

Open When ✉ Discussion Guide

Introductory Letter From the Author

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Open When You're Ready to Discuss This Book

Dear Reader,

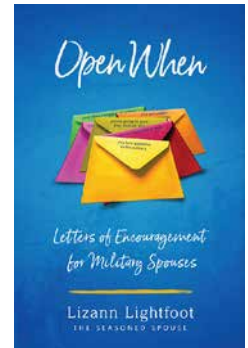
I'm so excited you have found inspiration in this book, and you are eager to share *Open When* with others! Thank you for considering my book for your next book club or spouse group discussion. I'm honored to be on this journey with you, and I hope that together we can make a difference for numerous military spouses.

As you probably know by now, "open when" letters are a popular tradition among military spouses. When a service member will be away for a long time, with limited communication options, it's common to create a stack of these letters so the service member will have a loving message from home to open when they need it most. The loved one at home may spend hours writing heartfelt letters to be opened during particular moments, placing them in colorful envelopes, then tucking them into the service member's bags before they depart for deployment or training.

The letters in this book convey this same intent—to diminish fear, homesickness, or frustration; to remind of love, possibilities, or perspective—except the letters in *Open When* are all written to military spouses. It is my hope that these beautiful messages will be a treasured resource for military spouses and other loved ones to pick up and read many times throughout their military life journey.

I believe there is so much power in written words. In the modern age, when we often communicate by text messages or memes, there is something very personal and meaningful about receiving a letter. This book contains letters that are personalized for military spouses in specific situations—from basic training to retirement. Sharing this book and these letters with the other military spouses in your life is an excellent way to support your milspouse community and develop meaningful friendships.

I wrote this book over the span of a few years, while I was deep in the trenches of milspouse life. I saw that so many military spouses and significant others were feeling isolated or alone during military life challenges. The overall message is that no milspouse is ever truly alone, because we are all facing similar challenges together. During the time it took me to write the manuscript, my husband went away from home for multiple trainings and schools, and he deployed. We PCS'd twice: once within the state of California, then again two years later across the country to Mississippi. I turned the manuscript in to my editor just a few months after I gave birth to baby number five. Milspouse life is not easy, and I struggled through many of those situations. But realizing that I was not the first military spouse to go through a deployment, or a PCS move, or a birth always brought me comfort.



This **Open When Discussion Guide** will help you:

- » Reflect on your military life experience.
- » Share your experience with other military spouses.
- » Feel part of a community of other military loved ones who understand the challenges and rewards of military life.

Find the book at:

**MilitaryFamilyBooks.com/
OpenWhen**

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ISBN 978-1-934617-61-8
Ebook \$9.99

The emotions portrayed in each letter are strong because I have lived through each challenge. I am right there with you, reader, offering a shoulder to cry on, a helping hand, and a kind word to give you strength.

As you lead or participate in a discussion of *Open When*, be prepared for a variety of emotional responses. This discussion guide will help your group get the most out of the book, while also getting to know each other and learning to support the community around you.

It is my hope that *Open When* will not only support individual spouses who are going through difficult situations, but that it will also spread encouragement throughout our military community. By leading or participating in this discussion group, you have the power to make a difference for spouses and significant others in your unit, on your base, and around the world! Please use these letters as inspiration for your own creative ideas. I hope this discussion is just your first of many steps toward creatively inspiring those around you. Whether you choose to write your own “open when” letters, lead future book club discussions, or become a leader in the milspouse community, I can’t wait to see where your journey leads!



Finally, I want to support you to make your discussions as meaningful as possible. This guide can be used for a variety of groups and meetings, and I’m happy to meet with your group virtually or in person if you’d like a more personal connection. I wish you a fulfilling and exciting discussion of this book. Above all, thank you for helping to spread the encouragement!





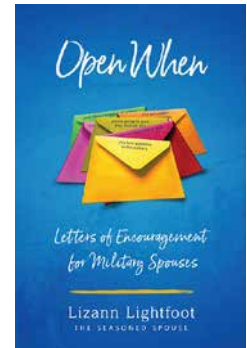
Lizann Lightfoot

Author

Open When: Letters of Encouragement for Military Spouses

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Supplemental Resources:

SeasonedSpouse.com

» Blog by Lizann with articles and resources about many aspects of military life.

