

# SOLDIER

Continued from 1C

fellow parent soldiers, Brian has two families. There's his "military family," as he calls it: the men and women he serves with in the Fires Squadron, 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment in Camp Taji north of Baghdad. And there's his family back home.

Arriving in Savannah in March, Brian started his 18-day leave. He was in the middle of a 15-month deployment in Iraq. He had not seen his family for the past seven months. During that time, Sophia was born, and his family moved from a military station in Germany back to his wife's home town: Hilton Head Island.

## MAKING ADJUSTMENTS

The point of R&R may be to leave the heat of war and see family. But with it comes a whole new set of challenges. Brian's first meal back on American soil was at Phillip's Famous Seafood in the Savannah airport food court. He sat with Sophia in lap. She didn't fuss. Brian checked Aiden for lost teeth.

The father unveiled presents. Sophia got a shirt: My Daddy is in the Sandbox — Camp Taji. Aiden got a shirt from Ireland, the size judged from e-mailed photos from birthday and Christmas.

"Might be a bit big — I don't know," Brian said. "Hard to tell from pictures how big. He's grown."

Over seven months, lots of change can happen in the life of a kindergartner.

This is Brian's first introduction to Sophia. But his larger challenge is with Aiden. Aiden remembers his dad. The boy remembers basketball on the military base in Germany and the bumper cars that jolt a bit more over there than they do here.

How will a 6-year-old react to the man he most identifies with coming back into his life, then leaving again?

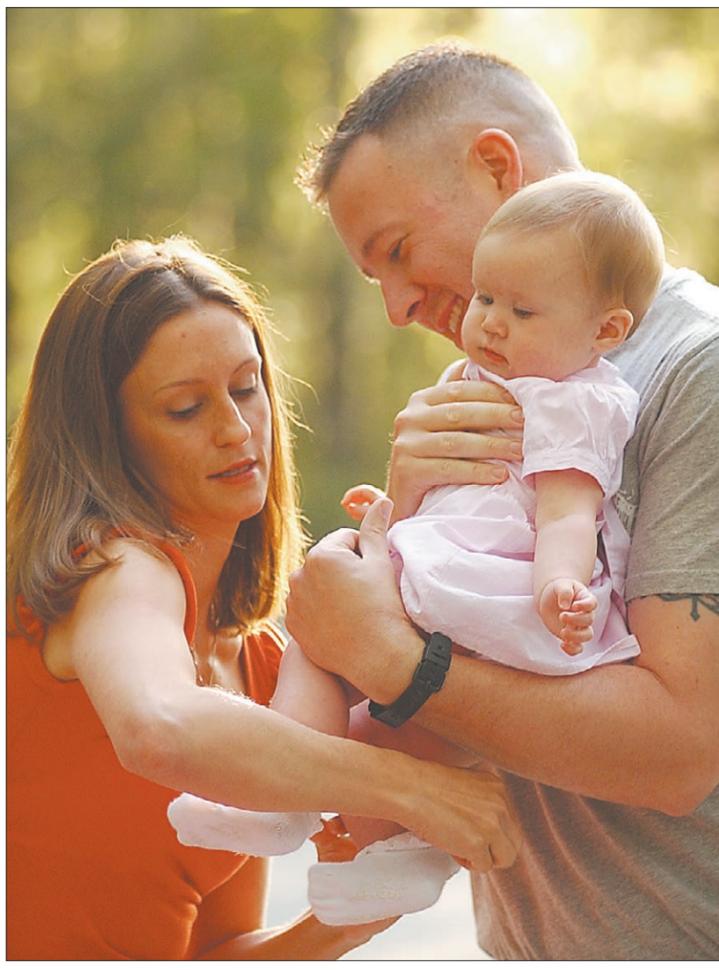
Once they were done with lunch, Brian struggled with his camo backpack and a diaper bag, while Sarah handled Sophia. Aiden scampered away toward the arcade.

"Some things never change," Brian sighed and chased after him.

