

LIFE IN OLIVE GREENS

A long time ago, our class was asked what we would want to be when we grew up. I was only 10 years old when I answered, "I want to become a doctor, but also want to serve my nation" and so it was my dream become an army doctor. It was a strange thing for me to say and I remember my class teacher looking at me indulgently. However, those innocent words turned out to be prophetic as years later, just as I finished my MBBS, I got married to my husband, who was then an army captain.

As we mulled over my career options, we decided it would be best if I joined the forces as being an artillery officer, my husband would often be posted to remote areas, and frequent transfers would make it difficult for me to have a career in the "civvy street"!

I took a Short Service Commission in 1990 to see how it would suit me, and how I would fit into a way of life I'd never been exposed to before. Surprisingly, it was a good fit and I enjoyed the scope and ethos of the Army life both as a professional and as the wife of an officer, which is a job in and of itself.



My career began in a sleepy town called Nasirabad in Rajasthan . However, I realized it was an option that gave me a lot of opportunity to practice good medicine while being under the watchful eyes of seniors . I learnt what hierarchy and accountability and discipline meant as I imbibed the ethos of army life. I was also exposed to administrative work, and I realized that I had a flair for it. I also had an advantage of seeing my husband take decisions and interact with his “men” and that fostered within me a true respect and admiration for the way officers bonded with the men they lead!

My family also started expanding; my son was born after a brief tryst with infertility, and the pregnancy was an obstetrician’s nightmare – an extremely complicated one. That set the stage for the next step in my career as I realized how much there is to having or being a good gynaecologist.

It was time to take a permanent commission, which entailed an exam and interview. Having cleared that, I appeared for the

PG entrance. My son was three by then, and starting his own schooling. I loved teaching him and taking him out for picnics and vacations. By the time I completed my MD, I was blessed with my daughter. It stressed me for months on end as I had topped my course in all exams but having 2 kids, with one barely a month old was not the perfect setting to ace one's exams! However, I surprised myself by getting the 1st rank in Pune University at the MD exam despite being 6 weeks postpartum when I gave my exams.

Thereafter, I've not done anything post PG as I felt my kids had to start studying, and I had to stop! However, I had great tenures, and the best part was that I got an opportunity to get into the teaching faculty at AFMC and other teaching hospitals, and soon became a professor.

Was everything hunky-dory with no hiccups? Well, definitely not. There are several duties one performs in one's capacity as a medical officer in the army, and I had my share of some difficult assignments. I remember evacuating an officer in a helicopter to Delhi. I don't know what terrified me more – handling the serious patient all alone or travelling in the chopper!

There were several times when my roles as a mother clashed with that of a being an army officer. I have spent months with my toddler son on my own in border hospitals and clinics, which was daunting for an inexperienced mother. Very often, even after I became a gynaecologist, I had to do duties away from home as relieving duty for the doctors who were on leave in other stations. These are termed temporary duties and they were duties that disturbed the routine and often, I would take my children with me, especially in stations where I was posted alone.

The army tries and has a policy of posting married officer couples together, but it is not always possible to accommodate personal growth and ambitions as well as organisational

interests and requirements. Though it was tough to be posted alone in a station with young kids and balance a busy speciality such as gynaecology, I have rarely cribbed about the duties and frequent transfers alone. I felt it was my choice to join the forces and while I loved being posted together with my husband, I never thought of it as a matter of right.

A word about the tremendous bonhomie and camaraderie that is an integral part of army life would not be amiss here. As separation from spouses is a very common occurrence given the exigencies of service life, there is a very tight knit family of friends and more so of the members of a single unit. A large part of my life in the army has been that of an army officer's wife and that has taught me how an extended family can function as one family. There is no limit to what your true friends will do for you. It is an element of life that I miss even today.

I've often been asked how it has been to work in a male dominated profession. It has its challenges, but for the most part, it has been a friendly atmosphere. If one pulls one's own weight as far as duties and responsibilities are concerned, my family has been as supportive as they could be when I had a genuine problem with a particular assignment that clashed with my duties as a wife and mother. One of the sore points is that ladies do find it difficult to do duties away from home. I had created enough of a support system at home, so I could do most of such duties at my own pace.

Asking for postings with my husband to keep my family together required me to give a career certificate, which may have affected my career graph at certain points in time, but that has been my choice and I have no regrets. I retired as a brigadier and as the professor and HOD of the gynaecology department at AFMC , which was the crowning glory, to my way of thinking and I'm glad to have achieved that.

My kids were encouraged to follow their dreams, and my son, Rohan, who is an engineer, won a national video game jam, and is presently following a career in making video games at a leading game production house. .

My daughter Apoorva has an avid interest in horse-riding, and now has a Bachelor in Mass Media from Mumbai University. She has chosen creative writing as her career, and is starting her own career at present as an professional advertising writer. I've loved reading and writing, and indulging in this hobby was also part of my own dreams. I paint and cook, too. Cooking is a stress buster, and a way to connect the dots at the family dinner table.



I write on a few platforms including Women's Web, and my blog

Ripples and Reflections, too, is fairly successful in garnering views and readership. I won an award from Women's Web too and keep having my own little moments in winning flash fiction and several other prompts on various platforms.

I've been a single parent for a very large part of my parenting life, mostly because my husband's work as an artillery officer in the Indian army kept him away from home very, very often. Yet we, as a family, have a very strong emotional bonding, and I like to think we have a great connect which includes my talented and beautiful brand new daughter-in-law, Ann.

Presently, I am working as a senior consultant and HOD at a private hospital in Kerala, and I'm finding my feet in a new phase of life. But what I've imbibed from the army can never go away from my psyche.

All in all, I feel I've followed my own dreams with a few compromises, and helped my spouse and children achieve theirs, too, and that is what makes me happy, proud, and most importantly, content.