[Handle Deployment Like a Boss](https://www.facebook.com/SeasonedSpouse)

» Facebook group managed by Lizann, for military spouses going through their service member's deployment.

[MilitaryFamilyLife.com](https://www.militaryfamilylife.com)

» Articles and resources about many aspects of military family life.

[MilitaryFamilyBooks.com](https://www.militaryfamilybooks.com)

» Books for all ages on many aspects of military family life.

Open When ✉ Discussion Guide

Discussion Guide Questions

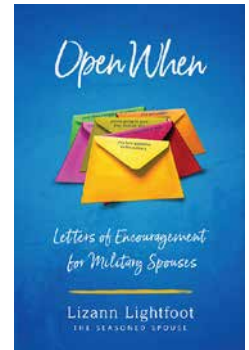
Based on the book *Open When: Letters of Encouragement for Military Spouses* by Lizann Lightfoot

OVERVIEW

Questions in this guide are designed especially for readers of *Open When: Letters of Encouragement for Military Spouses* by Lizann Lightfoot, published by Elva Resa. As you read each section, use the corresponding discussion starters to enrich your understanding and share your experiences with others in your discussion group.

Open When is a collection of letters written from the author to the reader. Letters on similar topics are grouped into sections. Each section begins with a story about the author's military life experience, followed by encouraging, informative letters for situations you may find yourself in throughout your military life journey. You can read the letters in order, or use the Mail Call (table of contents) to find individual letters or topics of interest, according to the plan your discussion group decides.

You may find your group experience to be more enriching if you read the selections and prepare for the group discussion before each gathering. Page numbers refer to the paperback edition.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



New to Military Life

Lizann begins the book with the story of her first encounter with military life—in the recruiter's office with her then-boyfriend. Everyone's military journey begins at a different time and in various stages of their relationship.

When were you first introduced to military life?

Did your service member choose the military before or after you met?

Have you ever served or considered joining the military?

What memories or emotions did this story invoke for you?

“When you love someone in the military, it will change your life: the way you live it, where you live it, and even the way you view the world.”

—p. 1

The opening story is called, “Did I Sign Up for This?” People often try to comfort military spouses facing various challenges by reminding them that they “signed up for this.” Have you heard that phrase before? How do you feel about it? Lizann describes the whirlwind of emotions she felt when her boyfriend decided to join the Marines. She knew it would be a challenging life, but she couldn’t possibly foresee the obstacles that lay ahead.

Do you feel that you “signed up for” anything when you began your relationship with your service member?

What expectations did you have when you agreed to become a military spouse? Have those expectations come true?

In what ways has military life been different from what you expected?

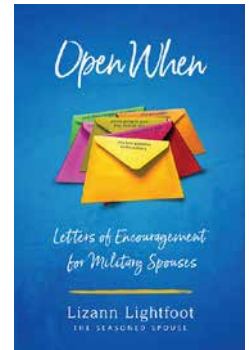
When was the last time you felt confused or overwhelmed in military life?

There are numerous “firsts” in military life—from the first moments you consider marrying your service member, to your first time on a military base, your first military ball, or the first night you spend alone. There are so many things to learn and experience during the early days of your military relationship.

What “first” military life experiences were challenging for you?

Is there a fun or unique “first” military life memory you will treasure?

Each letter in the book begins with a different greeting, as one way the author tries to connect with readers and make each letter feel special.



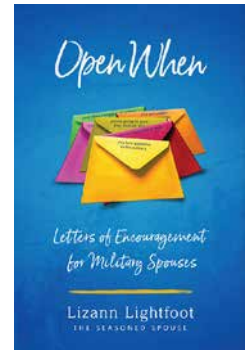
“Confusion and bewilderment are common for most of us when we first begin a relationship with a service member or learn our beloved wants to join the military.”

—p. 16

Which letter in this section spoke the most to you? Why did that letter stand out?

Is there someone who could use an “open when” letter from you? What are some ways you can encourage that person?

What are some ways you need encouragement in your current stage of military life? How can your discussion group members support and encourage you right now?



