policies, or let's say habits of behavior within the Army that if you were in a position to give advice to senior leaders that they might want to consider changing to make things easier for families?

**AM:** Yes. There are. There are things. There are a lot of things right, right? There's some childcare. I think that we do not do a good job at childcare in the military, but I think it's such a huge animal and it's really easy for me to say, childcare needs to be better. But I've never been tasked to fix it, so I think that's hard. The big thing though, and we talk about MACP, Married Army Couples Program. Prior to this new push with the Talent Management Task force, things were a lot harder, but as much as Talent Management Task Force has made things kind of weird, it actually helps to military couples. There's a few initiatives that they have taken, such as the ability to opt out of boards that actually could help us because sometimes, we need to change our year groups based on what's available to us. So there's a few things that have happened with

TMTF that's made your career a little more, choose your own adventure, which I think benefits dual military couples, and that is something that I would have said in the past. Just from a female perspective...well, let me go back. The other thing though, so on the table right now, there's big discussions to cut the BAH, which is our basic allowance for housing of dual military couples. So right now, my husband and I both get one, and everyone would say, well, they have one home. We do, but usually we don't. We're separated so much.

**RG:** Often you have not.

**AM:** Yes, and it's a congressionally mandated benefit, so you really shouldn't cut it. That goes to the soldier, not the family, but the amount of money that it costs my husband and I, I mean we spent \$45,000 in childcare just last year. So there's some financial stuff that we could be helped with, but what my husband I always say is that we all make decisions and this is a decision that we have made and we have decided to stay in and therefore we need childcare. We need help with that. But as a woman, there are things that I would talk to people about and I've had the opportunity recently to talk to some senior people about sexual harassment and sexual assault, gender integration and I find that interesting.

**RG:** Can I ask, how did your life change or did you notice that there was any change in the way that you were treated as a woman in the Army between when you were a single woman officer and when you were a married woman officer?

**AM:** No. But it has always been the same. I am always underestimated when I walk into a room immediately. That never changes. When I speak, I have to be right. So it's funny, my husband always tell people, don't bet her because if she bets, that means she knows it. I don't speak unless I'm right. I will never say I think, or I will never take a guess at some things. I have learned that I'm already underestimated, and I can't lose any more credibility than I already have from simply being a woman. You can say, oh, that's crap and it shouldn't be that way. Well, it's a fact, and it's a fact that I have to navigate around. So let's do it intelligently. That's something that's always been the same. We have to prove ourselves in all rooms. I'm used to it. I don't take offense. I think it's an unconscious bias. I don't think my peers and mentors and leaders out there are intentionally misogynistic, but I think that they can, sometimes just for no reason other than their own experiences and being mostly around men, they just do things naturally. Now when my husband married me, he said he started to see it and he started to notice it. He would notice in meetings, I would say something and be completely ignored and someone else say the exact same thing and all of a sudden, it's, oh, that's a great idea. And he said, prior to that I never saw that and he said, I may have done it as well. Until I married you and witnessed it, it was hard to see. It's also interesting, and we can bring it back to the sexual assault thing again and Fort Hood. We make all these policies, but no one talks to us about it. And I know men get assaulted too, but



when does the “hey, how is this working out for you ladies” question come? And I don't know if it does.

**RG:** That's one of the questions I definitely wanted us to touch on in our last couple of minutes. We talk about how to integrate people into the force. We talk a lot about standards. We talk a lot about what we expect of soldiers, but an awful lot of the pressure is placed on women to show that they “belong.” What advice would you give to senior leaders? What do men need to know? You've already mentioned this idea that we need to be more aware of unconscious bias when there's a woman in a meeting, but what should people be taught or encouraged to think in order to improve gender relations within the military and how should we measure improvement?

**AM:** Well, I don't think we can teach it at the point of joining the military. That is something that is taught in the home and cultivated from a young age. And there's no way around that, and it's culture. And again, that's why I don't take offense to that especially because every male boss I've ever had has been exceptional to me and given me obviously all the opportunities as a man. So I think that that's hard, but I think we can talk more about the fact that it can be hard for us to say it. This is a good story. I had a young captain who got in trouble when I was a battalion commander and she was a company commander in my battalion. She got in trouble and was suspended and then she was put back into command. But before she was put back into command, the brigade commander wanted to talk to her. And I was sitting outside the door. I was not in there and I could hear him, and he was just attacking her, just yelling at her, just berating her up one side and down the other. And then she didn't say a word and I was thinking to myself, stick up for yourself, stick up for yourself. And she wouldn't, and then he got really mad. So then she left and he said to me, she didn't even stick up for herself, maybe I won't put her back in command. And I said, Sir, she's not going to. She spent her entire life just saying, yes Sir. She went to West Point, she did other stuff. She has learned it's not worth talking because you're not going to listen. You've made up your mind about her and that is it and she will never stick up herself because of that. And that is true, and a lot of women do that. So I think that men need to understand that obviously we process things differently, but that they have some sort of bias and this goes not just for women, but every soldier is different and until we really take the time to figure out what makes them tick or what buttons need to be pushed, you really can't lead them. And so we can say it about women or just really anybody in general.

