

PERSPECTIVES ON GROWING UP AN ARMY BRAT **VERSUS GROWING UP IN A SMALL TOWN**

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This is my first paper as a member of the Athenaeum Society. I don't know if every member agonizes over the topic and contents of their first paper or if they agonize over the topic for every succeeding paper as well, but I can assure the membership gathered here that I did. The first matter was deciding upon a topic. Early on in the process, and keeping in mind the "comment" portion of the evening, I decided that one of two criteria should be followed in the selection of a topic. One option as a presenter is to choose a topic that you know a great deal about. The other option would be to choose a topic that the Society members will know absolutely nothing about. Boiled down to its bare essence, the question is. . . "Do I dazzle them with my brilliance or do I baffle them with my bullshit?" Because I have great respect for the breath of knowledge and experience of the members of this Society, and because I'm not sure I know a great deal about anything, I opted for the latter. In addition, the topic I chose gives me an opportunity to tell you about myself, as well as to give you a perspective of a "newcomer" to Hopkinsville.

After all, I've only been a resident of Hopkinsville for seventeen years. As a resident of Hopkinsville for seventeen years, I have lived here far longer than any other place in the world. Make no mistake about it, Hopkinsville is home.

My topic is "Perspectives on growing up an Army Brat". You know you're an Army Brat if:

- . . . you always answer the question, "Where are you from originally?" with, "I'm kinda from all over the place."
- . . . you can order beer in most European languages.
- . . . you can't speak the language of the country in which you were born.
- . . . you don't remember the names of your childhood friends.
- . . . the term "quarters" has a whole different meaning.
- . . . every room you had growing up was stark white and you couldn't put nail holes in the walls.
- . . . you've used toothpaste to fill those holes.
- . . . you've been asked just where in NY APO is.
- . . . you graduate from 12th grade and it's your 13th different school.

Because I can answer all of the above in the affirmative, I am definitely an Army Brat.

My father was a career Army officer assigned to the Signal Corps. He obtained his degree from the University of Kentucky in electrical engineering.

He retired from the United States Army as a Major in 1970. My father, in military parlance, was a "mustang", meaning that he originally entered the military as an enlisted man, enrolled in Officer's Candidate School and was awarded a commission.

By virtue of his duties while assigned to the Signal Corps, my father received a true hodgepodge of duty assignments. This can be evidenced initially by the place of my birth. I was born at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippine Islands. I don't have any memories of the Philippines but my parents had plenty of pictures and our "quarters" were anything but plush. They did have indoor plumbing and running water but few other amenities. Snakes and other reptiles were a constant problem. I was born at the base hospital, and my parents paid \$6.12 for maternity expenses (parents were "charged a dollar a pound, penny an ounce).

When I was nine months old, my father was reassigned to Fort Meade, Maryland. We were stationed in Fort Meade, Maryland for less than a year, and then my father received orders for an assignment at Camp Zama, just outside of Tokyo, Japan. Why the Army felt it necessary to ship my father 14,000 miles to Fort Meade, Maryland for less than a year and then to have him and his family merely retrace his steps 14,000 miles for an assignment in

Japan defies logic. In any event, one of Dad's longest assignments was in Japan. My father was stationed in Japan for approximately three years. My sister was born while we were stationed in Japan. Most of my memories of Japan center around my Japanese "amah", or live in nanny, Fumiko. At that time, I had almost white blond hair. Apparently, blond hair held some fascination for the Japanese, because Fumiko would take me everywhere with her and show me off like some sort of trophy. Japan remained one of my parents' favorite duty assignments. The Army then sent my father to Fort McPherson in Atlanta, Georgia. That was one of the few duty stations where we lived off post. It was here, in the first grade, that I was to meet my future wife, although I did not know that at the time.

I will digress here and tell you that after my father retired and we relocated to Atlanta, I met and began dating Pamela Adams, the woman would become my wife. We were in high school at the time. We were sitting around the table, and my mother, as mothers sometimes do, pulled out old pictures of me to show to my date. My mother explained, "Here is Bob's first grade picture taken while we had been stationed previously in Atlanta." Pam took one look at the picture and said, "How did you get that picture? That's my first grade picture and there I am." It was at that time that I discovered that

Pam and I had attended the first grade together. Given the overwhelming irony of that situation, I suppose Pam and I were fated to be together, and we have been married for twenty-three years. In that respect, I suppose I can relate to growing up in a small town . . . I married a girl that attended first grade with me.

After our tour in Atlanta, my father was assigned to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. From there, we received orders to Heidelberg, Germany. After being stationed in Germany, we were stationed at Fort Knox, Kentucky. My father received orders for Viet Nam, and we were forced to move off base out of government quarters while my father served his country in Viet Nam. Upon my father's return from Viet Nam, we received orders once again for Fort Bragg, North Carolina. And upon his retirement from the United States Army in 1970, our family settled in the Atlanta area.