## JOINING THE ARMY

Brian Morel and Sarah Bo Danzell's lives intertwined on Hilton Head. Sarah was born and raised for the most part on Hilton Head. She's a 1999 graduate of Hilton Head Island High School. Brian came to the island from central New York in 1998. They met through his brother's girlfriend.

He considered joining the Army after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. The



KRISTIN GOODE • The Island Packet  
**Army Spc. Brian Morel holds his daughter Sophia as his wife, Sarah, adjusts Sophia's sock during a family walk in early April inside Hilton Head Plantation.**

idea gave him a sense of purpose in life — a feeling that he was doing right in the world. But Sarah was pregnant. He put off the idea of joining the military.

They were married in 2004. He wanted to go to medical school, but the toils of having too-long hours of class and study, a job and a family were too much. But becoming an Army medic was a way he could combine his two passions.

He joined the Army in 2006 and the family was stationed in Vilseck, Germany. He was deployed to Iraq in mid-August 2007. Sarah was about eight months pregnant with Sophia.

After having the baby girl, Sarah moved the family back to Hilton Head. They moved in with her father and stepmother, who have four young children in a spacious house that's a quick walk to the beach on Brans Point. Her family convinced her to finish her teaching degree. Sarah, 27, started student teaching at Michael C. Riley Elementary School in January, through a program at the University of South Carolina Beaufort. Aiden started kindergarten. Sarah's father, Bill, fills in the role of father and takes Aiden to play tennis and basketball.

Sarah's stepmother, Louisa, helps with Sophia when Sarah teaches at school.

Sarah worried a bit about Aiden's transition from Germany back to the Lowcountry. She figured he'd fit in fine with his peers. He takes after his mother in that's he's outgoing and talkative. Aiden's also an athlete, who can get into whatever sports the boys are into.

But the family went from two parents doting on him to one mom and a newborn sister who shares affection. When they first arrived here, Aiden met with a counselor. The counselor said Aiden had adjusted well. He has good feelings toward his new sibling. But the counselor had one warning: "He's really smart. Don't let him work you over for attention."

## DAD'S BIGGEST FAN

On a Saturday in March, Aiden and Sarah were discussing Brian's early morning call from Iraq that day. After Sarah spoke to her husband, Aiden took the phone and paced from room to room, as he usually does. Topics of conversation: playing basketball in grandpa's driveway, shopping for Aiden's birthday (which was in February), how many days until Brian

would come home (16), how long he'd stay (two weeks).

"I want him to stay for 8 weeks," Aiden later said.

The boy's mind then got lost in scenarios he and dad could get into: riding bikes, going to soccer games.

"He'll let me do whatever I want to do," Aiden proclaimed.

Mom paused. "That's probably true," she finally relented.

"That's for real, mom," he said.

Aiden looks up to his father for a sense of approval and with unwavering admiration. His colored marker drawings show images of battles and weaponry — but then again, so do most 6-year-old boys'. The sign he made for his father at the airport showed him and his dad, both holding guns shaped like baseball bats. When Brian first joined the Army, Aiden would say his dad killed bad guys. But Sarah and Brian told him he was a medic, similar to a school nurse. They left out the parts about IED blasts and untreatable wounds.

Now ask Aiden what his dad does and he says, "Help guys."

Aiden says he wants to join the Army when he grows up.

## THE UNAVOIDABLE DEPARTURE

The first few days of Brian's deployment didn't feel like a vacation. They drove directly to Disney World from the Savannah airport. Then they went back to Hilton Head, where Brian's parents, sister and brother visited. By the second week, things calmed down.

While Brian was home, Sarah's uncle allowed them to stay at his place in an Oak-shaded cul-de-sac in Hilton Head Plantation, while the uncle was out of town.

The Wednesday before he left, Brian had not looked at his itinerary yet. He described his leave in the kitchen of the house, wearing cargo shorts and a T-shirt. He was polite and low-key, speaking in a straightforward manner.