**RG:** That's really good advice for leadership going forward, is to try to know the people under your command and know how to relate to them. One last question for you, and this is a really big question. At the beginning of the conversation, you said that you've essentially been thinking about getting out of the Army for as long as you've been in here. You've been in for 21 years and these have been two very difficult decades for the United States Armed Forces. Your career spans the entire period of the Forever Wars. What advice would you give to someone right now, someone who was thinking about making a career in the Army? How should they approach the

prospect of a career in the Army? Is it something you should always be thinking about how you're going to get out even as you move forward, or what sort of mindset would you want somebody to bring into the Army if they were going to start a career?

**AM:** Well, obviously if they're going to start a career, they've already committed to trying and I think that's important. I think they need to take stock in what happens every day and then realize that the Army is hard. It is physically hard. The Army is a sacrifice. The Army can be isolating, it can be maddening. But at the same time, it is the only job that I can think of where I'm happy more than I'm not. And I had a conversation with my father when I was a senior captain and I was going to get out of the Army. I was single and I couldn't meet anybody and my dad said, okay, so where are you going to go work? I said, I don't know, an insurance company to use that as an example. He said, so who are you going to meet there? These are the type of people you want to be around. You like the people in the Army, you like service-oriented people. And then he asked me for a month to keep track of good days and bad days at work and then also keep track of days that I laughed at work. So even on bad days sometimes you'll still laugh. So it could be a bad day but has a little "l" in the corner in my calendar. And when I did it, I laughed every single day that month, and I think out of the 30 days, let's say there were 25 days for good days. He said, no civilian will ever say that. My father had worked at a large corporation his entire life and has hired a ton of people and he was like, they'll never be able to say that they've had that many good days, and they've laughed every day and that they have a family and a community. So it really depends what you want to get out of your career. I would tell them to look very hard at the pros and cons. The pros are, you laugh every day, you're in good shape, you have a family, you have job security. The cons are, you don't know what you're doing the next day, so if you if you can handle the uncertainty of the military and the sacrifice and having to give up seeing your family, I mean extended family, or vacations or holidays or whatever it is, and you can deal with the fact that you could die, then the Army is for you, and that sounds kind of abrupt.

**RG:** That's a big one at the end there, but I understand the point.

**AM:** But the odds are technically slim, and we have a great Army. So you'd have to pro and con it out. And the Army is not for everyone. I have ushered quite a few officers out of the Army in a very positive way because this isn't for you and you'll be so much happier doing something else. And they are.

**RG:** Interesting.

**AM:** You have to figure out what your number one priority is I think. And for me it was happiness. Soldiers make me laugh. I love them. They crack me up and it's funny. I'll even get sick of like the constant grind of dealing with soldiers stuff and then as soon as I get a break from it, you come out of command and two months later I'm like, man, I miss I miss the constant grind

of dealing with soldiers stuff because they make me laugh and they make you smile when you do something good for them or you pin a medal on their chest. It's a pretty big day.

**RG:** Pretty big day. Well, I can imagine that the soldiers who have served with you have enjoyed it. It's certainly been enjoyable to have you in seminar, and it's been enjoyable to have you here for this conversation. Unfortunately, our time is up, but thank you so much, Lieutenant Colonel Ann Meredith for joining us for this conversation on A Better Peace.

**AM:** Absolutely. I enjoyed it. Thank you.

**RG:** You bet. And thanks to all of you for listening in. Please send us your comments on this program and all the programs. Send us your suggestions for future programs. Please subscribe to A Better Peace if you have not already and why haven't you subscribed to A Better Peace? After you subscribe, please rate and review this podcast on your podcatcher of choice so that other people can find us and participate in these conversations. We're always interested in hearing from you and we are interested in having you be part of our listening community. Thank you for joining us for this conversation and until next time from the War Room, I'm Ron Granieri.