

'MUMMY'S

a soldier in Afghanistan'

Leaving her daughter behind to serve in a war zone is the toughest thing Nina Rose, 39, has ever had to do...

Every weekend two-year-old Alyssa climbs into bed with her mum Nina for a cuddle and to have breakfast.

It's a simple ritual that means so much to them both – and it's no surprise. Nina recently spent three months thousands of miles from her toddler daughter, serving in Afghanistan – one of the most dangerous places in the world.

'We love that special time,' Nina tells *Woman's Own*. 'It's the kind of little every day thing I missed the most when I was away.'

Nina, 39, joined the RAF 10 years ago as a nursing officer and knows going to war zones is part of the job. She and her husband Mathew, 33 – who is also an officer in the RAF – have had to face being separated for long spells during their relationship.

But the toughest moment of her career by far was leaving behind her daughter at home in RAF Lyneham, Wiltshire, and flying out to Camp Bastion in

the notorious Helmand province of Afghanistan for a three-month tour.

'Leaving Alyssa was the hardest thing I've ever done,' says Nina. 'When I was told I'd be going, the first thing I thought about was how much of her young life I'd miss. She was just starting to talk and I felt upset about leaving her. Any mum of a young child would understand.'

Nina grew up dreaming of joining the RAF – but she wanted to be a mum, too. 'I'm quite career-minded but I wanted to get married and have a family as well,' she says. 'Mathew and I got together in 2006, when we were based in Cyprus. We were over the moon when Alyssa was born, two years later.'

'I had six months' maternity leave, which I loved. I was like



Nina treasures her time with husband Mathew and daughter Alyssa, two

A SPECIAL BOND

any other mum getting to know her child. I knew I would be returning to work, and that Mathew and I would avoid being away at the same time. Alyssa always has her mummy or her daddy to tuck her in at night.'

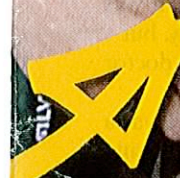
In the past, Nina's served in Bosnia and Iraq – but Afghanistan was the first war zone she was sent to after becoming a mum.

She left on a sunny August morning, at dawn. Dressed in her desert uniform, she tiptoed into

Alyssa's room for a last few precious minutes. 'She looked so peaceful asleep in her bed,' says Nina. 'I didn't want to wake her so I bent over her cot and gave her a gentle kiss on her cheek and whispered, "Mummy's going to Afghanistan."'

'I cried as I quietly closed the front door behind me – I knew I'd think of her so much when we were apart. I kept a photo

Words: Amy Fallon



Dangerous work: Nina had to wear body armour when going to pick up casualties

'Many of them had been injured in explosions and attacks, but some had also been hurt in road collisions.'

Nina was in most danger herself when she had to leave the camp to bring casualties back to the hospital. 'We'd be flown by helicopter,' she explains. 'We were considered targets for terrorists so we had to wear body armour and protective headgear.'

'The danger was always at the back of my mind, as well as my gorgeous little girl, who I so wanted to kiss and hug in my arms. But I tried to put my head down, concentrate on doing my job well and getting home. Mathew was looking after her - and both her grandmothers helped when he was at work at the base.'

Nina was only allowed 30 minutes a week to phone home and she would divide the time so she could speak to Mathew and Alyssa. 'I'd ask all the things any mum would - who she had been playing with at nursery and what she'd been eating. Mathew was very good with Alyssa on the phone. I cried more than she did - especially when she'd say "Love you, Mummy, see you soon."'

Paintings Alyssa had done at nursery were sent out to Nina - she had a 2kg parcel allowance. Photos were sent via e-bluey, a special mail system for the armed forces. She proudly hung them in her office. 'The best days were when photographs arrived from home,' she smiles. 'Mathew sent me one of Alyssa in the bath - he'd written "I love you, Mummy" in soapsuds.'

'There was another one of the pair of them in RAF shirts. They brought tears to my eyes but they also spurred me on,' she says.

Many of Nina's colleagues were mums, too, and in their spare

time they'd swap stories about their children to keep them going.

Nina was due home on 5 November and towards the end she was counting down the days. 'Mathew picked me up from RAF Brize Norton and we went straight back home. I could hear Alyssa chatting to her gran as she had her tea in her high chair. The minute I walked in the room she threw her arms in the air and shouted "Mummy's back from Afghan!" I gave her the biggest hug. It was the best feeling ever.'

'I cried as I quietly closed the front door'

Nina had two weeks' leave to spend with Alyssa. She says, 'Her speech had developed so much, her hair had grown and she looked even more beautiful.'

Now Nina is working in the medical wing at RAF Lyneham, so the family were together over Christmas. But she knows she'll eventually be sent to Afghanistan for another three-month stint. 'I don't want to go back any time soon but I have an important job to do,' she says.

'I realise as Alyssa gets older it will be even harder for both of us when I'm away. Alyssa's understanding of my job is very limited at the moment.'

But as she grows up, I want her to be proud of me and her dad.'

Mathew will also be posted overseas, possibly to Afghanistan, at some stage for up to six months. 'We are used to spending long periods of time apart, it's something we have to cope with as part of the job,' says Nina. 'We would love to have another child but obviously it's all about timing.'

Some of her colleagues have already left the RAF after having children, but Nina is determined to carry on for now. 'I know some people could be critical of a mother going away. But I'm proud of what I do.'

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Alyssa and Mathew wearing their RAF shirts

KEEPING IN TOUCH



Nina with one of her daughter's paintings, sent from home

of Alyssa in my pocket to look at, as well as a selection of six photos of her that I kept in a secret location.'

When she arrived in Camp Bastion - the UK's largest military base in Afghanistan, with 21,000 personnel - Nina threw herself into her job. She was working in the military hospital, looking after the injured and transferring the critical patients back home.

'Every day I saw soldiers as well as civilians who had been horrifically injured. They were men, women and children, who had families themselves.'