

## **Soldier without wings – Operation Iraqi Freedom veteran expects to be furloughed**

*By Jeannette S. Keton, Freelance writer*

Air Force Reserve Major Esty Ramirez was still wired from an eight-hour mission refueling F-15s and F-16s participating in “Operation Iraqi Freedom’s” massive, night-time bombing raids on Baghdad.

Unable to sleep that pitch-black April morning, Ramirez walked through the desert sand to the “morale” tent and sat down at one of the satellite-enabled desktops designated for soldier use. He was bone-tired and lonely for his wife Tracey and their five-year-old son Nicholas. Perhaps he would find an e-mail from home.

The e-mail was there, but it contained news Ramirez did not want to read. AMR Corporation had finally reached an agreement with its unions that would enable the company to avoid bankruptcy — at least temporarily, Tracey wrote. But 2,500 pilots would be furloughed. And First Officer Esty Ramirez, 800 pilots from the bottom of the list, didn’t need anyone to tell him that he would be among them.

“I was saddened, but not surprised,” said Ramirez from his Wichita, KS, home during a two-week leave in May. “Tracey had kept me apprised of the developments in the negotiations and I knew there would be some furloughs. I just didn’t expect there to be 2,500. This means it could be years before I am back in the air for American.”

He didn’t have much time in Iraq to think about his likely job loss, however.

“I had to keep focused on the mission and the safety of my crew,” he said. “We flew almost every night and getting hit was always a possibility. I spent a lot more time worrying about getting home safely than losing my job.”

### Ready to Sacrifice

Esty Ramirez grew up in a military family. His grandfather served in World War II, his uncle in Vietnam. His father spent 24 years in the Air Force, retiring as a Master Sergeant. Ramirez graduated from the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs — as did his older brother, now a full Air Force Colonel, and his brother’s daughter. His brother’s son is currently at the Academy — and his youngest daughter, Ramirez’ niece, will start there next fall.

He met Tracey Fisher, an aircraft parts salesman for Allied Signal Company in 1995 — and they married two years later. Their son Nicholas was born in 1997.

Ramirez enjoyed his Air Force work flying tankers and teaching new pilots the tricky maneuvers of refueling air-to-air. He and Tracey didn’t mind stints at

Columbus Air Force Base in Mississippi and Randolph Air Force Base in San Antonio, TX.

But Ramirez began dreading the often lengthy separations from Tracey and Nicholas. He and Tracey began discussing — and praying about — his long-time dream of flying for a commercial airline. They eventually decided they could provide a more stable life for Nicholas if they left the military. Tracey quit her job as a social worker to become a stay-at-home mom. And Esty, wooed by a number of airlines but impressed with the culture and people at American, signed on as an American pilot and traded his last four months in the Air Force for a year-long stint with the Air Force Reserve.

“We knew there would be sacrifices, that Esty would still have to spend time away from us,” Tracey said. “And we knew when he signed on the bottom line that if something happened — he would go to war. But we never really expected it.”

#### It Needed to Be Done

Early the morning of September 11, 2001, after a weekend at home, Esty Ramirez boarded an American Airlines flight to Dallas where he was in the middle of qualification training to fly Boeing 757s and 767s. A few seconds after the Folger 100 pulled onto the runway, it headed back towards the terminal. The World Trade Center had been attacked, the Captain announced over the public address system, and all commercial planes were grounded.

The Ramirezes fully expected Esty’s 18th Air Refueling Squadron, part of the 931st Air Refueling Group, to be sent to Afghanistan. The squadron worked out a series of 30-day rotations, instead, enabling members to retain their commercial flying jobs.

As tensions increased over weapons inspections in Iraq, Tracey and Esty prepared themselves mentally and physically for Esty’s squadron to be activated. They were not surprised when he received a phone call February 27, 2003, telling him he needed to report for ‘Operation Iraqi Freedom.’

“We saw it coming,” Ramirez said. “And we knew it needed to be done.”