Handle With Care

This section begins with a traumatic story about Lizann learning that her fiancé had been wounded during a deployment to Iraq. Ultimately, he healed and recovered and was able to continue serving for many more years. But the memories of that experience will stay with her for a long time. You may feel similarly about some of your experiences as a military loved one.

Lizann also describes a pleasant surprise from her military life: her overseas journey included an opportunity to share her first book with a Spanish mayor in the local Town Hall—a 13th century castle!

Can you relate to the description of military life as a roller coaster ride? Why?

What are some of the bigger challenges you have been through since meeting your service member?

What joys or rewards have you experienced that make you grateful for military life?

“The journey of military life has dramatic ups and downs ... You may want to scream—out of excitement, fright, or pure frustration ... Other times, military life offers unique, amazing opportunities.”

—p. 51

What are some of the ways military life has surprised you?

The letters in this section describe numerous situations that challenge your strength throughout your military life journey. Whenever you are feeling alone, jealous, insulted, angry, or even if you are loving military life, there is a letter in this section for you. At some point, most military spouses will experience the majority of the situations described in this section's letters.

How many letters from this section could you already relate to?

Which letter in this section spoke the most to you? Why did that letter stand out?

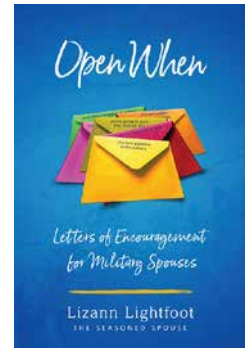
Some of the letters in this section describe situations that can be scary or intimidating. The letters aren't meant to be painful, but instead to encourage you through potentially challenging times.

Are there some aspects of military life that you fear or dread?

How do the letters in the "Handle With Care" section help you face those fears?

After reading through this section, what are some ways you can encourage someone who is experiencing military life ups and downs? Is there someone who could use an "open when" letter from you?

What are some ways you need encouragement in your current stage of military life? How can your discussion group members support and encourage you right now?



“You have the strength inside you to ride through both the wonderful and the terrifying moments in military life.”

—p. 52



Changes of Address

Moving is a common part of life for many military families. Lizann begins this section by describing her family's move to Spain with three children, ages four and under. They landed on the same day as the Benghazi attack, and half of her husband's unit deployed to Libya overnight. Obviously, not all military moves have this level of stress! But everyone has a story of something unexpected during a PCS move.

If you have moved before, what is your most memorable PCS experience?

If you have not yet moved, what makes you most nervous or excited about a PCS?

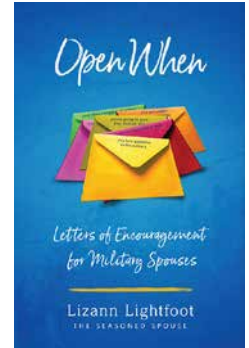
People often forget to discuss the emotional aspects of moving. The letters in this section address the logistics of moving, as well as the emotions a military spouse can experience before, during, and after a move.

Which part of a move do you think is the most challenging:

- » Waiting on orders
- » Planning the move
- » Packing and loading days
- » Traveling to the new location
- » Moving in
- » Getting settled
- » Something else

In the letter "Open When You're Adjusting to Life in Another Country" Lizann uses the image of a charm bracelet to celebrate little steps you take in your new surroundings. This can be true for any location, not just moving overseas. One step at a time, you add on to your charm bracelet until you have a collection of beautiful memories and experiences.

What do you think about this image? Have you used metaphors like this to guide your perspective during transitions?



“The moving boxes can be unpacked and sorted in a matter of days, but unpacking the emotions of a move is a less tangible process. Sometimes it takes weeks, but more often it takes months, and it’s a journey that can’t be rushed or avoided.”

—p. 97

This section of the book covers specific moving topics that some military spouses only encounter once, while others go through them many times. Which of the experiences addressed in these letters have you been through?

- » You Get Orders You Don't Want
- » You May Have to Live Apart
- » You Get Orders to Move Overseas
- » You're Thinking About a DITY Move
- » Your Kids Don't Want to Move
- » You're Grieving Your Previous Duty Station

What did you learn about moving from the letters in this section? What PCS lessons would you like to add? Which letter spoke to you the most?