I give all of this information to you as a background or a perspective on events that shaped my life and my personality and similarly shape the lives of other Military Brats. Conversely, my son, Brad, who is now fourteen years of age, was born here in Hopkinsville at Jennie Stuart Medical Center. He has lived all of his life in Hopkinsville in the same house at 120 Mooreland Drive.

There are several primary differences that I have observed between my

life as an Army Brat and my son's life growing up in a small town. First and foremost is that Brad has had lifelong friends and will likely retain those friends throughout his life. I, on the other hand, can barely remember the names of three out of four friends that I had growing up an Army Brat, and I have no idea where they are now. Moving every year or two meant that you moved away and lost touch with your friends. Upon reflection, it seems very sad and perhaps psychologically damaged. But growing up, I knew nothing different; that was simply the way things were.

The reverse side of that equation, naturally, is that it forced you to make friends quickly. You were forced to be outgoing. Otherwise, you would never make any new friends at your new duty station. Luckily, because we mainly lived on post, all of the kids had many things in common. When a new family moved into quarters, the neighborhood kids would gather to see if the new family had any kids their age. On occasion, we would live "off post", but it was much harder to make friends when we moved to a civilian community. "Civilian kids", as we called them, like my son, had lifelong friendships and had developed very comfortable relationships with their friends. I found it very difficult to break into those circles of friends. When Dad retired and we moved to Atlanta, I found it very difficult to make friends my first year of high school.

Some if it was attributable to being an awkward age, but also I was an outsider trying to break into long-term circles of friends. But whenever we moved to a new assignment on post, I always knew that there would be lots of kids in the neighborhood (and I mean lots), and they were always open to making new friends.

But I also knew that as I grew to be friends with those kids, that if it wasn't me moving, that their fathers would receive orders, and they would be moving. My friends and I would always vow to stay in touch with one another, and we would for a few months. But it was always difficult to maintain that bond of friendship, and eventually, I would lose touch with my friends. At this time, I don't have a clue as to the whereabouts of the three or four good friends I had growing up. In that regard, I am very jealous of my son and his relationships. However, I can also tell that my son is not as outgoing as I was, and he has a more difficult time making new friendships.

Another aspect of growing up as an Army Brat and moving and traveling as much as we did, it was very difficult to establish a strong relationship with extended family. My mother and father both came from large families, and yet, I was rarely able to interact with grandparents, aunts and uncles, or cousins. That is very different from many of you who are lifelong residents of

Hopkinsville. Upon moving to Hopkinsville, I quickly learned that when I met someone new, I had to not only find out about them, but also their family. It is important not only to know them, but also who they are related to. A negative or unkind comment could easily be about one's brother, sister, cousin or some other relation. To this day, I am often surprised when I learn that one of my friends is related to another of my friends. Luckily, my son had the opportunity to form a strong and lasting relationship with both sets of grandparents. I am very grateful that he had that opportunity to form those relationships.

Another comparison is the number of schools attended. Including law school, I attended seventeen schools in the course of my education. My son, Brad, is in high school and has attended three schools, all within a mile of each other.

Reflecting on military post life versus small town life, while there are many differences, there are also many similarities. Living on post was often like living in a goldfish bowl. Any hint of family problems could have a negative impact on a family's reputation and ultimately on the military parent's career. The military parent was held strictly accountable for the behavior of his or her children. In this regard, military life is very similar to small town life.

Like in a small town, rumors spread quickly on a military post. On post, your food came from a commissary. Commissaries were invariably huge, dimly lit warehouses. They sold huge generic cans of things like "Beans, Lima" or "Peas, Green" in big block letters. Almost everyone shopped on payday, and you shopped for the month. Mom would come out with three shopping baskets full. It was like Sam's before there was a Sam's. I'm convinced Sam Walton visited a commissary at some point in his formative years.

Almost everything else, including clothes, toys and the like, came from the Post Exchange. It was not uncommon to see the same clothes on 3 or 4 kids after Christmas. In many respects, this seems similar to Hopkinsville during that same timeframe when residents shopped for toys and clothes at Cayce-Yost, and there were no mega-superstores to buy groceries.

Growing up, I have specific recollections of the medical and dental care provided by the military. To begin with, I was never sure I would actually see a doctor if I went to the Infirmary. "Dependents" were low on the totem pole in terms of medical and dental care. Often we were seen and treated by medics or physicians' assistants. Luckily, I was never truly sick or injured and rarely sought medical treatment. Most of my memories of doctors involved getting shots required for our various overseas assignments.