But the Ramirezes’ goodbyes on March 6 weren’t easy. Talking about it is still difficult for Tracey.

“It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done,” she said of watching her husband walk away that night. “As an active duty tanker wife, I am used to long separations. I’m a pretty independent person. But this was different. This separation has made me realize how interdependent Esty and I are. It’s been tough.”

Esty's likely job loss is an additional stress, Tracey said. But the worry that consumed her while he was in Iraq has helped put their employment situation into perspective.

"We've done a lot of soul searching about this," she said. "And yes, I'm upset about Esty losing his job and about the loss of income and lifestyle. We sacrificed a lot for his career. But when I dropped my husband off two months ago, I had a sick feeling that that might be the last time I would hug him. The loss of a job doesn't compare with the fear that he might not come back alive. The war has helped us prioritize — to understand what's really important."

Ramirez agrees. He and Tracey had planned to buy a larger home this summer. Now they are not. Loyal to American, he was looking forward to returning to his pilot's position and hoped to resign from the Reserve in a year or two. Now he's considering returning to active duty. He and Tracey have also discussed the possibility of her going back to work.

"None of this was part of our plan," he said. "But there are families in a lot worse shape than ours. Families who need the medical insurance for their children. Families who will have to sell their homes in order to make it. By comparison, we are in a pretty good place."

But both he and Tracey worry about his finding a new position. Ramirez' unit headed for a 60-day stint in Spain in mid-May — and he is committed to the Air Force Reserve through February 27 — the 12-month anniversary of his unit's activation.

"The competition for pilot jobs is very keen right now — and he's not even here to interview for other positions," Tracey said. "We're afraid if he is gone until next year, nothing will be available."

Despite his family's situation, Ramirez is proud to have the opportunity to serve his country.

Reservists like himself with years of experience provided a real service to the military, he said, helping train and guide young, less confident soldiers. "This is what I spent years preparing for," he said. "I am proud to serve my country when my country needed me. I just wish I had a job to come back to."

#### Thank Goodness for Soldiers

Tracey tries hard not to let the stress and worry get her down. But she admitted she's not always successful.

She recalled a phone conversation with a friend a few weeks ago — a friend who is not shy about voicing her opposition to the war. The two had agreed to stay

away from the subject — but on this day, Tracey was feeling particularly overwhelmed and couldn't hide her concern.

"I was feeling sorry for myself," Tracey explained. "But at the same time, I felt as if I wasn't entitled to feel badly. Soldiers were coming back in boxes. Mothers had lost sons. Wives had lost husbands, and children, their fathers. So I didn't think I had the right to feel badly about my husband losing his job."

Her friend surprised her by affirming her feelings. "She told me I had every right to be upset," Tracey said.

"Thank goodness there are people like Esty who are willing to stand up and say 'Take me. I want to defend my country,'" Tracey recalled her friend as saying. "Thank goodness I can walk safely through the streets as a woman. That I can go to the church of my choice and work where I please. It IS unfair that he is risking his life over there so that I can maintain my liberties. And that I still have my job — but he does not.' And she thanked me for our sacrifices," Tracey said.

Their faith has been a sustaining factor throughout the past few years, they both said. "God is good and God is great — and he will take care of us," Ramirez said with conviction.

What advice would he give new AMR Chief Executive Officer Gerard Arpey if given the chance?

"I am very new to the whole labor/management relationship," Ramirez said. "I'm really just beginning to understand the purpose behind the union and why we need one. The thing that has really struck me is the lack of trust between management and labor.

"I think the company is at a crossroads now. There is a tremendous opportunity —one that has never been there before — to make positive changes. And I would hope that Mr. Arpey would work to build a more positive relationship with the unions.

"I think people really love American and want what's best for it. They don't want to go into bankruptcy. And I think employees have a lot of good ideas that could really improve American. I would hope, now that people have voted themselves out of jobs to save the company, that Mr. Arpey will listen to them."

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