

# Navy reservist, father of 11, to deploy with no regrets

By JOHN GEROME  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Johnnie Chennault has no regrets about joining the Navy Reserve, even though it means he's going to Iraq later this month.

But he does worry about not being around to help take care of his house full of 11 kids.

"Leaving my children, leaving my wife for so long — you're going to miss all the little things as the kids grow up," he said.

Chennault and his wife Ronda have a full range of children of all ages growing up at their home in Springfield, a small town about 30 miles north of Nashville: Terri, 17; Stephen, 15; Jobie, 14; Joshua, 12; Zakari, 8; Johnnie IV, 7; Mikal, 6; Syerra, 4; Gracie, 3; Jakob, 1; and Nikalus, 8 months.

"Yeah, I have more kids than most people, but I don't think my kids are any more important to me than somebody who has two kids. His kids are important to him, too. I just have more to miss."

The Chennaults knew deployment was possible when he joined the Navy's Construction Battalion, the famed Seabees, two years ago.

Chennault, 29, had inquired about enlisting in the Army, the Air Force, the Marines and the Navy, but they all told him it was against policy to take someone who has that many children to support on a newly enlisted man's pay. The Navy, however, said that wouldn't matter if he joined the Reserves.

But with the war in Iraq, his unit was called up for duty, and he leaves Sunday for training at Gulfport, Miss., and then on to Iraq.

"After 9-11 it just seemed like a big need, like there was something else I could do," Chennault said. "My country has done so much for me and my family — why couldn't I take a little time out and do something for it."

His employer, Sears, will make up the difference in pay while he's in Iraq, an assignment Chennault thinks will last seven or eight months.

He has worked for Sears for nine years, mostly as an auto mechanic. But he recently took a promotion to assistant manager in the auto department.

"He's big-hearted, and he'd do whatever it takes to help someone else out," said his boss, Chris Nokes. "I wish he wasn't going. I just hope he comes



JOHN RUSSELL/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Navy reservist Johnnie Chennault and his wife Ronda at home with their 11 children, in Springfield, Tenn., on Friday. From the left are, Stephen, 15; Jakob, 2; Jobie, 14; Mikal, 6; Syerra, 4; Gracie, 3; Johnnie IV, 7; Joshua, 12; Zakari, 8; Terri, 17, and 8-month-old Nikalus. Chennault leaves for training and then will be deployed to Iraq.

home safe.

After entering the reserves, Chennault remained committed to his military service. He recalls that when the Navy announced that his unit was getting called up, his name wasn't on the initial deployment list because of a clerical error.

"I raised my hand and the first

question I asked was, 'Why am I not going?' ... I said, 'Look, I don't think it's fair for my brothers and sisters here to be going. They have children, and their children are just as important to them as mine are to me.'"

Chennault's wife is supportive.

"We go to a really good church, and they talk in there a lot about the

husband's and the wife's role, what the Bible says is the husband's and wife's role," she explains. "And my role is to support my husband. My mother told me when I got married, 'Your life is about him, and you need to be there for him.'"

They met while working on the General Jackson excursion boat and

married when she was 25 and he was 19. Four of the children are hers from a previous marriage.

While her husband is away, Ronda Chennault will rely more on her parents and on their church, South Haven Baptist. The children will have to do more for themselves.

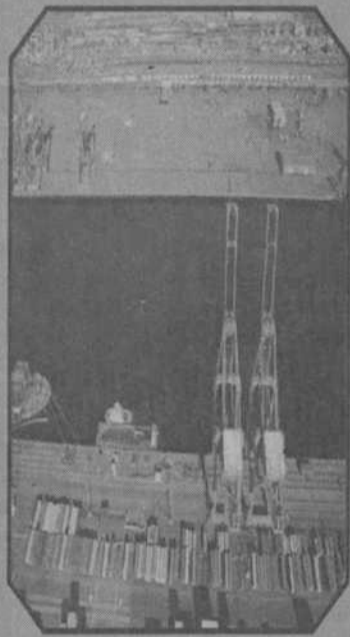
Still, she worries.

"I have trouble sleeping when he's not here. That's one of the hardest things," she said.

She knows she's going to miss him, but Ronda Chennault is proud of the example her husband is setting.

"It's important for the kids to see that he can't just weasel out of the duty that he volunteered for," she said.

# Coastal Terrorism



- Are our ports safe?
- What if it's NOT a hurricane?
- What kind of threats does SC face?

Commander (R) Gary Merrick, former Captain of the Port and Commanding Officer of the Marine Safety Office in Charleston, SC, is giving a "Lunch & Learn" presentation about protecting our coastal ports and communities from terrorist threats.

■ Tuesday, Feb. 16  
 ■ Noon-1:30 p.m.  
 ■ Russell House 808  
 \*LUNCH PROVIDED\*



# Valentine's Day spurs activism

By DAVID CRARY  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — Chocolates and flowers still abound, but Valentine's Day is acquiring a new, politically tinged layer of symbolism: For many activists, it's now the date of choice to mobilize on matters of the heart — advocating abstinence, decrying divorce, rallying nationwide to demand gay marriage.

