

The Ones Left Behind

We all know about the hardships endured by our soldiers in the Middle East. But what about the loved ones they left behind? For farm families with military ties, the struggle is doubled. Not only are they missing loved ones, but they must keep the farm going. The four families featured here make it painfully obvious that the Middle East conflict is taking its toll on America's farms in more ways than just rising fuel prices.

Running New Dairy Farm Makes Wife Bone Tired

"I never knew there was a tired that you don't get rested from," Jeannine Easterly says with a weary voice.

John and Jeannine Easterly of Clyattville, Ga., had been operating their 50-head dairy operation for

only three months when John's Army Reserve unit was put on alert.

Before John left, Jeannine's primary responsibility was feeding the calves. She had time to keep house, raise houseplants, iron John's clothes, and care for her appearance.

These niceties had to be forgotten after a few days of getting up at 5 a.m.; preparing the barn and parlor for milking; gathering the cows from the woods ("No matter if it's raining or cold or whatever," she says); milk-

ing the cows; feeding the calves, the heifers, and the cows; and cleaning up afterwards.

Jeannine asked her son and daughter to come and help. But even with their support, the Easterly farm is in danger. Still, she has decided to carry out the plans she and John had made to expand the operation during his absence.

"The thought of standing still for a year—I can't imagine that," Jeannine says.



Because the Easterlys were new to the community, they had few friends to call on. Feedstore owner Doran Bland and his relatives have helped.



(Above) Although he had never worked with dairy cows, Jeannine's son Anthony quit his job as a plumber to help Mom. "He's a fast learner," Jeannine says.

(Left) Maj. John Easterly



Photos: Vann Cleveland



(Left to right) Sally misses her husband, and Victoria, Katy, and Elizabeth miss their daddy, but life goes on. One chore Sally had to pick up was her husband's responsibilities with the Alabama Cotton Marketing Association.

Worrying About Daddy's Safety

"When will Daddy be home? Is Daddy in danger?" the three daughters of Sally Leavelle often ask.

"We've told them Daddy's pretty far back [from the fighting area]," Sally says. Husband Clyde has a military office job in Saudi Arabia.

"But of course when they saw him get on the bus with an M16 slung over his shoulder, I'm not sure we were too convincing," Sally adds.

Clyde served in the Army nine years before taking over the family farm in Buhl, Ala., from his retiring father.

Clyde and Sally raise cotton, soybeans, blackberries, and cattle. Now his father, Clyde P., is back on the farm helping Sally.

With her father-in-law's help, Sally says, running the farm has been fairly easy during these first winter months of Clyde's absence. She thinks they'll call on friends and neighbors who have volunteered their services when the work gets more intense.

But right now, soothing the fears of her daughters is Linda's primary concern.



Maj. Clyde Leavelle



Clyde P. Leavelle is helping his daughter-in-law Sally with the farm while her husband serves his military stint.



Running the Farm for the First Time

"Those others that have civilian jobs, the wife is not going to have to take over that job," says Linda Branam of Fitzgerald, Ga.

Making unfamiliar farming decisions isn't Linda's only worry. Both her husband, Ronny, and their youngest son Dean are in the same National Guard unit and asked to serve in the Middle East together. Back home, Linda just wants to learn enough about her family's 1,000-acre soybean, wheat, corn, and peanut farm to keep it going.

At presstime, she was still holding down her full-time job as a clerk at the local school and running a household for Suzanne, her 12-year-old daughter, and Scott, her 23-year-old son.

The pressure to make the right decisions in the upcoming months is tremendous. She is considering asking her Senator to help get Ronny home.

"My father-in-law's farm depends on us making a good crop. We have been through so many drought seasons, it's just taken a toll," Linda explains.



Sgt. Ronny Gene Branam (left) and Pfc. Ronny Dean Branam.



(Above) Linda Branam figures she will have to leave her job during the spring. Suzanne, 12, often takes her emotional cue from Mom.

(Left, above) Linda checks the lock on a sliding door. To help Mom feel more secure, son Scott moved home after his brother and father left.

(Left) Good friend Ruth Luke (right) often has a comforting word for Linda.

Family's Livelihood Depends on Son's Return

"I've had a couple of brain tumor operations and my other son is paralyzed and in a wheelchair," says Fred

Thomas of Dixie, Ga. His son Jones O. "more or less runs the farm," Fred says. At least, he used to.

Jones is training in the U.S. and scheduled to go to Saudi Arabia in the spring, but the family hopes to persuade the military to let him stay at home.

Otherwise, the family may lose the vegetable and hog farm that Fred has worked for almost 50 years, since his dad died when he was 14.

Although son Belardi, 36, has had a wheelchair lift put on the tractor, he can only endure a few hours of work a day, Fred says.

"It's really been a hardship on us with Jones being gone," the father says. "I don't know how in the world we'll operate without him."

Article by **NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON** with reports from **JOHN LEIDNER** and **DEBORAH G. LOWERY**



Fred Thomas hopes the military will listen to his family's plea to have son Jones back at home so they can keep operating the family farm.



Belardi Thomas was paralyzed from the waist down in a truck wreck several years ago.



Sgt. Jones O. Thomas



None of Fred Thomas's grandchildren is old enough to help much on the farm, but they do help out. Fred still drives a bus route mornings and afternoons.