"It's bittersweet," he said. "You really want to enjoy yourself, but in the back of your mind you have to head back."

Sarah was gone during the days, teaching. Brian was at home with Sophia. Aiden played hooky a few days so they could go to the beach and play putt-putt. Brian took Sophia on walks, and Aiden rode along on his bike.

But Brian's unavoidable departure loomed constantly during his visit to the island. Aiden asked a few times why Dad has to leave. Brian explained that he has to — it's part of his job, his duty.

The first few days, Aiden would cry when going to bed. He'd call for Dad. Brian would lie beside him until he went to sleep. Brian would tell Sarah what was going on. Sarah would start crying. "Geeze," Brian thought, "I

didn't know he'd have to go through all this."

The couple tries to focus on the positive: Brian will be back in another eight months. He's enlisted until 2011, but gets extended leave after his current deployment ends.

Aiden "is old enough where he can look at the silver lining," Brian said. "He's starting to look forward to when I get back again."

With Sophia, Brian said it feels like he's been there the whole time. She smiles when he stands over her in her crib. She's soothed when he holds her.

"I think she knows I'm her dad," he said. "Hopefully, she'll remember me."

## BEING A FAMILY

Most of the nights when Brian was in town, the family would take a walk around the block. One warm evening, Aiden sped ahead on his bicycle while Sarah and Brian took turns pushing Sophia in her stroller.

When they got back to the house, Aiden was already waiting for Brian. He had two Nerf-type missile launchers in his hands. They had a nightly tradition during Brian's visit: Brian and Aiden chased each other, crouching behind cars and bushes and shooting the soft vessels off in wild directions. Their shouts and Aiden's cackling laughter filled the calm neighborhood.

Sarah caught up with Sophia in tow and laughed. "Such a military family," she said.

## THE PAINFUL GOODBYE

On the Saturday his father left to return to Iraq, Aiden turned to his mother and said, "My heart hurts."

Sarah recalled this about a week after the departure.

The nights aren't as hard as they were right after Brian left. At bedtime, Aiden starts to miss his dad the most. But the tears aren't prolonged anymore.

Sarah said the positive is that Aiden deals with the emotions of the absence. She knew not all children deal with it. Some just push it aside.

Sarah wondered how she'd deal with it, if she just had a newborn. There'd be no one else to be sad with, to talk with. With Aiden, she at least gets to be the strong one.

"There's definitely a lot of heartache involved," she said. "But you feel like you should be selfless. There's a bigger picture."

She gets the sense that Aiden understands. But that doesn't mean he doesn't miss his dad.

The Morels went to Eastern restaurant with Sarah's family for her birthday. Sarah commented it was nice to have the family together.

Aiden replied, "My daddy's not here."

# DIRECTOR

Continued from 1C

Christ Lutheran Preschool board member Lori Anderson says Nancy isn't retiring, but she deserves the recognition now.

"She has just worked so hard

for national accreditation," Lori says. "Plus the program is so consistently strong. ... It is nurturing and loving, yet structured."

All four of Lori's children attended Christ Lutheran Preschool and are better for it, their mother says.

"My children have done so

well and I truly believe it's because of how they started out there," she says.

Nancy's philosophy — that care for preschool-age children should emphasize structured play, creativity and socialization — hasn't changed in 26 years. What has changed, she says, are the families

who've benefited from that philosophy.

"You definitely see the family structure has changed, and I think that has changed the children too," she says. "There are many more two-working-parent families, so the kids are (at school) a lot more. That's why we try to be the best we

can, because they're with us so much."

Nancy's daughter is also with her now. Leslie Conder, 20, is working on her early childhood education degree from University of South Carolina Beaufort and is a substitute teacher at the preschool.

Nancy credits the staff,

which numbers eight including the director herself, with the school's longstanding success.

"We have two teachers who have been there 20 years," she says. "It's very much a team-teaching situation, and the school's success is due to them."

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