Across the country, teens from hundreds of schools and youth groups will make chastity pledges Monday on the "Day of Purity" — organized by the Liberty Counsel, a Florida-based conservative legal group.

In Arkansas, Gov. Mike Huckabee and his wife, Janet, will renew their wedding vows in the presence of hundreds of other couples at a ceremony promoting the state's covenant marriage law — a voluntary system that makes divorce harder to obtain. "The nation will be watching as we take a stand for marriage," the Huckabees' invitation says.

And at statehouses, courthouses and city halls nationwide, gay-rights supporters will be rallying in support of gay marriage as Valentine's Day serves as the centerpiece of Freedom to Marry Week. Similar observances have occurred annually since 1998, but this year the mood is more combative as state after state moves to trench bans on gay marriage in their constitutions.

"There's a greater appreciation this year of how much more work there still is to do," said Evan Wolfson, a gay-rights lawyer who heads the Freedom to Marry campaign. "The hits we took last year were sad but predictable."

Last year, 13 states enacted constitutional bans on gay marriage, seeking to thwart any ripple effect from

court rulings like the one that legalized same-sex marriages in Massachusetts. Legislatures in at least a half-dozen more states are considering similar bans this year; Kansas lawmakers already have placed such a ban on the ballot for a statewide vote April 5.

"We are at a moment of peril right now where our opponents are able to stampede people into adopting these discriminatory amendments, depriving them of the time to take a deep breath and embrace fairness," Wolfson said.

Monday's events include rallies for gay marriage in Milwaukee, Portland, Ore. and Tampa, Fla., and at the statehouses in Maryland, New Mexico and Washington state. In Richmond, Va., gay and lesbian couples plan to apply for marriage licenses at City Hall, then be united in ceremonies performed by a minister from the Metropolitan Community Church. Same-sex couples in California plan to request marriage licenses from their county clerk's office.

A very different crowd is expected Monday evening at a North Little Rock arena for the marriage celebration in Arkansas — where voters overwhelmingly approved a gay-marriage ban last year.

"This fun-filled, romantic evening will encourage and equip you as a couple to go the distance," said the Huckabees' invitation, which promised entertainment from a Grammy-winning gospel singer and inspirational speeches from marriage experts.

The governor, in a telephone interview, said he wants to make more Arkansians aware of covenant marriage — an option in which couples pledge to go through lengthy counseling before any divorce, unless there is a dramatic factor such as physical abuse.

"We're trying to combat the idea that

covenant marriage is some kind of holier-than-thou religious act," Huckabee said. "It's an admission on our part that keeping a marriage together is very hard work; it's a commitment that if the marriage hits a crisis, we'll see counselors before we see lawyers — and see if we can work it out."

Arkansas has one of the nation's highest divorce rates. Thus far, few couples have exercised the option of covenant marriage — about 600 in three years out of roughly 40,000 marriages that occur annually in the state.

Organizers of the Day of Purity, being held for the second time, said young people from roughly 2,000 schools and church groups have signed up to participate. They are encouraged to wear white T-shirts as a symbol of purity, and to hand out flyers to fellow students on such topics as promiscuity and sexually transmitted disease.

"Students are bombarded with the message that they should become sexually active at a young age and to experiment with their sexual preferences," organizers said in a statement. "The Day of Purity offers the youth who strive for sexual purity an opportunity to stand in opposition to a culture of moral decline."

Rena Lindevaldsen, the event's national coordinator, said students themselves — not adults — were doing much of the organizing. School officials and teachers in some communities were wary of promoting the Day of Purity for fear it would be seen as a religious activity, she said.

Why choose Valentine's Day for the event?

"The focus is so much on going out on that special date," Lindevaldsen said. "It's a good time to be thinking about making wise choices."

## ■ SCOTT

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Scott said student-leaders in other states have discussed how slowly their comparable programs were started, but that USC has been at the forefront of the fast-growing SCSSA and will play host to a national conference in Washington, D.C.

"I think it is too young to accomplish its goals," Scott said. "But we were able to make sure it was stable for future administrations."

After participating in numerous SG elections, Scott said he has watched the latest elections closely, but is bothered by the veracity of which some candidates

attack SG, and not other candidates.

"I don't have a problem with people criticizing Student Government," Scott said. "But I do have a problem with students who only start criticizing when they are running."

Scott said he wouldn't endorse candidates directly, but there were certain people he would prefer to be in office, all of whom have some form of experience in SG.

"Looking at the debates, I am impressed with most of the candidates," Scott said. "They really seem to care about students and we are lucky for that."

Scott will begin his "lame duck" period after election results are finalized and will not formally leave office until

March 2, when the president-elect is inaugurated in Rutledge Chapel. After graduating, Scott said, he will be moving to California with his family, where he'll take an educational hiatus until he returns to school for a public-administration degree.

Scott said he doesn't have the stomach for more politics, but that he is glad he came to USC and took part in its democratic process.

"I don't think I would have been happy anywhere else," Scott said. "I may have disagreed with some of the school's actions, but this is a great school with great tradition."

Comments on this story? E-mail gamecocknews@gwm.sc.edu