After reading through this section, what are some ways you can encourage a fellow military spouse facing a PCS move? Is there someone who could use an "open when" letter from you—a departing friend or a new neighbor?

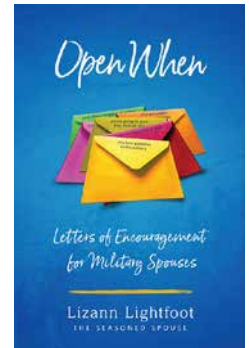
What are some ways you need encouragement in your current stage of military life? How can your discussion group members support and encourage you right now?



Sealed With a Kiss

This section is all about deployment. Some military spouses go a decade without their service member deploying. Others experience multiple deployments in their first years as a military spouse. Often, deployments are determined not just by a service member's military branch, but also by their specific job within a unit. The timing may be different for each milspouse, but the emotions are similar for all of us.

What is your deployment experience so far? Are you going through one now or preparing for one soon?



“... there’s nothing special or magical about me that enabled me to get through this ordeal. You have the same strength and ability to conquer difficult situations.”

—p. 156

In the opening story of this section, “Alone in the Storm,” Lizann shares her dramatic story of giving birth during deployment, in the middle of a hurricane. The image of feeling alone in a dark hallway can be applied to many of the physical and emotional challenges that come during deployments. But Lizann also shines a beacon of hope, reminding you of your own strength to face tough deployment situations.

What part of deployment (past, current, or anticipated) do you find most difficult? Was there a letter in this chapter that spoke to that situation?

In many of the letters in this section, Lizann talks about the importance of building your support network, so you have someone to lean on during deployment emergencies. She writes about the way a herd of elephants circles and protects one of its members who is about to give birth. Although this advice is given in the context of a deployment pregnancy, it’s a beautiful metaphor for anyone to consider during deployment.

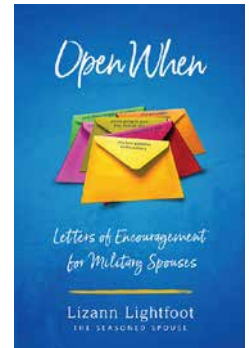
How does your own “herd of elephants” support you through deployment?

Is there a great friend who helped you tremendously in the past?

If you feel separated or alone, what can you do to build up your support network now?

There are many emotional ups and downs throughout the deployment experience. The deployment cycle begins a few months before the actual departure date, when the service member is going through pre-deployment training. And the emotional roller coaster continues after homecoming, in the period called reintegration. These tensions are addressed in the letters “Open When Pre-Deployment Trainings Exhaust You” and “Open When the Road to Reintegration Is Bumpy.” You may also discover that some of the letters in the “Handle With Care” section are appropriate during emotional deployment situations.

When during the deployment cycle have your emotions surprised you?



“The support network you build now ... will become your herd of elephants. Seek out the people you want to circle around you and support you ...”
—p. 169

How do you and your service member handle the extra tension before, during, or after deployment?

Deployments aren't always negative! The silver lining is that some people find ways to grow and explore new interests during their time apart.

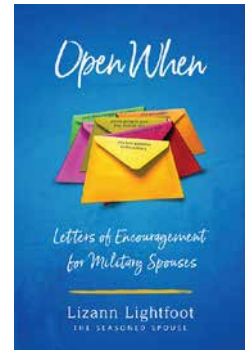
What types of goals did you work toward during a past deployment? What goals do you want to set for yourself during a current or upcoming deployment?

How can your support network help you achieve your goals?

What did you learn about deployment from the letters in this section? What deployment lessons would you like to add? Which letter spoke to you the most?

After reading through this section, what are some ways you can encourage a fellow military spouse facing a deployment? Is there a friend or a neighbor who could use an "open when" letter from you to support them during deployment?

What are some ways you need encouragement with a current military life situation? How can your discussion group members support and encourage you?



“Setting goals for yourself can help you look at deployment in a positive way. Instead of seeing this as a void of time apart from your loved one, you can view it as a time to invest in yourself.”