However, I do have vivid memories of visits to the military dentists. Apparently, I had numerous cavities which required filling. Naturally, this meant drilling and in my memories, intense and excruciating pain. Needless to say, I hated going to the dentist. I think that my parents used that as some form of leverage to ensure that I did not stray out of line too far. They would begin dropping subtle hints of "wasn't it time to schedule another dental appointment?" I can remember the drills that the dentists used. They had cables that ran from the base of the drill up an extension arm and to the actual drill bit. When the dentist would turn on that drill, it would make an absolutely horrible sound, and you could watch the cables move as they turned the drill bit. To this day, I believe that the dentist could have hand-cranked the drill bit faster than those cables turned the bit.

After my father retired and we moved to Atlanta, I had an occasion to visit a dentist and had a cavity that needed to be filled. I was fifteen years of age at that time. After telling me that I had the cavity and that it needed to be filled, the dentist came at me with a huge needle in his hand. I went berserk. I had never seen a needle that big, and certainly, no one had ever stuck me in my mouth with a needle that big. I told the dentist in no uncertain terms that he was not sticking that needle in my mouth. The dentist gave me

a most quizzical look and asked if I had never had Novocain. I informed him that I had never had a shot in my mouth and I was not any too happy about getting one. Luckily, the dentist was very patient and spent some time calming my fears about the shot. As I told you, my memories of medical care was getting shots for overseas tours. The medics were none to careful about giving those shots, and basically they hurt like hell. The dentist explained how the Novocain would numb my mouth and that I would not feel the drilling of the cavity. Suddenly, it dawned on me that the pain of a quick shot would far outweigh the ten or fifteen minutes of pain involved with drilling. Needless to say, I quickly fell in love with the idea of a numb mouth when it is being drilled on. After that, going to the dentist became a lot less traumatic.

Having said all that, I note that in my son's fourteen years of life, he has had two doctors and two dentists. They know he likely will be a long-term, if not lifelong, patient. And their care reflects that knowledge. They know his history and his past care. Military doctors and dentists only knew you by your chart and serial number. And they didn't have to worry about whether you were satisfied with their care. This is not to say they weren't professional or skilled . . . they simply didn't have the time to know their patients.

Another interesting aspect of military post life is that families are

segregated by rank. Officers lived with officers, and enlisted men lived with enlisted men. Even among the officers, families were segregated by company grade, meaning Captains and below, and field grade, meaning Majors and above. If one looks at housing patterns in Hopkinsville, one can find striking similarities in terms of economic segregation. However, despite living in different quarters on different parts of the post, officers' kids and enlisted men's kids would play together because of relationships formed in school or clubs or on athletic teams. But such families would rarely socialize as family units. I have found Hopkinsville to be similar in many ways.

As a kid growing up on a military post, it always struck me how orderly and neat the post seemed to be. When we would travel off post, it was anything but orderly and neat. In many respects, we led sheltered lives while stationed on post. But as I reflect on my son and his upbringing, I think that growing up in Hopkinsville, he too has led a sheltered life. Yes, we have our share of problems here in Hopkinsville, but they are not as great as those experienced in larger cities.

I can only imagine what memories my son will have of his childhood. Some of mine include the posting of colors on post everyday at 5:00 o'clock in the afternoon. All activity would cease. Cars would stop and people would

emerge from cars, and if in uniform, face in the direction of the main parade ground and salute. Dependents would stop and place their hand over their heart until the colors were struck.

To this day, when I smell Brasso or shoe polish, I think of my father polishing his brass or polishing his boots.

In preparing this paper, I logged on-line and discovered that there are literally thousands of web sites that deal with the topic of Army or military Brat. There have been government studies as to children of military members as to their strengths and vulnerabilities. Their overall health is good to excellent. Their self-esteem or optimism was reported as high. Anti-social behavior such as alcohol or drug abuse was reported as lower than those in corresponding civilian populations. Discipline in military families appears to be greater than those in corresponding civilian families. Bottom line, being an Army Brat doesn't appear to scar kids too badly. Although, there is no doubt that the military "environment" helps shape Brats' personalities.

As a final thought, when Pam and I moved to Hopkinsville, I had a real concern about being accepted into "small town" society. Would we make friends easily? I was pleasantly surprised with the openness and friendliness of the people in Hopkinsville. Perhaps my fears were founded on my

experience with civilian communities growing up. It is possible that our proximity to Ft. Campbell makes us more accepting of "newcomers". Whatever the reason, take it from this "newcomer" . . . while Hopkinsville may not be as glamorous or exotic as Germany, Japan, Atlanta or the Philippines, it's a great place to live and raise a family. And this Army Brat says thanks for taking me in as one of your own.