

Careers

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BALANCING ACTS/MAGGIE JACKSON



PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

WHILE HER HUSBAND WAS deployed in the Middle East with the Naval Reserves, Maria Albanese found herself doing many family tasks on her own. Among them was helping her son, Joseph, learn to drive. **BALANCING ACTS, G6**

Building on lessons learned while apart

When Joe Albanese started a half-year deployment in Kuwait with the Naval Reserves last spring, he left behind many carefully crafted plans — for paying family bills, keeping up with his three children, and staying in the loop with his fast-growing Boston construction firm. But the hoped-for, high-tech, constant connectivity wasn't there.

"I didn't get to weigh in nearly as much as I thought I would," says Albanese, president and chief executive officer of Commodore Builders in Newton, and a captain in the Naval Reserves. A packed, travel-filled schedule, spotty Internet service, and a seven-hour time difference made it hard to keep up with his old life in Boston. To his surprise, Albanese was truly away, more than he'd expected.

All went well. Albanese came home Friday. His company prospered, and his family managed, even thrived, in his absence. But the months-long balancing acts of Albanese, his co-workers, and his wife, Maria, can tell us much about long-range planning, global communications, and resilient living in today's mobile world. In particular, being constantly on-call — whether as a parent or a boss — isn't the only way to problem-solve.

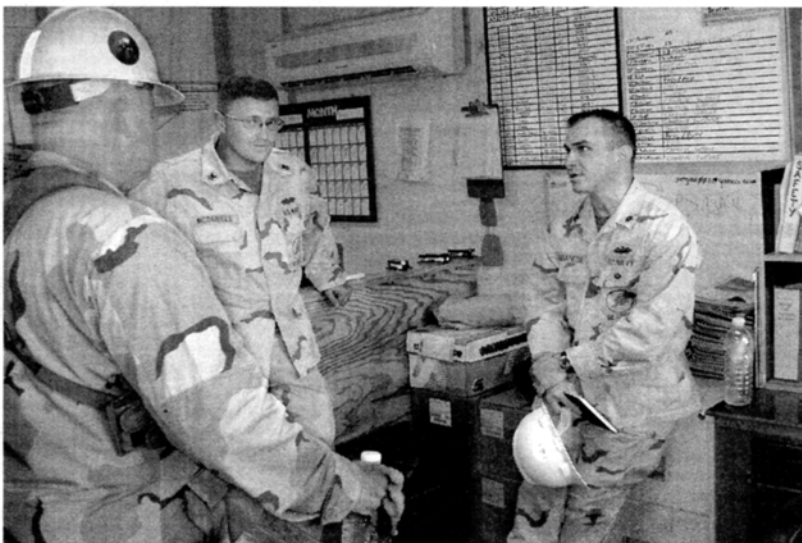
Since founding Commodore in 2002, Albanese knew he might have to step away for a time. Following two years in the Air Force Reserves and five years in the Navy, he's been serving in the Naval Reserves since 1988. So from the start, Albanese tried to nurture company teamwork and decision-making skills, especially among executives. With just a month's notice of his departure, he and other leaders hammered out a final plan to cover his work.

"In order to deploy into a war scenario, you have to keep your head in the game," he said in a telephone interview during his last week in Kuwait, where he directed the main operations and logistics hub for Naval construction forces — called Seabees — in Iraq, Africa, Afghanistan, Bahrain, and Kuwait. "I needed to know I was leaving behind a good business plan."

Still, sometimes he'd fall days behind on e-mail, a scenario that forced executives and others among the firm's 96 workers to pinch-hit and delegate more than expected. Says Tom Comeau, a Commodore vice president: "It forced growth, and when I say growth, I mean growth in individuals."

At home, sporadic communications demanded similar agility. During brief telephone calls every other day, the Albaneses learned to "get down to business," skipping chat in favor of decision-making and crucial household news, often about their children, ages 16, 14, and 12, says Maria Albanese, who also had to handle financial and other decisions that her husband normally would have shouldered.

"On Joe's part, he really needed to let



Before leaving for the Middle East, Joe Albanese (far right) said, "I needed to know I was leaving behind a good business plan."

go, to trust me," she recalls, adding that they were lucky to have loads of support from family and friends. "We needed to have some trees cut down in July. I just went ahead and did it, instead of waiting for Joe. I feel like I've become much more independent."

Limited, unpredictable communications with home are common for many deployed troops, says Shelley MacDermid, director of Purdue University's Military Family Research Institute. As a result, moments of connection must be strategic. Distasteful service members dislike hearing about problems they can't help fix, yet don't want to be entirely kept in the dark about family woes.

Nor is the homecoming always easy, says MacDermid, who recently completed two major government-funded studies of the deployment and homecoming experiences of more than 400 reservists and active duty soldiers and their families. Because more troops are older, deployments have more of a family dimension than in the past.

Not all returning service members experience a rosy "honeymoon" period at home, but even if they do, readjusting is taxing physically, socially, and psychologically, says MacDermid. Today's troops are thrust from desert heat, danger, and life-and-death bonds to uncannily old yet new worlds where kids have changed beyond recognition and spouses are newly self-reliant.

Both spouses' "heads are not in the relationship and that's not a surprise," says MacDermid. "They've had to transition away almost totally from each other during the deployment. They've had to learn to rely less on each other."

To help families, the Department of

Defense has set up Military One Source, run by work-life provider Ceridian (militaryonesource.com or 1-800-342-9647). The service offers information on where to obtain financial guidance, free counseling, and subsidized child care locally. The nonprofit National Military Families Association (nmfa.org) also has information on resources to help families.

Days before Joe Albanese was due home, his wife was thinking about this transitional period. "It's something we're going to have to figure out — how he's going to find his place again in the family," she said. "Reentering into family life is going to be hard."

Joe Albanese, meanwhile, was pondering his readjustment to both home and work. He wants to complement the growth experienced by his family.

And since the company worked so well day-to-day largely without him, he and his executive team sense that he can focus more on long-term strategy and client relations. "This is a huge opportunity for me to reinvent my role in the company," he said.

In today's virtual, mobile world, it's easy to assume that constant, high-tech connections can make up for a growing dearth of face-to-face interaction. But snippets and glimpses of each other can't substitute for real communication. That's why we need to rediscover both the power of presence, and the rich opportunity that absence gives us for growth and learning. Sometimes, less truly can be more.

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JOE ALBANESE