—p. 196



Seasoned Spouses

In the opening story of this section, Lizann describes her experience of being close to retirement, then having the goal posts moved because of her husband's promotion. Whether or not you are close to retirement, you can probably relate to some of the situations she brings up.

How long have you and your service member lived the military lifestyle together?

In what ways have your service member's career plans changed over time? How long do you think your service member will remain in the military?

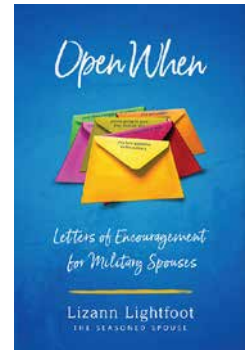
Lizann also shares her experience becoming a seasoned spouse, named so for being "peppered with wisdom." If others look to you to help them navigate military life, you are a seasoned spouse too.

Do you feel like you are a seasoned spouse? What are some major events that have seasoned you so far?

The first letter in this section is for those who are tired of military life. Can you relate? On days when military life feels exhausting, Lizann encourages you to go back to the beginning and remember why your service member joined the military.

What was your service member's reason for joining? Were you a part of that decision?

What is your lighthouse or beacon of hope that keeps you going on difficult days?



“Why did your service member join the military? ... Think about that reason and cling to it ... Finding your reason for military life will become a beacon of hope—a lighthouse to keep you from crashing on the rocks.”
—p. 226-227

This section also has a letter for when “Your Child Leaves the Military Nest.” It’s natural to be concerned about all the ways military life may be affecting your children.

If you have kids, what are their ages now? How long have they been military kids?

What are some positive qualities your children have developed from their military life experiences?

The letter to open when “You’re Searching for Your Identity” could apply to spouses at any stage of military life. It’s a common struggle, one that is not limited to spouses with over a decade of milspouse experience. But near the end of a military career, when you have been making sacrifices for so many years, the effects are felt more intensely.

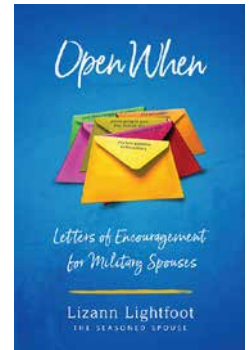
In what ways do you feel like being a military spouse has taken over your identity?

What strengths, abilities, or passions can you name for yourself that have nothing to do with military life?

Is there a dream or goal you hope to pursue in the future? How does your service member’s job get in the way of you working toward that now?

What are some actions you can take toward this dream or goal that creatively set you up to succeed in the future or that move you toward a similar goal in the short term?

What did you learn about the later half of military life from the letters in this section? What lessons would you like to add? Which letter spoke to you the most?



“Friend, no matter how much you supported your service member’s career or gave up your own goals to help them achieve theirs, your identity is much more than being a military spouse.”

—p. 236

After reading through this section, what are some ways you can encourage a seasoned military spouse? Is there a friend or a neighbor who could use an “open when” letter from you to support them at this time?

What are some ways that you need encouragement in your current stage of military life? How can your discussion group members support and encourage you?



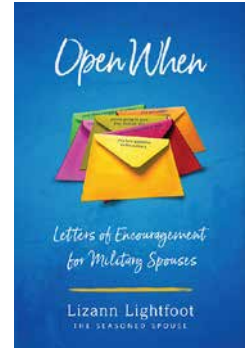
Letter to Myself

At the end of the book, Lizann writes a letter to herself. She reminds herself that love will help her do what’s difficult, that military life has been a good teacher, and that even on the hardest days, she can do amazing things.

What would you write in a letter to yourself? What letter do you wish your younger, new military spouse self could have read? What would you write to yourself today or to your future self?

What reflections or discussions with this group helped you see military life differently? How will you take your new perspective with you in your everyday military life?

It’s easier to give and receive thoughtful advice and encouragement when we are not in the middle of a stressful situation. In what ways can you use the idea of “open when” letters—writing encouragement now for when you need it later—to proactively support yourself, your family, and your community as you continue your military life journey?



“Life may never stop challenging you. There will always be good days and bad days, even when your military years are far behind you ... Military life has been an interesting journey ... You will never forget the lessons you have learned, the friends you have made, and the experiences that made you who you are.

—p. 245

